

Suzanne's story

I felt totally crushed as a person. It was like I was addicted to him & did whatever he said rather than risk losing him. And the worse he treated me, the more I clung to him.

He wanted to control me so much, that he wouldn't even let me breast feed Chloe. We got into bad debt. And I was so lonely that anyone was better than no-one.

Chloe was put on the 'at risk' register, later interim care orders were made for her. I had to call out the police a lot and he was arrested about nine times and finally got sentenced. Sometimes I was hurt so bad I couldn't go out of the house. There were lots of court orders banning him from the house or coming near me.

And can you believe I still used to sneak him into the house?

Due to drinking I've got two convictions, one for assaulting a police officer and another for causing affray. Looking back, I'm only 23, but I'm surprised that's all I got done for.

Probably the One to One probation programme I had to attend as part of my order has been what's helped make me see sense. Alongside nearly having Chloe taken off me.

I realise now that I do have choices. And if I want to be nothing, go to prison, lose my child and family – then I can just carry on – it's my choice.

Chloe deserves better. I deserve better. I might have had problems in the past but I don't have to be like that now.

I went down the wrong path. I wasn't supervised when I was young. Chloe's only four but I'm going to make sure that when she gets in from school then I'll be there and she'll be supervised.

And I'm going to see that she gets included in activities such as ballet, gym and swimming so she has other interests. And learns decent ways of interacting with other people, socialising in a way that is acceptable and doesn't leave her vulnerable.

I was six when mum and dad split up. Mum had to look after my sister and I on her own. She worked full time shift work which sometimes involved night work. So we were left on our own a lot. I'm not blaming her, she was only a teenager when she had my

sister and I came along a few years later. But what's happened can't be undone now.

When I was about 13 we moved house five times in 18 months. At one time we lived in two rooms in a rented house. That's when I first shoplifted. I'd already got into cannabis by then. I'd got a job stacking shelves in a local shop and spent my wages on draw (cannabis).

I had to catch two buses to school which was on the other side of town. This travelling and having no adults at home left me open to meet people that maybe I shouldn't have. I started breaking into cars and stealing the stereos.

Later I hung round with girls from school. We'd go out drinking and sit in parks being rowdy and verbally abusive to passers-by.

I've always been volatile. At school I was a fighter and always in trouble. I was quite quiet and don't think I went looking for trouble but when anyone upset me then I'd lash out immediately. Sometimes I'd turn up at school really late and really stoned. I thought it was so funny. A group of us were really disruptive. Amazingly I got 10 GCSE's at 'C' and 'D' grade.

In one of my first full-time shop jobs I put £5 of dope into my boss's coffee and watched her get slowly stoned. They couldn't sack me because I'd already given in my notice.

When I was 17 I started seeing a bloke who was 31 and addicted to speed. He was living in a homeless hostel and I used to sneak in and stay with him. I took drugs with him and did other sleazy things. When he was violent to me I left and went back home.

I started training in a specialist type of shop work. Things weren't going well at home and I went to stay with my dad. He got me a car and I learnt to drive.

I'd drive round late at night breaking into cars, stealing and damaging people's property. I'd work with a friend and put false number plates on my car and fill up with petrol at garages and drive off without paying. I'd walk into hotels and take handbags – it was so stupid because I didn't even know how to use a credit card. By this time I was back with my mum.

Then I got involved with Simon and as soon as I met him I never wanted to be apart from him. I knew deep down that he was no

good but when mum didn't let him stay we left and lived rough together for a while.

Within three months I was pregnant. We both wanted a baby. I was stealing from my work to pay our rent. Money ran out and we were forced into a homeless hostel. The carpets were wet with damp. I just lay in bed all day feeling ill, not eating.

When I finally managed to get a flat from the council we were broken into a week later and everything we had was taken.

Once when I was pregnant I confronted him about flirting with someone else and he got so mad he put his foot through my car windscreen.

Chloe was born in the new year of 1999. You can see the bruises on my face on the photos.

It escalated from there on. I ended up living in a safe house. I became estranged from my family because they couldn't understand why I stayed with him. Nor could I.

I was at work when Chloe fell and hurt her head and broke her arm. He didn't want me take her to the hospital and when I did the social services got involved. The social workers were on my case all the time, visiting me three times a week and I was told I had to cooperate.

There was another big fight and I got arrested and got done for assault on a police officer. I was locked up for the night and the court gave me a 6 months community rehabilitation order and £75 fine.

But I went back for more and we ended up drunk, kicked out of town centre pubs, fighting in the street. I was charged with affray and got one year's community rehabilitation order and another fine.

No-one would help me anymore. I hit rock bottom.

So I went to social services and told them everything that I'd done and said I'd do anything it took to keep Chloe. She was with my mum – who wouldn't let me see her.

I had to tell my work all about what had happened – it was so embarrassing. They were supportive in the end though.

I think people do want to help you – but only if you show you want to help yourself. Social Services let me keep Chloe in the end.

I changed my way of thinking thanks to Linda, my Probation Officer. I had a really bad attitude when I first went to the probation office. I just didn't want to be there.

I did the One to One Programme, I had to work intensively on my own with Linda. It teaches you to stop and think about the situation before it goes too far. I had to look at my drinking and how I used anger to respond to problems. I came to really understand that everyday you've got choices.

I've got my self esteem back. This is the help I needed to get through what I've been through and make some sense of it all. And look at how I can avoid it all again.

Linda gave me handouts to take home, and I do positive thinking, positive self talk. Like 'I'm not fat' and 'I am a good person'.

She gave me stickers – with positive writing on them and I'd stick them in the kitchen or on the back of the toilet door.

It was hard at first because I was so lonely. But as I started doing the college course things picked up and I started meeting better people through college. Chloe went in the crèche which was good for her social life

I've been doing an NVQ in business administration and holistic therapy and a diploma in anatomy & physiology. The year before I did legal and audio text processing, spread sheets database, & CLAIT.

Chloe starts school next month. Then I'm doing sports therapy and holistic therapy NVQ Level Three. So the future looks bright, I hope to get a career and make something of myself.

I work just four hours a week in a shop because I'm on benefits. And I'm managing.

I have a rented place now – it is in one of the best areas in town – what a difference.

My advice to other people in my situation is not to go with the flow, follow your gut feeling, because most of us know right from wrong – I know I did.

ENDS