

Chapter 9

Suzanne's Story

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When I joined, there were not that many women in the police force. I was brought up a tomboy. I was out with lads. So I suited that environment. I could take that challenge on. The people I found most difficult in the police were other women. It was like you had to earn your place and you earned your place by getting good arrests and being outspoken. But in the same way that made it harder for you to be accepted among men. You know, 'watch out for her she is a bit arsey'.

So even though the police was a very male-dominated work environment, it suited me. I had a great Superintendent and you just did as you were told. The first time I met him, he said 'give me ten press-ups' – and I did, right there in his office. You did as you were told – how people who were overseeing you dealt with things – that was how you dealt with things. Now I am quite horrified. There was no discretion, you would go in hard. You went for the best arrests you could get. I look back and cringe. Students with tiny bits of cannabis. Ecstasy – because that was scheduled. I am a bit embarrassed about it now.

Being a woman, and the challenges that brings, mine was motherhood. After I had my first child, my depression kicked off. That was when I started using alcohol problematically. I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt and shame. Other people might be like, 'well I feel a bit down, I am going to have a drink'. I found it crushing, overwhelmingly crushing. Women have children all round the world every day and I just could not get my shit together, even though you have doctors and midwives, professionals coming around and asking, 'is there anything going on for you?' The drinking never came up.

There was nowhere to go. I come from a middle class background. You don't talk about things like that. You take your kids to school, drop them off, everyone is doing cakes for cake stalls. I am sure I am not the only one who took their kids to school drunk. But it felt like I was. There was no help because I was not vulnerable enough. I had my mother in law who would be able to come and look after

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the kids so it meant I could hide it more. So that was the problem – even today, with more compassion out there, I still see it, women devastated by this illness who found it impossible to ask for help because if they have children social services get involved, the kids can get dragged off. But I had support. Other women I know, single women, it is so hard for them. When they go into treatment, who looks after the kids? Women I know have come out of treatment, but then the fight to get their kids back leads them to relapse again.

I got offered rehab after things got so bad that my husband couldn't cope and asked me to leave. He had no choice. My problematic using meant I was out of it 24/7. I could not be with the children. He could not trust me. At the time, leaving the family home was a relief. But I felt guilty and ashamed. As a mother am I not meant to be there for them, for the kids? So then I ended up going through homelessness and was put through rehab because at that point I did not have the kids. I ended up in a rehab, it was really bad. It was full of men and women which is a real issue. You don't have a choice. You take what you are given. I needed to do something and I just took it. But that environment of men and women, it is quite toxic.

From my experience, I can say that there is an absolute lack of services for women. Nothing for women so they can have their children with them, or facilities and support that enable them to have their children close. It is not possible in mixed rehabs. I saw my children three times when I was there for five months. My husband refused to bring the children to see me, so my mother in law brought them down. In hindsight that must have been awful for them.

I relapsed so I got chucked out. That is what I don't understand. If you go into hospital for a heart attack, you have all this treatment – but if you have another heart attack you would get kicked out? Problematic substance use is the only illness where this happens. To relapse and get chucked out is really harsh. All that did for me was reconfirm I am a complete failure, a bad person, that I did not deserve my children, they were better off without me. I was given ten minutes to pack my bags, and a train ticket. I just remember going shoplifting and then home. But I could not go 'home' as I had used up all my chances with my family.

And that's the thing, you just accept it. So I got put into sheltered accommodation, again a mixed environment, full of crazy people. I was never talked to about the issues of being a mother, how I felt, or support for my children or support for me. My son saw what was happening. I have to take responsibility for that. It is that guilt, about not being there for them as a mum. We talk a lot about trauma, problematic substance use and children – this could all be done differently, children supported with their mums, not as individuals apart. It could really help stop this trauma for children.

My dad was a functioning alcoholic, I am okay with that now, but at the time I was angry. I look back at his upbringing and I see the trauma for him there. I accept that now. I had the chance to be a better parent and mother. But saying that, the odds are against you. I am in recovery. I have the support of women in the 12 Steps Programme, but I had to find that. The support from the other women is phenomenal. When I was there it was like 'yes, I am not the only woman who forgot to get their kids from school, a bad parent', or who just wants to opt

out. What I got from recovery is being able to be there for both my sons. But I would not be here were it not for that support from those women.

It makes me angry to say I am lucky. But it should not be down to luck, the help should just be there and made available so it is not such a huge wrench. Why is it so difficult to go somewhere to explain what is going on and ask for help? I did do that later though, I was so desperate. But they don't have anything to offer you. I got referred to counselling, it was four hour-long sessions, really intense. At the end of the four sessions, the guy I had opened my heart up to, sat there and cried, he said to me 'I am really sorry but you are too ill for this therapy'. So what do I do now, again, I am a hopeless case, a failure, too ill to get therapy.

There is therapy out there if you have money, but again, it is that lack of where to go. Women have gone in, asked for help and because they have done that social services have been involved and their children taken away, but all they wanted was help. I was using problematically but managing to hold it together – that is how it is for many women, they have their kids and that is enabling them to hold it together. When social services get involved and take the children away that is the last straw. People say, if your children have been taken away then why not get your act together? They just don't understand this illness. I know too many women who have taken their own lives because of it. And that is criminal. And where are the kids now – the next generation of traumatised kids?

My problematic use of alcohol and drugs was over a four year period. I knew I was drinking too much, going crazy, it was literally 24/7. Once I had pressed that button, it just snowballed. And then I was arrested, wrote my car off, overdoses. It was the whole moral boundaries thing. Once you cross it, once you get away with it, then you do it again and again. I woke up in intensive care, not realising I had written my car off. For some that would be a wake-up call. For me, it was the stigma and shame, so I wanted to just block it out. So it was back to the drink.

I had a lightbulb moment. I had five months in rehab and that saved my life. But again there was still stuff going on for me. The complexities of the illness – I just found life really hard. I hated being an adult. I had been going to AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] and was in a half-way house with other people. Again, a bit of a crazy place. A lot of women, including myself, self-sabotage. If things are going okay I will sabotage it – 'I am useless, I am rubbish' – those were feelings that I became comfortable with. I had arranged for my kids to have a sleepover at my place. But the night before, I went out, relapsed. So I could not have my kids, just self-sabotage. The one thing I was not meant to do was have drink and drugs, so I did. 'I am shit, I am a shit mum', so I made it so I could not have them. And I had been trying, AA, NA [Narcotics Anonymous], you got breathalysed every morning. But I did not get away with it. And I just thought, I cannot do this and so I decided I would kill myself. I took drugs and drank, spoke to my sponsor, told her that I could not do this anymore.

Again, I woke up in hospital. I had been reported missing, I was found by an Inspector. We had done our probation together, been to weddings together. I like to think he had been looking for me. So I woke up in hospital and thought 'I cannot even do that right'. I saw a psychologist that I had seen before. The tears were running down my face and all I wanted to do was be kept in the hospital because

I felt safe. He looked at me and just said, 'you are not ill enough to be kept in, we are going to release you'. So I just thought 'fuck you, I am going to do this, I am going to give it everything'. That was 11 years ago.

The problem was there was nowhere for me to go. I phoned a woman I knew from AA. I did not want to as she was really scary. But she was wonderful. I stayed with her for a few months. I managed to start to get myself sorted, with a flat, welfare benefits – nobody tells you any of this, what you are entitled to, what help you can get. You have to do it all yourself. So I had a flat of my own, not far from the family home. I was able to see my kids regularly, which I know now is very important – being there as much as I could be for them.

Addiction is a really selfish illness, it affects everyone in your family. But so is recovery. You have to be selfish. How do you get that self-esteem back, your confidence? But I had a lot of support and was able to do that, but a lot of other women don't. And I felt guilty because I got that support. So after two years, I went back to the family home and we are still together. I had a unique opportunity to have that time out, to look after myself. Self-care is hugely important. That is what I tell other people. But again it is that guilt. I feel guilty about caring for myself.

Every professional I saw, they were usually men. I did have a female GP who I had seen all the way from depression to alcoholism. I wanted to see her but I could not always get to see her. There was no continuity. So I would go in and see someone else, someone different. They would be sat there with my big, thick medical file and I had to go over everything all over again. And I just could not be bothered. Or they would tell me that there was not a lot that they could do for me.

I know there a lot of people who criticise 12 Steps and NA because it is like you have to get to rock bottom before help. But for me, death is rock bottom. If there could have been a safe space, female, where I could have honestly discussed what was going on for me, then had something put in place within 48 hours. The problem is it is usually a wait of six weeks, just for some sort of support. I know the stresses of the NHS [the United Kingdom's National Health Service] and GPs and everything, but just the feeling that someone really understood or cared. I know they did to a degree but I can still see the look on doctors' faces of just not getting it. The judging that you get. And I am not saying that is all male doctors. Within the NHS – which I love and adore and is fantastic – I have been in a ward where I have had awful treatment by female nurses. A lack of compassion. One was awful to me, but I felt that I deserved it. But then when nurses were nice to me, it was the same, I felt that if they knew me, what I had done, that I did not deserve them to be nice to me.

How do you get through to women, get some light through the curtain – to say 'you deserve a life, a place in society, to hold your head up high, but you are very ill'.

I did not know what was wrong with me. How did I not understand what was wrong with me – I have two degrees, I have been a teacher, a police officer, but I just did not understand. I just thought that there was something really wrong with me, I am bad, I don't deserve to feel good, to enjoy life. Through the 12 Steps, I now know it is about learning from other people, understanding how

I got to where I did. In my family, you just got on with it. Which I did. Until I couldn't anymore. Drinking and using drugs made things easier. People ask 'when did you cross the line?' That is a bit blurry. I have friends who will have a bottle of wine a night – yes, probably not good for your health, but they do not end up where I did. I try to be as open as I can about what has gone on for me and I use that self-awareness that I have from recovery. It is alright to feel upset, to feel angry, learn to recognise what you are feeling. Understanding that is a gift. With friends and family – it is important to be open – we have to overcome the stigma, the shame. Then I find people start to talk to me about their drinking problems – they will talk to me but not go to their doctors, or talk to their partners, or their other friends. And people say to me 'you are so wise' – but to get to here for me was a bit of a mess! Everybody knows somebody who is using drugs and alcohol problematically. And that is hidden, well hidden, and the family keep it hidden. Nobody wants to say anything because it is embarrassing.

I have been in recovery for 11 years now. But every year I hear about women who die. Another person, more children who don't get the help they need. For me, it has been about learning that there are some things that I cannot control, that all I can do is keep my side of the street clean.