

Debs is an author and mother whose drinking masked her depression for years. Here she explains how she saw the light.

Recovery and Depression

Depression is no stranger to those of us in the throes of active alcoholism. We struggle daily with despair, pointlessness and physical torpor until we find recovery. For the majority, the symptoms of depression will all but have disappeared within several months of giving up drinking and in some lucky cases, this relief will come in as little as a few weeks. But what happens when the drinks goes and the depression remains or even worsens?

I had been taking anti-depressants on and off for ten years before finally putting the drink down. Optimistically, I looked forward to a time when, stabilised in my recovery, I could begin to cut down on the tablets with a view to coming off completely. After all, my depression was just another of the baleful effects of alcoholism, right? Nine months sober I planned with my GP to begin tapering off the medication hoping to becoming completely free of it by the time I hit my first AA birthday. I didn't expect it to be easy and prepared myself for a bumpy ride, knowing that as long as I stuck close to the fellowship of AA and used the tools of the programme I would get through it. Such was my belief in my own recovery and the power of the programme that I was simply not prepared for what was about to happen to me.

At first my descent was gradual. I put the lethargy and creeping isolation down to the demands of work, motherhood and at the time, a rigorous academic course of study. A vague sense of hopelessness began to creep around the edges of my psyche, and I began to wonder if maybe the programme wasn't working. My fall, when it came, was spectacular and I remember it vividly. One Friday at the end of the summer term I had two pieces of good news in one day; I heard that I had passed my course in the morning and in the afternoon my son won an award at prize-giving. Either one of these should have left me feeling ecstatic but I felt curiously flat and unmoved. By the following Monday I could not get out of bed and a sickening sense of not wanting to be alive was my constant companion. I spent my days lurching between terror and despair, unable to believe that this was my reward for being sober for a year.

Fortunately, I had enough presence of mind to seek the help of my GP who immediately started me back on the anti-depressants with a view to adding a mood stabiliser as treatment progressed. I gratefully took the anti-depressants but resisted the mood stabiliser for many months. Finally I arranged an appointment to see a private psychiatrist as my experience with a doctor on the NHS had been far from satisfactory. For two hours we went through my history, and after a thorough analysis of my mental health, he concluded that I did indeed have an underlying mental illness that had been obscured by my drinking for many years. My GP had been right and I began immediately on the mood stabilisers.

One year on from this, I have never felt more solid in my recovery and realise that I came dangerously close to giving up on AA, putting my depression down to the failure of the programme and not the fact that, as I have subsequently discovered, like many other alcoholics, I had an underlying mental illness that required medical intervention and the sort of help that is not available in recovery circles. AA can get you sober but if you need medical help, you must seek it.