

I beat alcohol addiction for my children'

Lea Hegarty, from Dublin, hid her shocking addiction from her husband and children, but now they are stronger than ever...

Looking at my picture now, it's hard to believe the secret I kept for 11 years. I was a happily married mum of two with a good job. Yet I was also an alcoholic and a cocaine addict.

I was on a dangerous spiral of self-destruction. Now, a year on, I'm sober and happy, but ashamed of everything I put my family through.

I can vividly remember the first time I got drunk. I was 21 and juggling my job in a bank with being a single mum to Chiara, my 18-month-old daughter. My stormy three-year marriage to her dad had ended in divorce.

So, when a female colleague invited me out for a drink I accepted. After a few vodkas, everything seemed better. It was as if I'd entered a different world.

I started going out twice a week, while my parents looked after Chiara. My weaknesses were vodka

and wine. Some mornings I'd have blinding hangovers, but I convinced myself I didn't have a problem.

When I was 24, in summer 2002, I met my husband, André Berthold. He was the same age and did the same job, but was as much of a homebody as I was a drinker. I'm not sure if he knew about my party girl reputation but maybe he hoped if we were together I'd calm down.

I vowed to drink less

At first I did change, and when I fell pregnant with Luke, I refused to touch a drop of alcohol. But I found it tough to cope with a newborn. I was convinced I was a bad mum and within three months I was back to my old ways.

But instead of confronting me, André blocked my drinking out. I think he – like me – was in denial. Maybe that's why he proposed to me when Luke was a toddler. So, in September 2007, we married but it didn't change me. I'd still go out drinking four or five times a week.

Then, in May 2008, I was at home when suddenly I struggled to breathe. André rushed me to hospital where I was diagnosed with panic attacks and depression. I was there for four weeks. As André sat by my bedside I vowed to drink less. But it was an empty promise. As soon as I left hospital I began to hide my drinking, swapping water for vodka so André wouldn't know.

I started mixing with people who drank as much as me. One evening,



Lea is slowly regaining the trust of her children, Luke and Chiara

a year later, one of them showed me a small pack of cocaine. 'You'll get the same buzz as alcohol but without looking drunk,' she said. Soon I was taking it every time I drank.

Slowly, my fragile grip on reality broke down. I'd disappear overnight and André would call the hospitals looking for me. And it broke my heart when Luke wrote about his parents for a school project. He said his dad helped with homework, then wrote, 'Mummy likes to sleep a lot.'

But my shame only intensified my self-hatred, which made me drink even more. Then, last September, I changed jobs and reached a new low by sipping vodka at my desk.

For the first time I wasn't elated and was convinced everyone would be better off without me. I fled the office that Friday, determined to take enough drink and drugs to kill myself. But when I woke up on Monday morning, in a car park, I realised I

Telling it like it is

had too much to lose. I called André and told him where I was.

He drove me home, where he

bathed me and put me to bed. The next day, I called a detox specialist called Sober Services. We cashed in our savings to pay for my treatment and I went into rehab in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. At first, I fought my counsellors. But speaking to my children twice a week, I knew I had to stay for them.



Lea would go out drinking four or five times a week, often disappearing overnight

I'm trying to make amends

After four months, André came to visit. We had joint counselling and for the first time I was totally honest with him. I had tried telling him before but I don't think he could take it all in. 'I'd drink five or more times a week and take cocaine,' I admitted. He was more angry that I'd lied to him than anything. But he realised I was ill. 'We'll get you better,' he said.

I was away for five months in all. Going home last March was nerve wracking. Having neglected my family, I had to rebuild their trust. I decided to quit work and volunteer for a local addiction centre instead.

I'm still trying to make amends. I help Luke, now six, with his colouring and take Chiara, 14, to the cinema. Slowly, I'm regaining André's trust too. I'm so sorry for what I put my family through and so grateful I have a second chance. I'm finally the wife and mum they deserve. 40

*MY SHAME
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Overcoming addiction

* Alcohol and drug addiction aren't just confined to binge drinking teenagers.

One in four of us is consuming more than three bottles of wine a week.

* The number of middle-class women seeking NHS help for addiction to cocaine has leapt by 50% in two years. Both the model Jodie Kidd and singer Katherine Jenkins have admitted to using the Class A drug in the past.

* Sober Services helps people get help and maintain recovery through professional services. Go to soberservices.co.uk or call 0844 330 1213.