



Client Story – Steven Lanham (NORCAS Lowestoft)

From my late teens to my late twenties I led the life of a typical young man. I worked hard during the week and went out and got drunk at the weekend.

I'd done okay at school, went to university and got a good job as a biochemist. I was doing exactly the same as my friends, I didn't think I was doing anything especially dangerous and didn't feel I was damaging my long-term health.

After a while I would have a drink during the week as well, usually on my own alone. I'm not quite sure why, maybe because of stress from work, maybe just because I could. Still, this didn't seem to be a problem, I always got to work in the morning, even if it was a struggle sometimes! Gradually the nights out with friends became less frequent as I felt more and more like staying home alone.

Then I began to feel not so good. Although I had been a very relaxed and happy person I began to feel anxious and depressed. Of course I quickly discovered the "cure" for the anxiety – a drink. I was drinking every day now and going off sick from work. I didn't realise it but I was in a horrible downward spiral – using alcohol to relieve anxiety short-term while making it much worse in the long term. I went to the doctor and got the usual antidepressant prescription and advice to cut down the alcohol. By now though I was physically dependant, if I didn't drink I suffered withdrawal symptoms, and being depressed and anxious made it all much worse. I'd been off work sick for weeks and they were running out of patience, things were just getting worse so I realised I had to take action. What to do? Go home to mum of course! I was living and working in Bristol at the time, and one day in 2005 I went in to work, resigned, phoned my dad and asked him to come and take me home to Lowestoft. Luckily for me my parents are fantastic. They realised I couldn't just stop and got me a new GP. It didn't take a doctor to see I was not well but he was excellent and explained that it would be dangerous to stop drinking suddenly and that I needed specialist help. He directed me to NORCAS. I'd never heard of NORCAS before but I thought I knew what it would be about- counselling and support groups; just the sort of thing I had no faith in whatsoever, but I really needed help so I went along.

So in autumn 2005 I walked into NORCAS for a drop-in assessment, in hindsight it was one of the most important days of my life, unfortunately I can't remember it at all but I do know I must have been given my first appointment with my allocated key worker, as well as a health-check - I was surprised and rather impressed that NORCAS boasted a full clinical team.

I enjoyed seeing my key worker immediately as it was clear that she really knew what she was talking about, not just in terms of the alcohol but also with coping with anxiety and depression. At first I tried a reduction programme, I was able to begin to reduce my intake but when my blood results came back it was clear I needed medical help fast. The doctor at NORCAS saw me and I was booked in for a detox as soon as possible. I was now clearly ill, jaundiced and bloated wreck. I was 32 years old.

I was admitted to Northgate hospital in early 2006 for a planned 10-day detox, but after one day my latest blood results came back and they were awful. I needed to go to James Paget Hospital, where I could continue the detox under closer supervision while my health was monitored. I was by now very yellow and things were not looking too good for me; my immune system was suppressed leading to me contracting pneumonia. My key worker visited me in hospital, as all clients are, although I wasn't aware of it at the time. I was in hospital for 6 weeks and very weak for a few months, but I recovered.

I resumed my sessions at NORCAS, which were mainly concerned with my mental health, I was suffering with anxiety and the loss of my old job and lifestyle wasn't helping my mood. It was also suggested that I attend the support group. I really didn't think a support group would be for me, but was prepared to try everything on offer so went along, enjoyed it and continued to attend.

By summer 2006 I'd been abstinent for about six months so thought I'd have a couple of drinks, just a couple. Of course my key worker had told me it was unlikely I'd be able to do this, but I just hadn't accepted that at the time. Sure enough I was pretty much instantly back on it. I'd been drinking again for about two weeks, when I saw my hospital consultant for my six-monthly check and got lucky. I told him I'd just started drinking again and he said: "so you want another detox?" I replied "erm, yes please" and to my amazement he said go home, pack a bag and come back, there's a bed for you.

I stopped drinking again but I was still really struggling with anxiety, and terribly depressed, I attended the support group most weeks but sometimes I just didn't get out of bed for days. I remained abstinent for several months until I was so low I just didn't care anymore, and started drinking again. After about one week of drinking, my

health deteriorated again, I wasn't sleeping, and I couldn't shave because I was shaking so much, my legs and feet swollen with oedema. Then something happened. I looked in the mirror and my face was cut and bruised, I looked down at my feet and they were all blistered and shredded where they'd been swollen up in my shoes and I just said to myself: "this is ridiculous. I've had enough." I've haven't had a drink since, nor wanted to.

What changed was my mindset. My NORCAS key worker and the person who facilitates the support group, had been explaining that it wasn't enough to just remove the alcohol from one's life and carry on as before, it was one's whole *lifestyle* that needed to change. That's what I did, I stopped drinking and smoking and started exercising all at once. I would never recommend this, it's a bit extreme! But it's what I needed to do.

I was still attending the support group and found myself really looking forward to it every week. My mental health was gradually improving and I was getting back to my calm self. My only worry now was how I was going to get back into work. There had been a volunteer helping out with the support group, and when she left I thought I may as well ask to do it. I began going along before group and just helping out by making the coffee and getting the room ready. I would never have thought group work would suit me but I enjoyed it more and more, so I asked if I could help out in any other way. I was sent on the befrienders course which anyone wishing to volunteer must do, and once I'd done that I asked if I could be classed as a client, so I could attend the support group as a volunteer. One day, I was saying that it would be good to have another group in the evening, for people who cannot attend during the day, and I got the response: "yes it would, why don't you start one?" This was just what I needed, something to start from scratch myself. Another worker agreed to work alongside me and we got the new group started, after the inevitable tricky first few weeks, it began to flourish, and then explode in popularity. It's hugely rewarding to get something like that going and be involved right from the start. I found I love group work, the spirit of support we have in the groups, especially at the moment, is fantastic.

Now I'm being given opportunities to do other things as well, I'm involved with two new clinics we recently started at NORCAS, I attend all team meetings and discussions, and I just feel like a member of the team now. It seems incredible now that I was a client so recently, and that's because of the NORCAS policy to give everyone a chance to contribute as well as the fantastic attitude of the staff.

I now also represent Lowestoft service users at Suffolk Drug and Alcohol Action Team meetings, helping to ensure service users have a say at every level. My

personal goal in this respect is to empower service users to possibly start their own user-led groups, giving more service users an opportunity to get involved.

I don't pretend to be entirely altruistic, I hope I help clients but it's good for me too, you could say it's the ultimate relapse prevention!

Of course, as I've been taking on more responsibility I've needed to take the relevant training. NORCAS provides access for volunteers to all training courses, as well the DAAT courses, which is brilliant. I've still got a lot of training to do and hope to do some one-to-one work in the future. I think I officially work two days a week, although in practice it tends to be a bit more, I've pretty much done full time hours this week (only because I keep volunteering for things!).