

# Juz's story: from childhood to health management

I grew up in a very dysfunctional family. Both my parents were health professionals and were unable to deal with emotional issues. I developed asthma as a young child. When I was sick my parents medicated me and nursed me. My asthma became a vehicle for getting my needs met. Once I started school, I was left to manage my medications on my own. In retrospect, this set up a pattern of self-medicating to cope with emotional issues.

As a teenager I felt alienated, both from my family and at school. I wasn't able to find a constructive outlet to develop my self-esteem. The only way to get attention was to act up. I started drinking and then taking drugs. I remember thinking that drugs were frightening but also thrilling. I thought everyone would be in awe of me. Instead of being geeky and full of self-loathing, I felt cool and dangerous.

At sixteen years old I fell into a social group where everyone was struggling in the same way. We all had troubled families and little self-confidence.

I wagged school and hung out in a dilapidated bungalow. In this oasis from school and home, I found a place where I was validated and admired by my peers. I started injecting amphetamines at sixteen. They were like anti-depressants. Drugs simplified life in some ways. They gave me something to think about, to drive for, and most importantly, they muted the suffocating depression that was a legacy of my childhood.

This was in the 1980s. If anyone noticed that I was going off the rails, they didn't mention it. No-one approached me and tried to help – it just didn't happen. In those days you got detention or you were grounded. There was no support at all.

My friends and I were introduced to this older man. We were sixteen; he was twenty-eight and an experienced drug user who had previously been arrested for trafficking heroin from Thailand to Australia. He had extensive connections in the drug scene. Until then, we mainly smoked marijuana. After he arrived we had a pipeline to copious amounts of amphetamines.



# Self medication

When I look back, I believe this man cultivated me and my group of friends. He was our drug dealer and his social life became a group of sixteen-year-olds. I became his girlfriend and it was a very abusive relationship. I ran away from home to live with him. He had all the power. I had no money; my family didn't know where I was; my only friends were buying drugs from him. He collected the dole for me but I never saw a cent. I was incredibly naive.

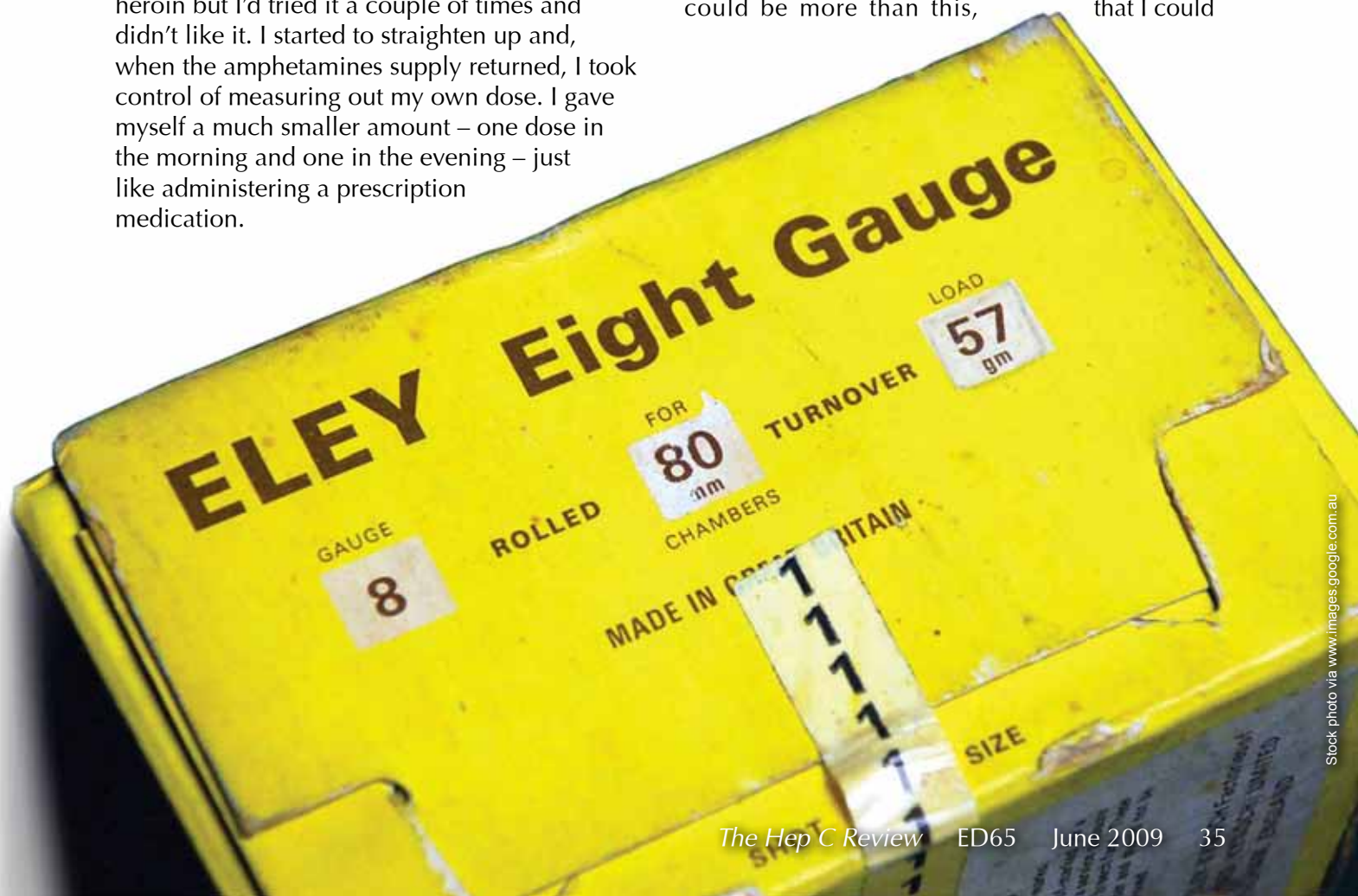
My boyfriend must have had some experience with the dangers of sharing fits because he was pedantic about not sharing. We would buy a box of a hundred needles and he would never share with others. He had total control of the drugs and would always inject me with his syringe after he'd finished his hit. In some ways I'm grateful to him. While I got hep C from him, he probably protected me from other blood-borne diseases.

Things changed when the amphetamines supply dried up. My boyfriend started taking heroin but I'd tried it a couple of times and didn't like it. I started to straighten up and, when the amphetamines supply returned, I took control of measuring out my own dose. I gave myself a much smaller amount – one dose in the morning and one in the evening – just like administering a prescription medication.

It is very difficult to stop taking drugs when you live in a drug culture but I knew that taking drugs was a dead end for me. One morning I woke up and realised I didn't want to do this anymore; I just stopped. When I look back, I am amazed at my single-mindedness. After I stopped I was extremely run-down. I was malnourished and slept twenty hours a day.

Even though I wasn't taking drugs, I was still living in the terrifying environment of heroin dealing. My boyfriend ran out of money and started ripping off other heroin dealers. I remember sleeping with a shotgun next to our bed. I started taking Rohypnol and drinking, not only to deal with the fear, but also to manage the emotional pain that had caused me to seek out drugs in the first place. When you come off drugs you are very susceptible to other addictions. I went straight to alcohol and drank everyday.

I knew this wasn't the way to live. But I just needed a kernel of something to believe in, a sense that I could be more than this, that I could



## my story

have a fulfilling life and feel good about myself. It took me about another six months before I left him.

I was finally able to leave when I met someone else. I was very dependent with no education, job, money, friends or family. My new boyfriend and his family literally took me into their home and supported me. They fed me, paid for me to get my licence, provided me with a car and eventually found a place for us to live in.

We were both eighteen, ex-users and living in a flat together. We were trying to play grown-ups when we were really just kids. He was smoking dope and I was drinking everyday but we managed to make this life for ourselves. His parents enrolled me in secretarial school and I got my first job. That was a critical point in my life – it was like a seed being planted. For the first time in a long time I felt proud of myself. More importantly, it gave me financial independence.

It was six years before I was diagnosed with hep C. In that time I worked in a good job in the corporate sector, broke up with my boyfriend and backpacked for a year through Europe and Canada.

When I was diagnosed in 1992, the diagnosis did not impact on me. I was really tired and I went to the doctor, who gave me blood tests, including a liver function test. My ALTs came back elevated. I was asked if I had ever injected drugs and when I said I had, I was tested for hep C. In retrospect, getting the diagnosis was a strange experience. I was told, "You've got hep C, so don't share your toothbrush or razor." That was it. I just thought "I have got this thing and I shouldn't share my toothbrush." I didn't understand the long-term implications of a chronic illness or even know about side effects. Mind you, it was '92, and nobody really understood it.

At that time hep C was the least of my worries. I was still battling multiple addictions. I finally gave up drinking but it was replaced with an eating disorder. Eventually, I started psychotherapy, which I continued with for the rest of the decade. During that time I returned to studying my VCE and a university degree – and went on exchange to the USA. I went back to work and further developed my career. Then in 1998 I had my first flare-up of hep C.

A few years after I was diagnosed, I was referred to a specialist. I would go and see him once a year and he would smile and tell me that everything was fine and there was no need to worry. Then in 1998 I felt unusually fatigued. I saw the specialist and was told that my ALTs were in the five-hundreds. It was the first time I realised that hep C could potentially cause me serious ill health. It gave me a hell of a fright.

I am still surprised at how little information I was given by the medical profession about my illness. They are quite happy to give you information about your ALTs or tell you your fibrosis score, but often they don't think beyond the numbers and the physical manifestations of the disease. I have always been someone who seeks out more information, so I did my research and discovered the Hepatitis Council in Victoria who gave me support, advice, referrals and access to research data, and helped me to get to know my disease.

We all handle our health differently. Some people prefer to know as little as possible, and that is a valid option. I wanted to know what I could do to manage this disease. I enrolled in a course which introduced ideas about diet, meditation and health self-management. My ALTs settled and my specialist started talking about treatment. Little did I know, this was just the beginning.

### • Juz, VIC

Juz's story is continued  
in the next edition  
of *The Hep C  
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