

Spending time with horses helped me kick heroin

After spending more than 15 years living rough on the streets of London, ex-heroin addict Teresa, 42, checked into rehab and turned her life around using equine-assisted psychotherapy at the Stepps rehabilitation centre

On... how things got so bad

I don't like to make excuses, but when you spend your childhood in different care homes, it's not the best start in life. You fall into difficult situations before you're ready to cope with them – relationships with men, being homeless. I started smoking at nine years old, drinking at 14, by 19 I was on crack, and in my mid-twenties I started injecting heroin.

On... getting off drugs

There's nothing glamorous about being a drug addict. It meant I wasn't fit to look after my five boys, got involved in crime, and sold myself on the street. People talk about hitting rock bottom, but I hit rock bottom years before I went to rehab. I was injecting up to ten times a day, staying up for three days at a time, but getting no enjoyment from each fix. It was a routine, something to get me through – I was just surviving. Thankfully, a girlfriend I knew from the children's home took me in, saw things had gone too far and persuaded me to go and get help.

On... letting go of the past

Sam, who runs Stepps, admitted recently that she really wasn't sure they'd be able to turn things around for me when I first arrived. She'd driven me to the rehab centre from London and, for the entire three-hour journey, I didn't say a word. I'm a different person now. I wouldn't say my personality has changed, but, after years of suppressing it and putting on a mask, I've had the freedom and space to be myself. My nickname as a dealer was Skeletor, because I was incredibly gaunt, skinny and mean – you'd walk across the street to avoid me. Now, I'm not sure I'd even recognise that person.

On... equine-assisted psychotherapy

Animals are a leveller – whether someone's disabled, depressed, a millionaire, a drug addict, we're all the same in the eyes of a horse. At my first session, I was taken to a paddock with six horses and it was just amazing. They all came straight up to me,

"I was taken into a paddock with six horses. They came straight up to me, nudging me – it felt spiritual"



surrounding me, nudging me – it felt spiritual and calming. I really think they sense when someone is sad or vulnerable. I've always felt a lot of rejection, and find it very hard to get close to people and trust them, but from that first session, things began to change. I started to open up, talk and finally face my fears.

On... the next step

Even though I've been clean for two and half years, I'm still an addict and that's why I've chosen to move to the country. Occasionally I go and see my sister in London, but I could never live there again because of the temptation. All it would take is one hit and it would send

me right back. My focus now is staying on the right track, building up relationships with my sons, and getting meaningful work. It's been hard getting used to the country – the space, the solitude, the slow pace. My first year here was the hardest, but this place is the reason I've succeeded. ■

NEED TO KNOW

Equine-assisted psychotherapy is a collaborative effort between a therapist and a horse specialist, and has been used to treat everything from depression to drug addiction. It's particularly effective in situations where people have low self-esteem, difficulty articulating their feelings and trust issues. For more information, visit stepp rehab.co.uk.