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# How One Woman Beat Heroin Addiction

February 28, 2018 [Recovery](#), [Recovery at The Ranch](#)

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in the seemingly hopeless world of heroin addiction. With an excruciating amount of hard work, the help of specialized [heroin abuse treatment](#), and a loving family that didn't enable, Emily beat the odds.

## “I needed to run away from myself.”

Emily started using drugs and alcohol at age 14. “I smoked weed all day, every day. I skipped class to smoke,” she said. “I did well in school, so no one really bothered me about it.” She also experimented with other drugs like mushrooms and LSD.

During college, Emily started drinking more and hanging out with people who did cocaine. Eventually, she transferred to a school in Canada. “I needed to run away from myself,” she said. But Emily would come home during school breaks and party the entire time. “A lot of alcohol and cocaine. Whatever was around. I used some opiates with a couple of friends who did pills,” she said. Despite her substance use, she managed to graduate.

After college, Emily moved in with a boyfriend who was using heroin. It wasn’t long before she joined him. “It started with pills,” she said. “About two years later I was using IV heroin.” She was stealing purses from bars to fund her opioid addiction – until she got caught.

Live Chat



Facing a theft charge, Emily walked out of the courthouse to find her parents waiting for her. She hadn't spoken to them in several months. They found out about her whereabouts when she missed her first court date and the police showed up at their home with a warrant for her arrest.

Her parents persuaded her into their car under the guise of taking her to lunch. Instead, they drove to her father's house where an interventionist was waiting. After eight exhausting hours with the interventionist – and with no job, a theft conviction, and the prospect of facing painful heroin withdrawal with no money to buy more drugs – Emily agreed to enter heroin abuse treatment. But her heart wasn't in it. She thought, "Oh, this is great. I will get a medical detox and will have a low tolerance when I get out, so I can get high easier."

Emily went through the motions in heroin abuse treatment. "I would lie and say I wanted to quit, but I was still talking to my boyfriend [who was also my] drug dealer on the phone," she said.

## **“It gave me hope.”**

Though it didn't end with sobriety, treatment wasn't a complete loss. Emily had a therapist who helped her work through underlying issues. "It felt great to be clean for the first time in years." The family therapy aspect of treatment did wonders for her relationship with her loved ones and the ways they communicated.



seeing their response of, 'that's not okay' was impactful." Trauma-focused therapies like EMDR helped her start getting to the root of why she'd felt the need to numb and self-medicate with substances. "It gave me hope," she says about that time in treatment.

Emily got a taste of what life in recovery could be like, but she wasn't ready. She thought she would quit one day. Not yet. "Part of me was honest, but inside somewhere, I knew something to be different."

## **"It was the 'searching-streets-for-cigarette-butts' level of addiction."**

Emily found a job and somewhere to live, but everything fell apart faster this time. "I planned to continue using, but didn't want to get physically addicted, which is impossible." She relapsed within one week of leaving drug rehab.

At her lowest point, Emily lived with an abusive boyfriend for several months. She used drugs and was barely allowed to go outside. They lived in a tiny room and shared a bathroom with the 12 other rooms on their floor in a dorm-like apartment complex. She slept on the floor. Emily would do whatever amount of drugs her boyfriend allowed and cried all day, every day. She hadn't showered in a month. "It was the 'searching-streets-for-cigarette-butts' level of addiction," she said. "I was just absolutely miserable and knew I couldn't live like that anymore."



One day when her boyfriend was out getting drugs, Emily called her mom sobbing; she needed to leave. Her parents set up everything with The Ranch treatment center, picked her up when her boyfriend was gone, and flew her to treatment.

This time, it was different. “I felt like I couldn’t do anything anymore. I was torn open,” Emily said. She had no reservations about being vulnerable, and no energy to keep her self-protective armor intact. “I was completely open to anything anyone could do to help.”

When Emily arrived at The Ranch, she started medical detox. The process was more challenging this time because she’d injured her back at some point after passing out from using. Without opioids to numb the pain, physicians helped ease her discomfort with topicals and anti-inflammatory medicines. She was on Subutex to manage cravings and withdrawal symptoms. “I felt like garbage for a month to six weeks,” she said.

## **“I learned everything over again – like eating three meals a day.”**

With her emotional defenses down and intrinsic motivation up to get better this time, Emily was able to open herself up to what was being offered. “I had the most amazing therapist I’ve ever had in my life while I was there,” Emily said. “She was just not hesitating to call you on your shit, which most addicts need – and she radiated unconditional acceptance at the same time.”



spiritual connection she discovered through some of the Native American healing traditions like the sweat lodge. “I think I could have been ready, but if The Ranch didn’t happen, it wouldn’t have ended up the same way – if I didn’t have that support and couldn’t be in that bubble where I was safe and literally had to figure out how to live again,” she said.

At The Ranch, Emily lived in a cottage with other clients where they were responsible for everyday activities like cooking and doing laundry. “I had done it before and I knew how to do it, but I didn’t know how to live,” she said. “I would eat a bag of candy weekly. I had lost 70 pounds. I learned everything over again – like eating three meals a day.”

In heroin abuse treatment, Emily addressed the situational events that fueled her substance abuse and learned to manage her depression, which had also led to her addiction. “I had severe depression episodes since I was a kid that I now manage with medication,” she said. Her anxiety was high and she had a lot of trauma: “The 15-year-old incident wasn’t the only time I’d been raped.” Emily also explored trauma in childhood. “I grew up in a very loving household, but medical stuff that occurred made me horribly anxious as a child,” she said. “I learned how something [traumatic] can really invade your brain. My brain started functioning differently because I was so terrified.” Armed with a new understanding of her issues and a toolbox of healthy coping skills, Emily left treatment to try her hand again at recovery.



After treatment, Emily said, “I was just so happy, honestly, waking up to a whole different world where everything was super bright.” That, and a lot of hard work.

When Emily left heroin abuse treatment this time, she moved into a halfway house. Some of the women from treatment also lived there, so she had a built-in support system. She called several staff members at The Ranch on a regular basis. “Everyone was so supportive and offered continued support after I left.” She transitioned into an intensive outpatient program, got a job and went to 12-step meetings every day. With no car, she walked home every night, arriving around 10 pm and leaving around 4 in the morning for work. “It was intense, but I needed to have a lot of things to focus on so I didn’t think of other things as possibilities,” she said.

After five months, she moved into an apartment with friends from the halfway house. They signed a contract. If one of them relapsed, they were out. One of them did. She moved. Emily continued to attend 12-step meetings and experimented with alternatives to the 12 Steps like Dharma meetings. She meditated. All of her closest friends were in recovery. She found a really good sponsor that kept on her about working the steps and had her check in with him every morning and night.

## “I found a different way to live.”

Eventually, sobriety felt like the new normal. Emily worked and enrolled in classes at Vanderbilt University. She graduated with a



BY: JESSICA COOPER

About maintaining her recovery from a drug that has a 90% relapse rate, Emily says, "I found a different way to live. It feels like I'm my true self now." She doesn't have those feelings of wanting to run away from herself anymore. She hasn't had cravings in years. She's been sober since March 2012.

Emily says desiring something different has been a large part of her success. "It had to be more than just not wanting to be an addict," she said. "It wasn't about fighting against addiction. It was about choosing a different path."

## “Don’t enable.”

Emily's advice to the loved ones of individuals caught in heroin's vicious cycle is "Continue to not enable." Family members of addicted loved ones hear the phrase "detach with love" a lot. That's exactly what her parents did, and it worked. Emily doesn't think she would have gotten sober had her parents continued to provide her an apartment, car, food and money and rescued her from her mistakes.

There was a lot of anger back then, but today she says she can't imagine what it was like for them, not knowing how she was doing or even if she was alive. She gives them credit for holding those loving boundaries. Emily knew her parents loved her unconditionally and would be there when she needed them. And they were the first people she called when she was ready. "Knowing you're there for



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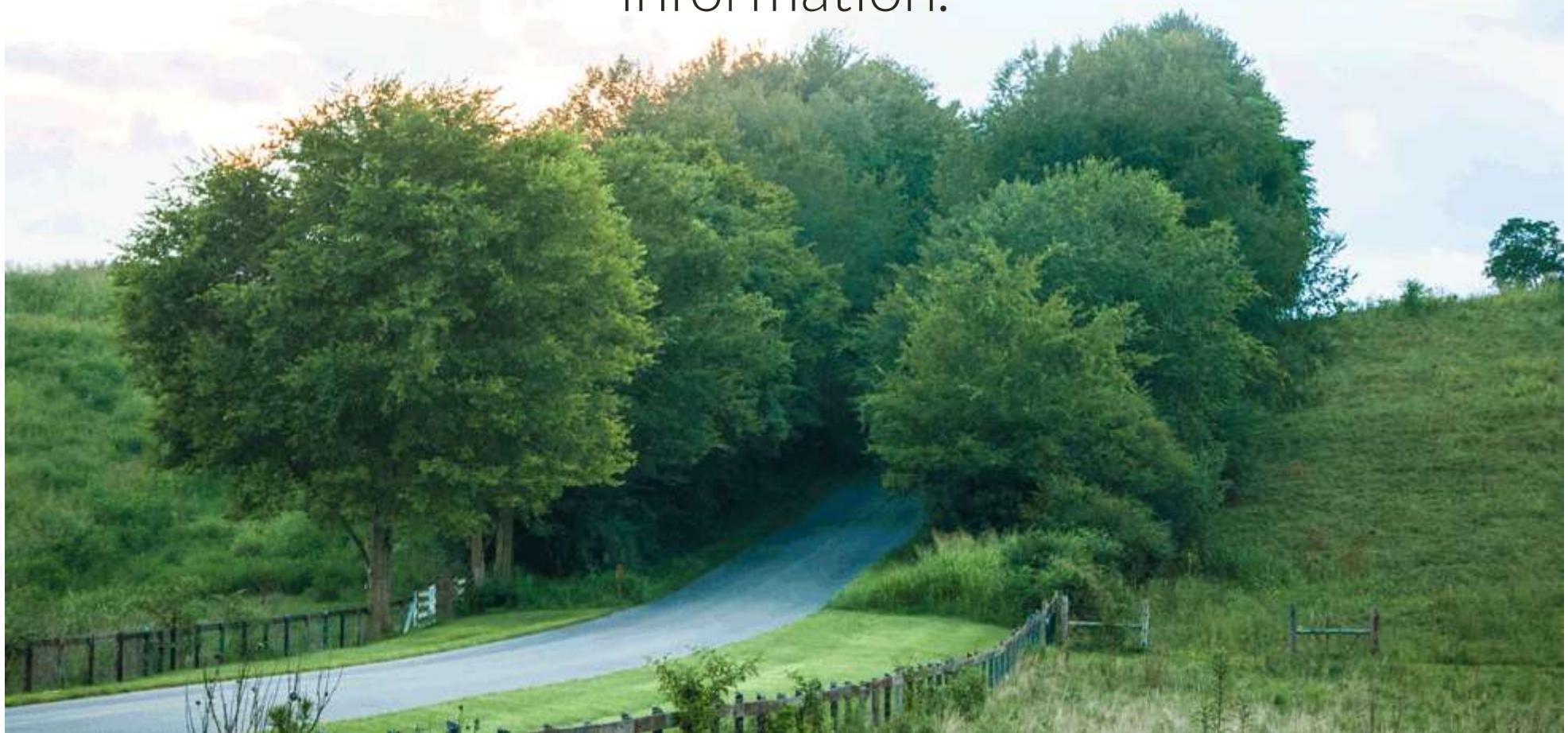






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