



LISA MAXWELL HAD HER FIRST DRINK AT 13 AND BEGAN A ROLLERCOASTER RELATIONSHIP WITH PRESCRIPTION PAIN MEDICATIONS AT 16.

A LONG AND WINDING ROAD

Secret. Shame. Guilt.

These are the “friends” that have surrounded Laura Elizabeth (Lisa) Maxwell, 53, for 40 years. She had her first drink at 13 and began a rollercoaster relationship with prescription pain medications at 16. She’s had a lifetime of hiding her addictions, and feeling guilty and ashamed about her behavior.

Now, with the support of Kelly Marsengill, MA, Clinical Coordinator at Mercy’s Sedlacek Treatment Center, Lisa’s been drug-free since May 6, 2014. She’s also marking eight years without a drink (with help from Alcoholics’ Anonymous). It hasn’t been easy. Lisa shares her story in the hopes that others with similar addictions might seek help from the outpatient treatment program that has saved her life.

She discovered pain medication in high school, after three surgeries for endometriosis-related issues. With each surgery came

a prescription for pain medication. Lisa remembers, “The medication gave me energy and made me more talkative instead of tired, like most people.” And she liked it.

After high school, Lisa became a dental assistant in an office with easy access to hydrocodone samples from pharmaceutical representatives.

Stealing from work

“One Saturday, I took all of them (the samples). But I didn’t admit I did it and they couldn’t prove I did it. The bad behavior started then, even though I loved my job and the dentist I worked for,” says Lisa. She began taking one to two pills each day. But then she ran out.

“I felt so guilty about my actions that I didn’t steal any more. And, the office became more careful with them then, too,” she

says. Lisa remained drug-free for the next couple years, but then her addiction flared again.

“I started writing my own prescriptions,” Lisa says, calling them in to different pharmacies. “I knew how to do that because I called them in for patients. I also used the prescription pads in the office to write one- to two-week prescriptions, just as a dentist would typically prescribe for pain after a dental procedure.”

She tore out the phone book pharmacy listing page and highlighted those she’d already used. Her abuse escalated. “I’d take eight at a time because my tolerance had built up. I became so addicted I’d sleep with a bottle under my pillow and water next to the bed,” she remembers. Plus, she was drinking.

“Mentally, I wanted and depended on drugs,” Lisa says.

The secret is out

It caught up with her in 1989 when one of the pharmacies questioned a prescription and called her employer. The police were brought in. Lisa lost her job and her fiancé discovered her secret. To get her life back on track, Lisa began a 90-day outpatient treatment program at Sedlacek Treatment Center.

She responded well to treatment and began exercising, eating right and quit smoking. Lisa attended AA meetings and stayed drug-free from 1989 to 1993. In 1995, her fiancé of 13 years passed away, and she started drinking and using drugs again every day.

Things began looking up again in 1999, when she fell in love, got married and had a son (now 15). She kept the same job for 13 years.

Then Lisa’s husband left and she became depressed. The cycle of drinking and drugs returned. This time, she was getting prescriptions from several physicians for

“LISA’S LIFE WAS THE PERFECT STORM. SHE HAD CHRONIC MEDICAL CONDITIONS, A GENETIC PREDISPOSITION AND AVAILABILITY OF DRUGS.”

*Kelly Marsengill, MA
Clinical Coordinator
Mercy’s Sedlacek
Treatment Center*

relief from various pain-related conditions, such as fibromyalgia and rheumatoid arthritis. But she abused the drugs, causing her to fall hard several times, chipping her teeth and knocking her head. When she blacked out and fell while holding her young son, she knew she needed help. She moved home and went back to treatment.

But the stress of caring for her son and her father (who had dementia and later died), plus her own physical ailments became too much; she began skipping treatment sessions.

The cycle begins again

Lisa began seeing a new doctor. “The doctor didn’t know my history. I wasn’t honest with him,” she says. And the cycle of pain medications and drinking returned. She was diagnosed with Gitleman Syndrome, a kidney disorder that causes an imbalance of potassium, magnesium and calcium. The genetic abnormality can cause painful muscle spasms, cramping, weakness, dizziness and more. The diagnosis helped explain Lisa’s constant battle with pain and could have contributed to her falls.

Kelly explains, “She didn’t develop healthy coping skills, so she turned to drugs and alcohol to mask emotional and physical pain.”

He notes the importance of “having a qualified doctor who



"I COULDN'T TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITY ANYMORE.
I WAS TIRED OF FIGHTING THE ADDICTION AND THE SHAME
THAT GOES WITH IT."

Lisa Maxwell
Patient, Sedlacek Treatment Center

Everybody
holds a possibility of a Miracle

1st
drink at
13

AFTER A LIFETIME OF HIDING HER ADDICTIONS, LISA HAS BEEN DRUG-FREE SINCE MAY 6, 2014, WITH THE SUPPORT OF KELLY MARSENGILL, MA, CLINICAL COORDINATOR AT MERCY'S SEDLACEK TREATMENT CENTER.

listens and explains and looks for family history. Doctors really have to know the patient's history, especially when it involves pain medications." The value of a medical home, where a patient communicates and develops a relationship with a provider, is important, he adds.

Today, with the prevalence of electronic record management systems, like Mercy's Epic, there is much more transparency of information. Epic gives Mercy providers access to their patient's care and medication history.

Couldn't take it anymore

Lisa says she was popping pills like candy, while caring for her 14-year-old son and her mom, who was in poor health. She suffered three cardiac arrests during this time period. In May 2013, Lisa overdosed on sleeping pills.

"I couldn't take the responsibility anymore. I was tired of fighting the addiction and the shame that goes with it. I was drinking at night, losing my friends and not paying bills," she says. The hospital alerted her family doctor about the overdose and he stopped seeing her, shutting down her source for drugs.

Lisa wanted pain pills so badly she went to a dentist, supposedly seeking care for her chipped teeth.

"I knew if I got them (my teeth) pulled I'd get narcotics," says Lisa. "So I called a dentist who didn't know me and had a full mouth extraction."

The dentist refilled her pain medication twice, but refused more. With no source for drugs, Lisa went through withdrawal. She called Sedlacek for intensive outpatient therapy. Kelly became her counselor and life started looking brighter.

Lisa says she felt like using every day for the first 60 days. "I was really hurting with all the cravings," she adds, but once she turned the corner they lessened.

Drug-free!

Kelly says Lisa's relying on a different approach to treatment now — for the first time, she is being completely honest.

"She's putting stuff on the table she never put out before. She was in a vortex where she saw herself as sick," he says. "We had to get her to step outside of that."

Lisa agrees: "I had to step out of the negative thinking and 'Oh, woe is me.'" She's getting parenting help from a community agency and making strides to improve life for herself and her son.

"I'm learning to push away negativity — that was a learned pattern," she says. Kelly is helping Lisa with cognitive behavior therapy, encouraging her to replace negative thoughts with positive self-talk. He also is helping her to use mindfulness and meditation tools to combat her negative thoughts.

"I have totally surrendered to God. Now I'm ready," Lisa says. "I'm tired of being sick."

Kelly says, "Lisa's life was the perfect storm. She had chronic medical conditions, a genetic predisposition and availability of drugs. By the time she realized she was addicted, she was so deep into it that she couldn't control it on her own. She had become more and more withdrawn and isolated."

Now, she's back home caring for her mom and son. She attends AA meetings and continues treatment at Sedlacek. And she writes in a journal to express her feelings, something she has always struggled with.

"She's a fighter. She has been through treatment four times! I applaud her for coming back," Kelly says. "Guilt and remorse often keep people from getting the help they need."

"I HAVE TOTALLY
SURRENDERED TO GOD.
NOW I'M READY,"
LISA SAYS. "I'M TIRED
OF BEING SICK."

Lisa Maxwell
Patient, Sedlacek
Treatment Center

Need help?

Call Mercy's Sedlacek Treatment Center at (319) 398-6226.

Want to learn more?

Watch *Help for Prescription Drug Abuse* as Kelly Marsengill, Clinical Coordinator at Mercy's Sedlacek Treatment Center, talks about which drugs are commonly abused and how the abuse of these drugs affects minds, bodies, lives and families. Learn about resources available to treat prescription drug abuse. Watch it on demand at www.mercycare.org/webinar.