



Positively Speaking

A Podcast by Casey House

Season 2, episode 5 – HIV and substance use: Marty's story

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Liz Creal [0:05]
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Welcome to Positively Speaking, the podcast that explores the experiences of people living with HIV. I'm your host Liz Creal, I'm a social worker at Casey House, a subacute specialty hospital in Toronto providing inpatient and outpatient care for people living with or at risk of HIV.

The theme of this episode is HIV and substance use. In the previous episode we heard from Fred. Fred described the impact of early childhood trauma as it led him to substance use and self destructive behavior. But before we get started, it's important to acknowledge the opioid crisis which is impacting people in communities all over the world. In Canada the impact has been devastating on people who use substances, their families and friends and communities. According to the Government of Canada Health Info Base, a total of 3,556 apparent opioid toxicity deaths occurred from January to June 2022. In Canada, this is approximately 20 deaths per day.

In this episode, we're going to hear from Marty. Marty is a 54 year old woman who is a long term HIV survivor. And 30 of her 54 years Marty has been using substances. Here she tells us of how the pandemic and hard earned wisdom from years of hardship helped her to surmount her depression, to get out and to utilize her skills positively. But before we hear from Marty, a warning to our listeners. This episode contains content that might be upsetting for some. Please take care.

For Marty, focusing on someone else's need for support provided her with an opportunity to get away from her unhealthy focus on herself and focus on another. In doing so she meets her own needs for motivation to get out and feel a sense of purpose, while at the same time offering a lifeline to another person.

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out]

Marty [2:10]

Well uh, I was at home. I was depressed. And uh, I mean, that kind of goes hand in hand with being at home. And then you tend to stay home for too long and then you don't want to go out anymore. And then you start feeling nervous when you go out. You find comfort in your own home and you stop associating with people and uh, it's not good. Um, so really when the COVID hit, I got very busy. Um, my outreach positions took off. There was lots of demand for me and um, the skills that I have. And a friend of mine, and an elderly person,

needed help. He got sick with COVID. And he needed my help. And I was 100% completely dedicated for the first time ever in my life. He's a lot better now. And he he's a good friend of mine. So I was only happy to do it. And uh, it was good it. It brought me out of my shell. It brought me out of you know, my depression. It brought me out of my house. Maybe it might be a little extreme that I'm really busy now, but it's better than being stuck in, inside and uh, wallowing in misery. And so yeah, it's, it's it has helped me.

Liz [3:38]

You can hear the pride in Marty's voice when she speaks about how she cared for her friend and drew on her strengths. But she was not always able to do that. Here she talks about her substance use and how she was introduced to crack cocaine.

Marty [3:51]

I was living in Regent Park. I had a boyfriend. I got pregnant. I had my son - I was just 19 years old. And the people that we knew did drugs and where we lived, the superintendent had like kilos of it. And my boyfriend had gone to jail. And he was getting out the next day. And I was with my friend and her boyfriend and my son was sleeping. He was just a baby. And I don't know why. But I just said, you know, let's, let's have a party. He's out tomorrow and let's have a party. So I tried it for the first time and it was incredible. I was like blown away how amazing it was. It's sad to say that but it was pretty incredible. The high that I got and it's something that stuck in my brain and my mind can't forget how good it was. And yes, I have done other drugs. I've done lots of other drugs but crack is my thing. like I, I could turn down a joint, I can turn down anything else. But I have one heck of a time turning that down. I was clean for five years out of the 30. And I gotta say they were the best five years of my life. I got into a relationship, and um, I had a really good job. She had a good job. My son was, you know, he was a good kid. We just had things going for us. We had a, you know, we had jobs. We were on baseball teams. We rented cottages. We went for drives up north. We did like normal things that people do. And it was really, really great. He was a really good man. I was engaged to him. And then I got into a car accident. And two years later, I got the settlement. And he was really good. He was there for me. But two years later, when the settlement came, he got back into crack. And he told me. And I said to him, I was upset. But then I said, let's get high. So after five years of being clean and enjoying life and having a good time, I was 20, within 20 minutes, I was getting high again. And that relationship lasted another three years. And that was it. And it was just a disaster of a breakup.

Liz [6:32]

The period of time Marty wasn't using things were going well. But with a return to using crack came pain, both physical and emotional.

Marty [6:43]

It went to, it went to shit. Excuse my language. But it went to hell. Three more years of absolute hell and violence. And it was really bad. I mean, I guess I should have just walked away and left him. But, you know, but that's how it is. It's really tough when you're in a relationship. You, that person kind of holds you back from using and vica versa. But then when that person ends up, screwing up, either person screws up, then you take the other person with you. Not meaning to but you

know, that's what usually happens. I knew it was going to take a big super deal to get rid of him. And it did. Like we had, we had a really bad fight. And my son was 11 years old getting in the middle of like a 270 pound guy and me. And I was, you know, begging him to get out of the room. Because you never know he could have been hurt easily by somebody not meaning to. Anyway, so he did leave the room, but he called the police because he was assaulting me. So um,yeah, so it ended up being a big super deal. He was charged. I didn't want to charge him. But my son called the police and I tried to call and cancel it. But the police said you better stay there. Because if you don't you'll be charged with I don't know, some, I don't know what it was. Anyway, so they came and he was charged with assault causing, assault, causing bodily harm. And a week later, he ended up charging me because I had hit him with, I lost my head like, I just lost myself like I went nuts. And I hit him. And so he was charged and I was charged. And it took a year to go through the court. And I was found not guilty and he was found guilty. And it was just brutal. It was just the whole experience was disgusting. And things that were said and it was just horrible. It's too bad that it ended like that.

Liz [9:02]

Things ended badly for Marty but could have ended even worse for her son. This experience was terrifying for him. But with really solid support for Marty's and his father's family's, Marty's son was able to work through the experience and is now an adult and doing well.

Marty [9:19]

He is amazing. He's never done drugs ever in his life. He doesn't drink. He doesn't have any addictions. Like he did see his mother addicted. I did try my best like, um, to keep it together. But you know, I wasn't that far gone like and plus I had parents that helped me through. I raised him by myself. My parents were a big part of him growing up and his other grandparents were a big part. But his father wasn't around. I wasn't a perfect mother but I did try my best and I did hold it together for the most part, you know. Using like after he'd gone to bed or on weekends, that sort of thing. But that drug like got the better of me. When he was 17 I, I walked out on him, and I left him. And it was like, suffering from an empty nest syndrome. Like he was busy at school, he was on the football team. And plus he had a job. So he wasn't home very much. And um, so I just felt like, I didn't know what to do with myself. I would come home from work and I would be lost. I didn't know what to do. I didn't have to make dinner anymore. I, you know, I didn't know what to do. So I went and lived like a homeless person. Getting high downtown. So stupid. Walked away from my job. My parents put a missing persons out on me. And I started hanging out with these people that were homeless, drug addicts. And um, it was fun. And then the drug is so addictive. I didn't want to go home. Like, for three weeks, that kid didn't know where I was. And he was a kid. He's only 17 years old. And I always told myself, oh, he's 17 years old. He's a big boy. He's still a kid. Right? And I hold a lot of guilt over that. And it kind of keeps me stuck in my addiction. I'm not saying that that's the only thing that keeps me in my addiction. There's a lot of things that keep me in my addiction. It's like a ritual type of thing. And it's my, it's my champagne. I always said that is my champagne. Like, other people enjoy pink champagne. Other people enjoy beer. Well, that's my champagne. I never meant to hurt my son, or my parents. I

always just thought I was hurting myself but I've learned that I was hurting other people and um, I did I hurt my son. I hurt my parents. I hurt a lot of people and I never, that wasn't my intention. I just, I was lost. And um, I see things clearer now but not so clear to make me smarten up.

Liz [12:24]

Marty, regrets the pain she's caused her son and family. But her draw to her substance was unbelievably strong. During the latter part of the 10 years when she was absent and alienated from her family Marty was incredibly lucky to have a really good friend who took her son in to live with her from the time that he was 17 to 20 years old. This stability provided a solid life path for her son.

Marty [12:49]

I stayed away from my parents and my son for 10 years. My son ended up going to live with my girlfriend. She was a beautiful person who took him in. He was 17 until he was 20 years old. He finished his high school. He went to college, all on his own. And my girlfriend, she let him live with her and her son and daughter in a two bedroom, small little tiny apartment. So there's two big huge boys and then her and her daughter. And I just thank, what a beautiful angel she was. But yeah, I mean, I didn't see my family for 10 years. And um, I saw my son at a, at the subway one day and I said to him, hey, Steven. And he said, he looked back at me, and just the look in his eyes and he said, "You're not my mother. You're not the woman who raised me". And it was like, wow, that was, like choked me. And um, you know, I just kind of stayed away after that I um. Until I finally got housing through Fife. Through the ASH Program. And I finally like decided to start taking care of my health because I didn't really acknowledge that I was HIV before that. I never took medication. I didn't have a flippin place to lay my head properly. I was, but when once I got my housing, and I started you know, taking care of my health, got a doctor, I got on medication. And then I got back with my family and I slowed down on my drug use. I didn't quit. But I slowed down. I had a roof over my head which I, I so appreciate that. I was so grateful. And it helped me more than like it helped me so much. I'm so grateful for for Fife House and, and the ASH Program. And LOFT, you know. It was a turnaround. It was a real big turnaround like, I used to be pretty bad into my drug and going to jail three times a year. And I haven't been to jail in 10 years. I maintain, I pay my rent. I buy my food, I have nice, I have a beautiful apartment. I have a cat that I care for. I see my family on a regular basis. I keep my jobs. And along the way I use my drugs. And um, it's not as demanding and important as it used to be. Like I didn't live to acquire drugs. I don't live to acquire drugs anymore.

Liz [15:51]

Finding safe and affordable housing after experiencing homelessness can be a stepping stone to stability. This was certainly true for Marty. And while crack has continued to play a part in Marty's life, It doesn't define who she is. And she's able to manage her life now. She feels that she's able to be responsible and responsive to those who are important to her. And she's managing her health. And to Marty's delight, her son has done really well in his life, and has not used substances.

- Marty [16:22]** I think because of what he saw, he knew his father was a drug addict. And he saw his mother, like, walk out and leave him and it hurt him bad. And he was at college to be, he wanted to become a police officer. And so that's just not his thing. He never, he'd never has experimented. And trust me, he would tell me. Like, I wouldn't chastise him for if he had of used drugs. I'm so impressed that he hasn't. I'm so delighted and grateful that he hasn't. He's a really good, good guy. I'm so impressed with him.
- Liz [17:02]** Maybe Marty's son is where he is today because of what he experienced with Marty. But Marty has a lot of guilt for what she put her son and her parents through.
- Marty [17:12]** My father. He was like my best friend. He has a wonderful, wonderful father. And he always told me, oh, his mission in life seemed to be that he wanted to get me on track. He wanted to fix me. He sent me to rehabs. He tried so hard. He covered my rent when I didn't have it. And I took care of him quite a bit when, when he was older and he was in a wheelchair. I tried my best to you know, help him because I loved hanging out with him. He was amazing. He wanted me you know to be, to have a have a normal drug free life. And he was so proud of me with my job with the government and he was just really proud of me and then things went, slipped off the rails and I, I got lost and really lost into my addiction. But I do feel guilty because my father worked so hard. He tried so hard. And he deserved like his wishes to be granted but I couldn't, I couldn't grant them. So I do feel guilt. I feel shame. You know, when I start dwelling on it, I get I get myself worked up into a real fit and I get really down. But see, the nice thing about crack is that you can smoke it and everything goes out the window.
- Liz [18:40]** Finding out she was HIV positive and the way she found out was further stigmatizing and demoralizing for Marty. It was when Marty was living on the street she found out she was HIV positive.
- Marty [18:55]** I got it from a boyfriend. Um, but um, I mean I was on the street. I, I didn't have time to take meds. I didn't have a place to shower. I didn't have food. I didn't have, I was like couchsurfing or sleeping in stairwells. There weren't, there weren't food places like there are now when I was out there. There weren't shelters like there is now. There weren't, it wasn't anywhere you could go and wash your clothes. We used to sneak into 519 and go down in the basement and, and hide behind the furnace and do my laundry. But yeah, I, there. I remember the Sanctuary and the church at Sherbourne and Dundas. And that's the extent of the meal places that I knew about downtown. You know, I didn't have time to think about my, and I didn't want to think about my situation. I didn't want to think about it. That destroyed me when I found out.
- Liz [20:02]** When someone is homeless and using substances, the importance of a thoughtful and holistic approach to supporting them when they're diagnosed with HIV is so important. Many people involved in this podcast spoke of how the way they were told they were HIV positive, made a huge difference in how they dealt with it. It shaped whether they sought support and accessed services, or didn't. It was a critical

moment in shaping their receptivity and responsiveness to manage the virus and their lives.

Marty [20:30] It was just horrible. And the way I was told, and it was horrible. The doctor was horrible. The whole experience was just devastating. And it was nothing, like there was nothing. Nobody there to, to counsel me to tell me kindly. Nothing. It was horrible. And um, I don't know. I just, I was running from it. I was getting high to escape it all. I didn't want to. I wish I hadn't of known. And a lot of the people on the street, that's what they do. They don't, they don't find out because they don't want to know.

Liz [21:22] Although crack continues to be a part of her life, Marty is working in the field of harm reduction and ensuring people have access to clean supplies and essentials, such as food and clothing. As well as referrals to services. This role in supporting people is incredibly important to Marty. Here, Marty describes how she got involved with harm reduction.

Marty [21:42] I had my housing and there was another girl in my building that I'd befriended. And she was from McEwan house, same as me. And we became quite close. And she told me about OAHAS - Ontario Aboriginal HIV and AIDS Strategy. And she said that they were looking for people to make kits and go out and be a peer support worker. A harm reduction worker. And I became an outreach worker, harm reduction outreach worker. And I loved it. Like, we pack up our knapsacks and bundle buggies and we go around downtown to areas where we know there's homeless drug users. And we take a clean supply of tools. Drug needles, pipes. The tools that people need to use their drug. And we take clean ones to them, and so that they can use safely instead of sharing a needle with someone who's infected with HIV or Hep C. It all comes in a, in a kit. And the crack kits come with things that that are needed to smoke crack. Everything but the drug. We also offer little granola bars, protein bars, or Ensure and water. We offer condoms and dental dams and Naloxone we offer. We offer socks, hygiene kits. And it's still not enough. These people need food. They need meals. And they need housing. I feel a lot of empathy for these people. They're me. Like, you know, I get it. Like I understand where they're coming from. I know what their struggles are. And it's not easy and they need someone who knows it. Not someone that read about it in a book or something like that they need someone who's lived that life.

Liz [23:51] And getting people to talk about their HIV status is hard. And something Marty can relate to.

Marty [23:57] The faces of downtown have changed since I was out on the street. But you know, it's kind of hard to get that out of people. Who wants to openly come out and say, "I'm HIV positive." That's something we're stigmatized about, you know. People keep that to themselves. It's something that we're shamed for, you know. And it's not easy to come out.

- Liz [24:21]** Marty describes the basic tasks that people need when they're unhoused or in encampments. And how crucial it is to have the support of someone who understands just how overwhelming it is and who can be there to offer the practical and emotional support in order to move forward.
- Marty [24:37]** All the rest of those people that are in tents there, they all need that assistance with at least one or five things that they need to get done or they need to be getting on top of. They need their ID or they need this or that. And it's difficult. It's hard to do these things. I remember. I remember when I got my housing and I had my worker take me to my appointments. Take me here, take me there. Helped me open up a bank account. This is what I needed at the time. And now I can do it for myself. So I can do that for somebody else. I'd love to.
- Liz [25:20]** Marty was asked what message you would like to give our audience. Here's what she had to say.
- Marty [25:26]** I would say for one thing, nobody has the right to judge anybody. Because guess what, everybody has their thing. I might use drugs and you might use alcohol. Everybody has something. Nobody is perfect. People who use drugs aren't bad people. We need to convince ourselves and realize that we are not bad people. Because we're not bad people. We're just people use drugs. Nobody should be judging anybody because we all have our issues. I don't care who you are.
- Liz [26:05]** Marty story is powerful, but it's not unique. There are many people who use substances for many different reasons. And as Marty said, none of us are perfect. We all have issues we're struggling with. We'd like to thank Marty for sharing her story with us. We hope that it was helpful to people who may be walking a similar road but also helpful to people who simply want to benefit from understanding her experience. If you are someone struggling with substance use, there is support. Please reach out to your local mental health provider in your community. In the episode notes there will also be a list of resources.
- If you have any comments or questions about this episode, we'd love to hear from you. You can email us at podcast@caseyhouse.ca. You can also visit our website at Caseyhouse.ca. for a transcript of this episode, a glossary of terms and links to other resources. This episode was written and produced by Andre Ceranto, Amanda Crawford and me Liz Creal. The music was composed and performed by Nick Naubaum. Our sound engineer was David Matta. Also special thanks to Tony Boston and Adam McGee for the creative input and support. Remember to subscribe to Positively Speaking on your favorite podcast platform.
- Thanks for listening.