
The eating disorder that paved the way for anabolic steroid use

This is a story of how the pursuit of self-control ended in eating disorders and misuse of anabolic steroids. I encountered a health service that knew very little about steroids. My hope is that telling my story will enable others like me to be treated with greater understanding.

As a teenager, I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa, after growing up in a dysfunctional home, where my body was a constant topic of discussion. There was a lot of self-hatred and self-torture, and I yo-yoed between binge eating, vomiting and starving myself. At the same time, I exercised frequently and excessively. The only thing that made me feel calm was driving my body to the limits of exhaustion. In the end, I had become so thin that I no longer had the strength to exercise, so I increased my food intake to get the energy I needed. Life was empty, and I was looking for a new identity. I found it in the fitness community. The aim was to achieve a perfect, fat-free, muscular body with visible veins – a personal suit of armour that I could wear with pride. But neither my teenage years with eating disorders nor all the exercising with a regulated diet gave me the perfect body I longed for. I had been trying for so many years, and finally I made the choice to try anabolic steroids.

The first injection

An acquaintance in the fitness community gave me my first injection. I didn't dare do it myself. My knowledge of steroids was very limited, as regards which drug to choose as well as the strength, effectiveness and side-effects. So I trusted blindly the information I got from the guy who sold me the stuff. I bought more ampules of anabolic steroids and injected myself, despite not having been taught how to. The anabolic steroids helped me gain bigger and harder muscles, less fat and visible veins. I went from being introverted and reserved to outgoing and sociable. My painful feelings of shame faded away. I was no longer anxious and insecure, but unafraid and self-assured. My low energy levels and lack of drive disappeared and were replaced by tremendous vigour and very high energy levels. When I'd starved myself before, I'd experienced little or no joy from sexual intercourse. Now, on steroids, I gained a strong sex drive, and felt horny more or less all the time.

Life revolved exclusively around body, food and training 24 hours a day. I became highly self-obsessed, had a shorter fuse, and cared little about other people. My use of doping escalated over a six-month period, and I tried other drugs too, to achieve an even greater anabolic effect. From then on, I used steroids continually, without a break. I sought no-one's advice. My body became my own laboratory.

I had developed body dysmorphia and no longer knew what a good-looking body was. I should have experienced a terrible comedown, but the enormous feeling of well-being I had and the fake self-confidence made me no longer care about the growing masculinisation of my body, such as the deepened voice, greasy skin, greasy hair and clitoral hypertrophy. My days consisted of body-building, anabolic steroids, quite a lot of sex, drug-taking parties and sleep. I felt immortal and invincible. Life had never been better.

Depressive thoughts

Then, after misusing steroids for almost a year, I stopped suddenly. The anabolic effect had started to level off. My performance had stagnated and I had grown tired of the body-building lifestyle. It was fine to begin with, but using had left me with a permanently increased appetite, and my weight shot up. After two months depression set in, and I had intense thoughts about ending my life. When I told my General Practitioner about my suicidal thoughts, it was put in my notes that I had had visual and aural hallucinations. My doctor prescribed an anti-depressant and sent an urgent referral to a psychiatric outpatient clinic. I took the medicine as prescribed. My head exploded. Everything around me changed. I no longer knew who I was. One evening I heard a distorted woman's voice in my own head talking to me.

It was only after several months that I got an appointment at the outpatient clinic. The psychiatric nurse tried to understand what I was telling her, but had no previous experience of patients who had misused anabolic steroids. During this period I got worse. Over the course of a day I could experience frequent and intense mood swings, and was alternately euphoric and plunged into chaotic darkness. I was admitted to a psychiatric ward. The doctors concluded that I was experiencing short-term psychotic episodes, and in their opinion my excessive use of anabolic steroids had made me vulnerable to psychosis.

I was quickly discharged. One year after I stopped using steroids, the physical and mental adverse effects began to disappear. I continued receiving treatment as a psychiatric outpatient for some years. The treatment was supportive and aimed at helping me to manage everyday challenges and form my plans for the future. I moved away and completed a course of higher education. With the aid of therapy, my studies and a change of environment, I managed to liberate myself from the body-fixated focus.

Lack of knowledge

For me, steroid use was a brief and destructive solution to my eating disorder. My striving for self-control had itself got out of control. In my encounter with the health service, I found a lack of knowledge concerning steroid use. I hope that my story can enable other steroid users to be met with greater understanding than what I experienced. As I see it, an absolute key element of the treatment should be to explore the reasons why people start using steroids.

The author wishes to remain anonymous, but the author's identity is known to the journal's editors.

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