

# Complexities in working with co-occurring mental health and alcohol and other drug presentations

## CASE STUDY

Mike, aged 43 years, is a carpenter and recently divorced from his wife of 15 years, Sue. Mike and Sue were high school sweethearts and have no children. Mike grew up in a violent environment and his father had alcohol dependence, drinking himself to sleep daily. Mike's father also physically and emotionally abused his wife weekly.

Mike left the family home at the age of 17 after an altercation with his father. He lived in share accommodation with mates while he completed his apprenticeship. Mike married Sue when he was 28. Mike started smoking tobacco at age 14 and smoked cannabis occasionally throughout his teens from age 15. He first drank alcohol when he was 19, drinking with mates. He continued drinking 2-3 times a week, hosting nights with his mates in his shed at the back of his house, that would often start straight after work at 4.00pm and go until 4 in the morning. His drinking never really bothered Sue as it was out of sight in the shed.

Six months into their marriage Mike's drinking became an issue when they decided to try to have a family. They had difficulty falling pregnant and tests showed that Mike had slow sperm and he was advised to quit smoking and alcohol. He really tried but just couldn't get on top of quitting. Sue always brought this up when they argued. This made Mike feel very guilty. He always said to Sue, "you just don't get it, it's harder than you think". He even went to a GP who told him 'I can't help you.

You just need to realise that you're an alcoholic and need willpower to stop'. Mike felt terrible about his behaviour and scared that he was turning into his father.

At the age of 32, he was finding it hard to hold down a job – losing several in a row. As Sue wasn't working either, money became a real issue and they were under significant financial stress. With the combined pressure of trying to conceive and money problems, Mike started drinking more than normal. He found that drinking daily helped him to cope and stopped him from feeling shaky in the mornings.

Sue threatened to leave him if he didn't stop drinking. Mike didn't want that to happen, as they have been together for such a long time and she has always been his rock. He tried going cold turkey and AA meetings, but neither worked. Sue then followed through and left him.

Mike tried unsuccessfully to change his drinking behaviour on his own. Some years later, he was admitted to hospital with acute pancreatitis. He was diagnosed with alcohol use disorder and completed medicated alcohol withdrawal management in hospital. On discharge, at the urging of a friend, he saw a GP who assisted him with relapse prevention. Mike says, 'I felt hopeless and shameful, but my GP told me this was a serious health issue that, with support and treatment, could be successfully managed.