

## **PE1651/UU**

Anonymous submission of 5 January 2018

I was a happy, funny and talented girl, but faced with life stressors at 21, I became depressed and developed anorexia. I was referred to a field-renowned psychiatrist who gave me hopes of recovery, I trusted him, I truly believed that he had my best interest at heart. So when he prescribed me clonazepam in 2004, I didn't even bat an eye-lid. I had no idea what benzodiazepines were, and of course I did not receive any warning or word of caution. I soon developed sleep paralysis and would have nightmares of rape – I did not connect those with the drug I had recently started and thought it was my fault – I was the one conjuring up those dreams, surely I should be ashamed. I did tell the psychiatrist about those sleep issues but he stared back at me blankly. The nightmares subsided... time passed and the prescriptions kept coming... and the “depression” would never lift. I would soon be put on a cocktail of 2 antidepressants, and 10 mg Valium (diazepam) would be added to the 4mg of clonazepam I was already taking, still and always as prescribed.

I soon sank into a state of apathy, finding comfort in solitude and thinking about food all day long. I was never able to resume my studies despite trying twice, I'd struggle to stay awake through classes and my cognition had declined. I was too disconnected from reality to question “my meds” and I rapidly became a non-functional member of the society, surviving in a bubble of my own. The girl I'd once been was no longer.

As years passed, I became more and more tired, I thought I had developed “chronic fatigue” and this led me to finally questioning the drugs I was taking. Furthermore, my GP had been decreasing one of the antidepressants I was on – so this might have been withdrawal, but at the time I thought the only risk with coming off an antidepressant would be “rebound depression”... as my GP had told me.

After some research, I found the Benzobuddies website and decided to start tapering off benzodiazepines... and antidepressants. After over two years of daily reductions with the sole support of the online forum, I finally became drug-free in May 2017, after over 13 years. I kept positive, hopeful and even accepting of the process. But never told my GP because I was simply too scared of him taking over and ruining this process for me, risking going back on meds because of forcing too rapid tapers on me as he did with the first antidepressant I had tapered off. I made it to the other side, on my own, in spite of everything.

During the acute phase of withdrawal, my throat was swollen to the point I could not lie back in bed as I couldn't breathe. At night, my mouth would fill with way too much saliva, my tongue would swell even more. I knew this was withdrawal but, for the first time of my life, I thought I was going to die. And I was alone.

The dizziness was also beyond words. It felt like my brain was no longer attached inside my skull. I would lie on my sofa and grip onto whatever I could, desperately trying to alleviate the sensations...

Now seven months “off meds”, I am still stuck in a living nightmare. The initial depression and anorexia were a walk in the park in comparison to what I am going through right now. Words simply elude me.

My emotions are still very much blunted from prescribed drugs. I can't feel joy, love or anger. I exist but I am no one. This is a tragedy, not only for myself but also my family to is patiently waiting to get their Daughter and Sister back.

In addition to this anhedonic state, I suffer from what is commonly called “cognitive fog”: I can't think. I can't read. Writing this is a challenge. I have trouble understanding simple things and doing simple math calculations when I used to be a promising computer scientist... I can't visualise things.

Memories and flashbacks make me feel more alive in the era of those memories. Intrusive thoughts keep me awake at night. With the inability to distract, the “nothingness” of my brain gets so unbearable I need to fill the void of time with activities and people. I have even developed fears of being alone: monophobia.

I also feel as if time is at a standstill – one minute feels like an hour – or is that that time sped by while on drugs?... I have forgotten what “normal” feels like.

And those are only the main mental symptoms. As for the physical... they too are beyond anything I had ever encountered in my life, both in nature and intensity: paraesthesia in back and limbs, blurry vision and sensitivity to light, excruciating neck and back muscle pain, cramps and spasms, poor coordination, physical weakness, swelling of face and mouth... I don't feel full or satisfied after eating... and the list goes on and on.

But, off prescribed drugs which were supposed to “help” me come out of depression and anorexia, I am finally regaining awareness. I am no longer obsessed with food and calories. I no longer need to nap for 3 hours a day and no longer seek solitude either...

So what good did those drugs do, apart from steal 14 years of my life?

At 35, I still have some hope that my whole life hasn't been ruined by a prescription. I just need to survive this... but not everybody does.