

‘I’ve survived drugs. It has made me a better therapist’

Max Kirsten in his Knightsbridge office

Tom Pilston for The Times



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February 12 2011 12:01AM

This week I’ve treated a cocaine addict, a smoker, a shopaholic and an insomniac. With each person, the technique I use is different, although it will involve some hypnosis, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), education and stress management, but I know I would not be in a position to help them without having spent a lot of time being my own worst enemy.

As a child I remember having a low level sense of social awkwardness, of feeling ill at ease. I was an only child so interacting with other children could be a challenge. I've also recently discovered that I'm dyslexic, though in those days, you were just seen as "thick". With effort, I could do OK, but it was *such* an effort. Growing up in Chelsea, a teenager in the Seventies, I became aware that there was a new subculture that seemed much more fun. Drugs were pretty cool. All the groovy artists and rock stars were up to it, and who didn't want to be like them? I started with a joint and discovered that drugs immediately "fixed" me. They gave me confidence, my awkwardness evaporated.

I was soon getting high every day, often on the way to school. In the evenings, I'd go to a house in Chelsea called 66. Elvis Costello wrote about "fancy tricks to get your kicks at 66". You'd arrive and everyone would be sitting around a table passing the endless bongos. In my late teens I got a place at St Martin's College of Art, but by then I was taking cocaine and smoking heroin every day if possible and taking whatever pills I had to hand. I was unteachable, dropped out of college and flew to New York, working in nightclubs, behind bars, taking an awful lot of cocaine and then speed and MDA, the precursor to Ecstasy.

This was the early Eighties and that year of unadulterated hedonism nearly killed me. Half my friends from those days are dead. They died young, either from overdoses or falling out of windows or in desperate despairs. By the end I was so run down — I had bronchial pneumonia, glandular fever and no health insurance. I flew back to Mum and Dad, who wouldn't put me up unless I got help. I agreed to go on a variety of 12-step programmes and, at 23, I embarked on a new life in recovery.

That was good for a while. I built a successful telecommunications business and in the late Eighties, early Nineties, I was also designing a lot of fliers for raves. I loved music, I loved the whole house scene.

Though I was clean for the famous second Summer of Love in 1988, it was not the safest place for me to be. One night, after a relationship breakdown, when I was feeling pretty low, I was at a club and a DJ offered me a joint. Without a moment's thought I took it, and was instantly lifted. It began another decade of addiction.

People picture an addict as an unemployed, non-functioning destitute. We aren't all like that. A lot of people use drugs to function. I was jointly running a dance music nightclub in Berkeley Square. Drugs helped me to get out of bed. They got me through when I felt anxious. They were my reward, the glue that held me together.

I could be up on a Friday, all night, taking stimulants through Saturday, then I'd take a tablet of "E" before getting into bed, so it would kick in and wake me up in an hour, ready to go out again. I was taking so many stimulants, I added opiates to calm me down. Eventually I was smoking ever-increasing amounts of heroin and on methadone as well, until I got to the point where I couldn't go on. I'd nearly died several times of accidental overdoses and was petrified. I put myself on a residential detox programme and started exploring therapies, such as hypnosis and NLP, looking for answers.

At first I was a wreck. I couldn't sit still, concentrate, or breathe properly. The key was learning to feel comfortable with myself. If you don't have regular time with yourself, you will feel "the stranger within" you'll probably want to get away from, by getting high, or going shopping, or whatever becomes your fix. I've finally accepted myself, I even quite like myself. Every day I meditate. I go inside and find that part beneath everything that I am.

Discovering that trance state has been amazing. I'd spent decades nearly killing myself because I hadn't known that it was possible to find this sense of wellbeing without drugs. I quit smoking 40 a day. I trained to become a clinical hypnotherapist. I studied NLP. I started coming up with my own strategies and building a successful practice. It grew by word of mouth. Ewan McGregor came to me. He was a heavy smoker and wanted to stop. Dougray Scott wanted help with sleeping. Joseph Fiennes was interested in my Relax Now iPhone program. Peter Andre wanted to conquer his fear of heights. I treat as many women as men, but the way I work appeals to men, perhaps because they can soon tell that I've really lived, and survived. Drug use is more prevalent than ever.

We live in a quick-fix culture — "feel good now", "take this", "snort that". Why go on a spiritual quest when you can score a gram? It's so immediate, but not fulfilling.

Five years ago I married Rebecca, a set designer — now nominated for an Oscar — and shortly after that, our son was born. Last year my mother passed away. I've had to learn to be a husband, a father, a son — all without drink, drugs and cigarettes. My life has way more meaning than it has ever had before. I wake up each morning in utter amazement.

I'm 51. How did I get this wife? This child? This house? I was lost for most of my life. I'm not any more.

Self Help: Find Yourself to Help Yourself by Max Kirsten (Hay House, £10.99) is available for £8.99, free p&p. Call 0845 271 2134 or thetimes.co.uk/bookshop; maxkirsten.com

How to face your fears: Max Kirsten's tips

Be aware of the law of attraction

The more you think about something, the more you will it into existence. If you dwell on your fears, it will be difficult for you to move beyond them.

Cultivate a sense of perspective

Learn to see things how they are, not how you imagine they are.

Be courageous

The only real failure in life is not finding the courage to try. Being afraid to try is the recipe for deep long-term disappointment.

Take responsibility for your actions

When you blame others you give up your power to change. Take responsibility for your thoughts, emotions and actions.

Be grateful

It will stop you feeling like a victim. Each day write down at least 10 to 20 things that you're grateful for.