

your life

From 2004 to 2009, there was a **53%** increase in first-time heroin users over age 12 in the US.

“both my BFFs OD’d on heroin!”

Trying something risky may seem exciting at first. But Brandi, 20, and her best friends quickly saw their lives spiral out of control. AS TOLD TO jane bianchi



lost loved ones
Briona, left, and Erika, below, died within two days of each other.

I’ll always remember driving around my Michigan suburb with Briona and Erika, my two BFFs. We’d blast Sara Evans’s “A Little Bit Stronger” and sing at the top of our lungs. Then we’d go to the mall to try on the most expensive clothes and take funny pictures of ourselves. Those were our favorite things to do—besides heroin.

BAD HABITS

I met Bri during sophomore year of high school. At the time, I was a B student and an all-league cross-country runner. We became close when we started dating guys who were best friends. Her boyfriend and mine were the coolest, most powerful guys at school. We knew they were drug dealers and thought that made them bad-a**. They got us into the best parties and bought us jewelry. They made us feel popular!

After a few months of dating, my boyfriend offered me heroin at his house. Like a lot of kids at school, I had smoked pot and taken prescription painkillers on occasion, but heroin seemed scarier. Still, I was afraid that if I said no, my boyfriend would leave me and find another girl who’d say yes. I trusted him and figured that he’d never do anything to hurt me.

Heroin made me feel numb to my problems. It made me stop worrying about getting good grades or running faster. While I was getting hooked, Bri’s boyfriend was introducing her to heroin at his house. And when Erika, a cute hippie girl in my math class, and I became friendly, I told her that I had tried heroin. She asked if she could try some too. Within months, she, Bri and I were getting high together every day—before school in the car, in the bathroom at lunch, and then after school at the guys’ houses. It became a fun, secret escape that bonded us together. When we were high, nothing bothered us—we felt free.

But when you’re on heroin for a while, you look like a zombie. I lost color in my skin, my eyes became sunken

in, and I was emaciated. It’s so hard to stop, because it’s so addictive. If I didn’t find a way to get high, I’d go through withdrawal—the worst sickness I’ve ever experienced. I’d get the chills, the shakes, and nausea until I shot up again to make those feelings go away. That’s when I’d truly feel gross, like an addict.

Our habits got so bad that we’d each spend \$140 a day to stay high and avoid withdrawal. We did grimy things to get money. We’d steal jewelry from

“We knew we needed to stop, but we didn’t know how.”

friends’ houses and pawn it. One time I stole \$3,000 from my twin sister’s college savings fund! As punishment, my parents kicked me out of the house for a little while. I am deeply ashamed now, but back then, I didn’t care. My only focus was getting more drugs.

DOWNWARD SPIRAL

By junior year, my life had fallen apart. I quit running, I lost any friends who didn’t do drugs, and my family was fed up with me. I got kicked out of school for skipping class, and then I got kicked out of an alternative school for drug possession. Next I got kicked out of rehab for breaking rules and went to jail for six months. When I was lying on a concrete bench in jail using a toilet paper roll for a pillow, I felt like a criminal. During that time, Erika was also in and out of jail, and Bri did some time in a juvenile detention center. We had no choice but to get clean. The withdrawal was horrible, but it was a relief to wake up and not need heroin.

But the moment we all got out, we fell right back into our old habit of getting high together. We had no idea how to be around each other and *not* do drugs. About once a month, one of

us would overdose and get rushed to the hospital. Doctors always brought us back, though. We felt so invincible that even before we’d leave the hospital parking lot, we’d do heroin again.

Last February, I went into withdrawal and decided to quit—and I wanted to convince Bri and Erika to quit, too. But then I got a call from Erika. “Bri died! She overdosed last night!” she said, hysterical. I didn’t believe her at first. I kept calling Bri’s phone over and over, just to hear her voice on the message. Slowly it sunk in. She wasn’t going to answer the phone. Erika and I hung out two nights later, and she said, “Do you want to use just one more time?” I said, “Absolutely not.” And she shrugged and said, “One more time won’t kill me.”

But she was wrong. Just when I thought life couldn’t get any worse, Erika died from an apparent heroin overdose, too. After I had gone home that night, she used in her bedroom.

LEARNING FROM LOSS

It’s been months, and I’m still figuring out how to live without my BFFs. At first, I thought it was a crazy coincidence. But now I think: No, this is what happens when you do heroin. People die.

I broke up with my boyfriend, and I haven’t touched drugs since. I’m not clean because rehab or jail forced me into it. I’m clean because I *want* to be.

I’ve been volunteering to tell my story at high schools, drug courts, and juvenile detention centers in my county. I want teens to know that this drug doesn’t care how old you are or what you have going for you—it just wants to kill you. I somehow survived, so I want to tell Bri and Erika’s story to make sure they didn’t die for no reason. 17

800-662-HELP

That’s the number to call if you or a friend is battling a drug addiction. The free 24/7 hotline run by the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration will help you find a treatment center near you.

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