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Valium became my illness

When Andrea Mackenzie, now 55, was prescribed pills for her bad back at 19, she had no idea that they would change the course of her life, she tells HILARY FREEMAN

IN 1969 I was 19 and at teacher training college when I went to see my GP about a bad back. He gave me some tablets and told me they'd relax my back muscles and help with stress. I didn't know what they were – I'd never heard of Valium (diazepam) – and I didn't think to question the doctor.

The tablets eased my back and made me feel calm. From then on, I kept taking them, getting them regularly on repeat prescription. They became a part of my life.

Even when I changed doctors, nobody ever said I should stop taking them or questioned why they continued to be prescribed. In those days, doctors didn't worry that they were addictive or that they might cause longterm health problems. They were "mother's little helpers".

About a year after I started taking them, I remember having odd symptoms – dizziness and feeling out of sorts. From then on, there was always something wrong with me and I know people suspected I was a hypochondriac.

In fact, the drug was starting to poison my central nervous system. Emotionally, I felt numb. Only huge events or traumas had any impact. I'd cope with divorce, my children's illnesses and so on without seeming bothered. Those pills cheated me of my adult life – I lived like a robot.

Feeling "comfortably numb" meant I didn't invest much energy in my relationships or career. Although I felt permanently dissatisfied, I never had any motivation. I gave up on having a teaching career at 21 and I believe Valium was at least partially responsible for the failure of my marriages.

I took the drug throughout my pregnancies. By the time I was pregnant with my third child, it was known that it could cause birth defects. I forced myself to cut down from 8mg to 1mg but I couldn't stop entirely. Fortunately, all my children were born healthy.

ONE of the few events that had any real effect on me was the death of my mother. I'd gone to stay with her after the birth of my third child because I had postnatal depression and one day she dropped dead of a heart attack right in front of me. I was hysterical. I went to see the doctor and he simply put me on a higher dose of Valium. The pills appeared to be a comfort but they also stopped me grieving properly. I don't think I ever really cried for Mum.

On Valium, all your emotions become bottled up but they don't go away. They have to come out in some other way. I started to suffer from panic attacks and in 1992 I had a breakdown.

It wasn't until the late Nineties that I began to realise that Valium was at the root of many of my problems and that I should come off it.

I was never offered a programme or any real support. I wasn't even told what the physical effects might be or how long it would take to recover. The doctors just kept prescribing the tablets and expecting me to wean myself off them.

Three years ago, all my children had left our home in Newquay, Cornwall, and I decided enough was enough. But had I known what I would go through, I wouldn't have tried to come off Valium. Although I have managed to cut down to just 0.5mg a day, the cumulative effects of taking the drug for many years, combined with withdrawal from it, have been devastating.

My balance is now damaged and I have to walk with a disabled person's walking aid. I am constantly tired, so even getting up is a huge effort. Sometimes my speech is slurred. Travelling exhausts me, so I tend not to go far. I can't concentrate on reading a book and I can't even measure out ingredients to cook, so I live on microwave meals.



NUMB: Andrea Mackenzie has been permanently damaged by Valium

I am hypersensitive to light and have also suffered headaches, stomach problems and altered sensations throughout my body. It often feels like I'm walking on cotton wool. I am constantly agitated and unable to sit still, and I have restless legs.

The symptoms are actually very similar to those of multiple sclerosis. I have been investigated for many conditions, including Parkinson's. I have also seen many specialists, including a psychiatrist who wrote that I do not have an underlying mental health issue – it is purely benzodiazepine addiction and withdrawal.

WHEN my original doctor gave me Valium, all those years ago, he actually prescribed me an illness.

I discovered a self-help group, a national charity called First Steps To Freedom, on the internet. I suggested we could set up a telephone support group for people with addiction to benzos [benzodiazepines] – the only one in the country.

There are about seven members, we speak once a week via a teleconference number and have guest speakers – usually people who have successfully withdrawn from benzos.

In addition, I helped to set up a support group, called Breakaway which meets once a fortnight in Cornwall. It is totally self-supporting but we do have the help of a cognitive behavioural therapist if we need it. I also train healthcare professionals.

I want my life back but I don't know if I'll ever kick Valium. I wish I'd never started taking it. There are thousands of people like me and there must be more in place to help us – not just voluntary groups.

I think the prescribing of Valium and other benzos was the biggest medical blunder of the 20th century.

For more information on this or any other mental health issue, see www.mind.org.uk, telephone Mind's information line on 0845 766 0163 (Monday-Friday, 9.15am-5.15pm), or e-mail info@mind.org.uk

First Steps To Freedom: call 0845 120 2916 or visit www.first-steps.org

Beat The Benzos: call 01457 876355 or visit www.benzo.org.uk