

PHOTOS: PHOTOGRAPHER, MARY TOSNER

# Valium enveloped me in cotton wool

**Andrew Don was prescribed Valium as a grief-stricken schoolboy. After becoming addicted, it took him 12 years to kick the habit**

**M**y hands trembled as I tilted the bottle over the toilet. Twelve years of living a lie in a twilight world in which I was anaesthetised to emotional pain was about to come to an end. I knew from my own research this was dangerous ground — cold turkey without support. But I was determined. Aged 27, I believed I was deserving of happiness and normality; not this half-life of semi-stupor, gobbling “mother’s little helper” daily. I hesitated for a nanosecond, then my chemical crutch and almost half my lifetime of dependency were gone, flushed into the sewer — freedom.

Last week, *The Times* revealed that more than 1 million people were addicted to tranquillisers prescribed by their doctor. For years, I was one of those addicts.

Growing up, I had been what I suppose you would call hypersensitive. I adored my mother, a complex character, who played “good cop, bad cop” so I never knew where I stood. That she loved me I never doubted, but she was explosive. I can still taste the soap she once forced into my mouth for a minor misdemeanour. I remember, too, how my head throbbed when she pulled me by the hair, banged my head against the banisters and dragged me down the stairs. It was her unpredictability that sowed the seeds of the anxiety and nervousness that became part of my character. But she could be as loving, compassionate and caring as she could be volatile, and I long ago made the conscious choice to be only that which was best in her.

I was 13 when Mum was told that she had bone cancer and she died a year later. During that year, a man lured me into his house on the pretext he had a present for Mum and assaulted me. Mum’s death in August 1977 caused me an intense grief that went unresolved until my early thirties and I lost my ability to trust. The shock of her death was compounded when a couple of weeks later my maternal

grandmother attempted suicide. I have often joked that I was born with a pen in my hand and I wrote obsessively as a way of expressing some of my pain. But I missed my mum, the side of her that was “for me”, the person who taught me my dreams were not “pie in the sky” and that I could be whoever and whatever I wanted to be.

Our move to a smaller home was another wrench and I longed to be back in the big corner house in Wembley where I had lived from birth. Puberty exacerbated my already considerable anxieties and insecurities.

I took alcohol from Dad’s drinks cabinet, which dulled the pain. When he married for the second time, I went over a psychological precipice. Dad was right to try to make a life for himself but it was a rebound marriage and they divorced fairly swiftly, to my relief. But while they were together, home did not feel like my home. I felt isolated and desperate.

My GP had previously prescribed Propranolol to treat me for anxiety and the tremors, twitches and tics I suffered but which no one ever remarked on. The thought that anyone could see me at my most vulnerable and might pity me was the worst humiliation I could imagine. Everything came to a head in school when I was called on to read a book review to the class. My legs and hands shook, I stuttered, I trembled in full view of everyone. I ran out in tears.

My GP prescribed me 2mg Valium. The tablets calmed me down marginally but were not strong enough. Dad’s second wife had large bottles of 5mg Valium — hundreds of tablets that I was later told had belonged to her first husband who had died of multiple sclerosis. No one noticed when I took them. I was so terrified of Dad finding out and my supply drying up that I persuaded a GP to prescribe me the same strength. I took two 5mg Valium tablets a day. They enveloped me in cotton wool that cushioned me from life’s knocks.

I often drank alcohol, too, when the effect wore off so I would not take a third tablet on any one day although sometimes I was so jittery I did. I was unhappy, lonely, I became ostracised from those I did not realise I loved.

One day during the first month of entering sixth form, I decided I was not going to take Valium anymore. We were sitting in a half-square of tables in A-level history and I was overwhelmed with a sense of paranoia. I felt acutely self-conscious without Valium. I started twitching and trembling. I was convinced everyone could see so I started taking it again.

Around the same time I was diagnosed with cholesteatoma, a non-malignant growth that caused severe pain and led to Ménière’s Disease, which affected my balance. I left school two months into A levels and underwent a major operation.



Top, Andrew Don, and above, his mother Jean, who died from cancer in 1977

I have been hearing-impaired from childhood on both sides and now I lost almost all my hearing in my left ear.

I maintained the same dose throughout my 12 years of dependency. I know that a lot of people feel they have to keep increasing their dose to get the same effect. That was not my experience and I have no idea why.

Perhaps it was because I often quit at weekends and drank alcohol instead. If people around me noticed at work, they never said anything. I’ve always been an eccentric and if my behaviour was odd, perhaps people just thought I was being me. Addicts can become good at hiding their habit. And I did not want the humiliation. One doctor said that

## “Giving up a beast like Valium takes superhuman strength

I should stop taking the tablets and suggested therapy, but I had tried that and disliked the therapist so did not go back. I became a journalist and when I was 26, I was hired by the deputy editor of a business magazine who saw potential. I was promoted to news editor, a role in which people said I excelled, albeit cocooned for much of the time in an inebriated haze.

But it was that one man’s faith in me and financial help from my great aunt in Miami that led me to that momentous day during my 27th year when I found myself standing over the toilet ready to make a decision that would change my life.

I had no doubts this time, even though withdrawal was to prove tortuous. I was prepared: when I was at journalism college in the early Eighties, I wrote a feature on the danger of benzodiazepines, for which I interviewed Professor Malcolm Lader, a leading authority at the Institute of Psychiatry, in London, who told me that withdrawing from tranquillisers could take more than a year compared with 72 hours for heroin.

My withdrawal did not take a year but it did take several months during which I suffered pins and needles, muscle cramps, nausea, nightmares, sweats and skull-bursting headaches. I would have given up the fight if I

had not known that what I was experiencing was withdrawal and without the new resolve and determination that consumed me. I continued to go to work — a focus that saved me and my belief that I deserved a good life. No one was any the wiser.

I believe regular acupuncture and the support of the acupuncturist also got me to the point where I felt strong enough to stop Valium. I am sure it both reduced the duration and the severity of withdrawal symptoms.

Gradually, I noticed how colours were more vivid: my world had been black and white on more than one level; and I could feel again. My grief resurfaced because I had forced it down deep inside for so long. A private counsellor helped me to work through my pain and other unresolved issues.

I still suffer from bouts of anxiety but I harness these to help me get things done. Today, I believe my experiences have made me more compassionate and human.

Am I angry with the GPs who helped fuel my addiction? Not really. I had access to Valium without their help. I would have found my way to it sooner or later.

Since then, I have been through other difficult times but have always quickly come out the other side because I have developed the inner resource to do so, and I have mastered yoga, autogenics and other disciplines that help.

Giving up a beast like Valium is a major feat. It takes superhuman strength and I am incredibly strong because of my experiences. Today I am just happy to be alive and sober, with love and laughter around me. My life is precious, warts and all. I have lived and learnt and that is all anyone can do.