

Bonnie's Story

I would like to tell you a story about Bonnie who was a brilliant, creative, curious, kind person who took her life on August 28, 2013 due to Benzodiazepine withdrawal. She had worked very hard to taper off of benzodiazepines over 21 months and took her life 4 weeks after completing her taper.

She was 59 years old; she had a successful career at the National Lab and prior to her ordeal she wrote music and poetry; she played the piano, guitar and bagpipe; and she enjoyed hiking, sailing and skiing. The truth is that she lost her life to these drugs several years before she actually chose to end the anguish and suffering these drugs caused her. The Coroner's Report reads "death by gunshot" so no one will record that it was really benzodiazepines. These drugs stole her personality and desire to live and caused such physical and mental pain that she saw no option but to end her life.



Her family is left asking, "How could this happen? How could these drugs be so available and doctors prescribe them so freely and without caution then miss the signs of withdrawal. How did Bonnie end up in this mess?" This is her story.

Bonnie was first prescribed valium for flying. She was afraid to fly so the doctor gave her valium for those occasions. When she reached menopause and started having trouble sleeping she took it to help her sleep. She didn't take it every day but after 10 years her average dose had increased from rarely for flying to about 3 mg per day. In 2008 the doctor would no longer fill the prescription so she was cut off cold turkey. Bonnie didn't think anything of it but she started developing burning, tingling, numbness, muscle cramping, headaches and distorted vision. She went back to the same doctor looking for a cause: Vitamin B12 deficiency? No. MS? No. She never imagined she was experiencing withdrawal and the doctor did not make the connection. He just wrote her off. He told her she had an anxiety disorder and referred her to a psychiatrist. He did not want to be bothered with searching for the cause of these odd symptoms.

So Bonnie went to see a psychiatrist and was initially prescribed Xanax. Over the next two years the prescription would be changed back and forth from Xanax to Klonopin twice and increased up to 4 mg. When she was switched from Xanax to Klonopin it would be overnight and not at the same equivalency. She questioned whether a more appropriate treatment might be one of the antidepressants that help with anxiety. She was told no. She was told that she had an anxiety disorder that was hard to treat. Throughout these two years as the benzodiazepines were increased but the physical symptoms became more constant throughout the day and she became agoraphobic, experienced panic attacks and withdrew from all activities that had brought her joy. She believed she was going crazy.

None of what Bonnie was told ever made any sense. It was just an easy explanation. Her doctors never took the time to understand what was really going on. Bonnie had always been an outgoing person. She



had a Masters degree in geo-chemistry and had a lot of responsibility at her job. She played the bagpipe with a band and participated in group and individual competitions. She wrote poetry and music and created albums of her work. She traveled to Buddhist workshops and she hiked over half of the 14,000 ft mountains in Colorado. She and her husband loved to travel and frequently went to the Pacific Northwest to go sailing. It makes no sense for someone to go from this profile to someone who is so anxious they do not

want to go outside of their house. She stopped playing her musical instruments, writing and even reading. She was literally housebound and withdrew from all of her friends.

Bonnie didn't know that she was experiencing inter-dose and tolerance withdrawal. She didn't know that it was actually the drugs that were making her sick. Again the psychiatrist did not recognize withdrawal and recommended more drugs – Zyprexa. When Bonnie refused this drug the psychiatrist told her it was her only hope and became angry with her. Instinctively Bonnie knew these drugs were not helping her so she chose to start tapering. At this time she did not know about the risks of tapering too fast and made her first cut of 1 mg of Klonopin in October 2011. She said that the head pressure, agoraphobia and other physical symptoms increased significantly. She thought she was dying. That's when she found Heather Ashton's research, learned about the dangerousness of benzodiazepines and got some clues about how to proceed.

Bonnie continued tapering the remaining 2 mgs of Klonopin and 10 mgs of Ambien over the next 21 months. She crossed over to diazepam and used a sensible disciplined taper and finished on August 1, 2013. Bonnie was in severe physical and mental pain with 50+ symptoms throughout her 21 month taper. She had a great deal of stomach and back pain, neuropathy, headaches, and heart palpitations. She experienced severe bone pain where she had a hip replacement and tooth pain where she had implants. Despite this physical pain she never missed a day of work. Bonnie would say that the physical symptoms were so bad that a normal person would go to the emergency room but she knew she would just be prescribed more benzodiazepines.

Although the physical symptoms were agonizing, the psychological symptoms were the most disturbing to her. She could find no joy in any of the things she had once loved to do and did not believe that she would get herself back. She believed that she was going to be crippled and people would have to take care of her. As she tapered Bonnie started to develop intrusive thoughts but she would not talk about them. She was so embarrassed that she had become dependent on these drugs. Bonnie would always look for the success stories but she was terrified she would not recover. She was afraid the symptoms would not go away and she would never get her personality back. When asked if she had any suicidal thoughts Bonnie would always say she would never do that to her family. But a note she left said the pain was too much.

Bonnie endured so much to complete this taper. I believe it was harder because of the amount, the changes made by psychiatrists and surgeries. She had come so far and had so much more of herself back but could not recognize it. She was reading books and laughing at times. She started to participate in planning trips. She was reaching out to friends and neighbors to tell them that she had a story to tell. But the pain was still there and we suspect intrusive suicidal thoughts. We thought she was home-free and we only had to wait for her to feel better, but for her, it was too long.

Her family is left with a terrible aching wound and questions about what we could have done different. Encouragement was not enough. Reading the support forums was not enough. The end of the taper is not the end. It is important for both those tapering and family members to know this. Sometimes it can take a while after the taper is complete to feel better. I wish Bonnie could have waited. We miss her so much.