



The My Choice project seeks to show diverse experiences of opioid dependence, emphasise the importance of personal choice in choosing interventions and to demonstrate the changes in drug treatment models in Australia from the perspective of people with opioid dependence and the perspective of service providers. This project seeks to demonstrate that drug treatment is most effective when we respect the individual needs of an informed population.



INHSU has collaborated with digital storyteller Conor Ashleigh to produce this participatory photography exhibition where 18 individuals in three locations around Australia were mentored to capture their daily life and drug treatment journey.

A series of short films accompany this exhibition, profiling individual people whose choice of opioid agonist treatment (OAT) includes Suboxone® (buprenorphine/naloxone), Methadone, Buvidal® (buprenorphine injection depot) or who choose not to receive OAT.

To view the films and read more about the My Choice Project, scan the QR code below.





I was scared of Pat the first time I met her. A friend introduced me to her, she was often quite gruff. I could see Pat had a kind heart, over time I began spending more time at her place. Then after a while because I was homeless during COVID, Pat put me up. I began sleeping at her place, in the end I spent about 6 weeks living there and I even spent Christmas with her.

Heather



I now have somewhere to go where I'm able to fill my days with worthwhile employment, and where I am respected not just for my drug use history but also for my professional skills. Prior to this role I was working as a cleaner, this job demonstrated to me that in the future I wanted to not only earn money but be employed somewhere I could use my skills and knowledge to increase my self-esteem while also being challenged.

Karen

If you are willing to do the right thing you're always welcome. Whenever someone comes over to drop by and I know they use, I make sure they have clean equipment to take with them. I am proud to say I run an informal NSP from my house, I go through 500 fits a week.

Pat



Nick



The middle-left artwork features a long-time friend of mine who recently passed away. He was one of the few people that I knew I could always talk to. A lot of friendships built around using drugs don't often last long term due to the realities of jail, overdose, distancing themselves to be safe. This friend was always in the community, he was consistently there in more ways than one. He will be missed.



This year I turned 63 and to celebrate with family and friends I baked a strawberry lychee chiffon cake. Birthdays are a time for me to take stock and to be grateful for what I have in my life.

Dayle



What started as a silly joke (more than 20 years ago) has grown into a vibrant collection of hands. For me, working in a true peer-based organization, is a privilege. Every day I get to work alongside some bona fide rock stars and they are all a part of my community. It's not rocket science, drug users listen to other drug users and that's why we need a living experience workforce.

Jane





Life is too short to go without a good bit of colour in your life. I would joke with my grandkids that I dye my hair brightly so they can find me in a crowd. I have always enjoyed having vibrant hair because it matches my personality and there is something about standing out in a crowd. This is me, this is who I am.

Dayle



In the past scoring was top of my list of things to do. Nowadays, music is my life. I have surrounded myself with other musicians and for the first time since I started injecting drugs and I have a positive outlook on my future. If I wasn't on the monthly injection and was still waking up feeling shit every morning I probably wouldn't be playing as much music.

Jase

People who inject drugs are normal people, we enjoy doing the normal things as anyone else. I have a good sense of humour, enjoy eating ice cream, walking the dog and taking photos, probably sounds like most people you know!

Looking at this photo I can tell I am on methadone, even though I am only 10mg of methadone and only have it twice a week I have started putting on weight again.

Karen



I have always enjoyed art and the creative process; it takes me away from the world and its troubles and helps me unwind. Recently I found myself yearning for a creative outlet and put my hand to pottery, something I hadn't done since teen school. I now have a wheel at home that I can work from, yet I always wish I would dedicate more time to it!

Ben



I painted this while in a rehab in jail. I learnt to paint and draw in jail, and it kept me out of a lot of trouble. Art and exercise kept me happy and healthy when I was inside, it took my mind off trouble.

Pat



The all-seeing eye, a view into another world where everyone and any drug is accepted without stigma or judgement. One of my favourite hobbies is working away on these adult colouring in books. They help me to relax and to wind down. So many people I know who inject drugs are creative, so many of the famous artists of today have been heroin users.

Pat





I'm a dog person, I've always had a dog in my life and Nala is the newest one! She was a rescue and she certainly is a handful but as time goes on we are getting used to each other. Dogs have that unconditional love that we all crave, they're loyal and you just know that you can rely on them. They won't judge you and they will be there for you through the good and the bad times.

Jane



The bird in the window is one of life's little miracles and he was so happy to see it land on my window and talk out loud. I actually tried to wind down window but it flew away not before I could first get this photos. Looking at ones self in the mirror and self acceptance this is the metaphor of the little bird.

Rick



My living environment around me isn't the best, it can be quite ugly around here. So when I have the chance, I always try to take a moment to appreciate something beautiful around me. I think as I start to get older nature and its beauty is becoming more important to me.

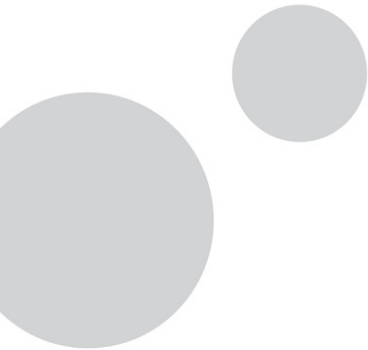
Nick



Khepa

Ebenezer was rescued from along the side of the highway about 5 years ago. Ever since we've life partners, we cohabitate and are co-dependents in life. When humans just aren't enough, Ebenezer steps into the frame.

Sam



Freda has been a big part of my life now for nearly ten years, we first met when I was renting a house on a bush block - she had been rescued from a farmhouse where she was found abandoned with puppies she was nursing. It's easy for me to call Freda my best friend, we have been through so much together over the years, and particularly with the isolation of covid lockdowns - I don't know where I'd be without her.

Ben



A lovely blue sky and gumtrees. There are no buildings or people, to me seeing the beauty of nature is to realise that there is hope in the possibilities of the future. This is a reminder that you have choice. You can choose to be hopeful if you anticipate the future in a positive way as opposed to seeing negatively.

Dayle





Even though I am not that successful as a fisherman, I am happy to be out there doing it. I try to go away a couple of times a year with my family for a holiday down the coast. Nowadays that I am not using or chained to a chemist I am able to leave my town whenever I want, it's a great feeling.

Pat



Have my dose in the morning. I love laying in my bed just waiting for my dose to kick in. It's so good to get a quiet moment to stop, my bed is really comfy and I know Chayce is safe in his awesome bed.

Laura

As someone who is 69 years of age who has had a lifetime love of dope, my family and others have struggled with the fact that I use dope because I love the feeling it gives. People struggle with the idea that just because it feels good is enough of a reason to use. I love how I feel when I use dope, but I don't like how I feel for how I am judged for what I love.

Marion



When driving is a pleasure not a chore. On my much-anticipated monthly suboxone pick up coffee catch up, antique shopping and book browsing to neighbouring town far from prying eyes.

Sam



Throughout my life I have not always been on methadone or injected drugs but in certain moments, especially when times were tough I have injected drugs or got back on methadone. Getting back on methadone isn't easy and in some ways I would prefer to get on the monthly injection because I get part of my life back. But even getting on that monthly injection isn't easy.

Karen



I didn't have a lot as a kid but I remember finally having enough money to buy myself a toy car. Today my collection of cars is a little reward for not using drugs and it helps. It's these little treats to yourself that is self help.

Rick





Going for a coffee was like a breath of fresh air. Leaving the clinic, I could go to a café and buy a coffee, I got to know the staff, I really enjoyed the social contact and the freedom to be anonymous and not judged. Going to the café gave me some normality that I once knew, I felt like I was back on the other side of the fence once again.

Heather



I've been on methadone since I was a teenager. Now in my late twenties I always think about getting off it, but with a child with such high needs I cannot be sick. Hopefully I can do it, but I've heard some horror stories. I've done it before, it was off a high dose and it hurt a lot but next time I'd do it properly, probably when Chayce is a bit older and more independent.

Laura



If I was on OMT then I would lose the control of my day and my day routine would be bound around someone else's idea. People find it unpalatable that one's life can surround their using but I don't need anyone else to drive my functionality. I am very happy to have my own agency and to drive my own functionality.

Marion



Receiving the injection monthly has been the most notable change from having to be dosed daily or weekly at best. There are no daily ups and downs of medication coming on and then falling off. There is a noticeable feeling around the third week with monthly depo dropping away, but I have been able to continue working and live life normally. For the first time in eighteen years, it has allowed me to live without a constant reminder of my reliance on my pharmacotherapy program.

Ben

I have been taking 20ml of methadone for the past year, but my relationship with 'the done' goes back 37 years. If I knew what I know now about OST and methadone, I wouldn't have done anything differently. Methadone saved my life. 37 years ago I was given the choice to go on maintenance or to go on a withdrawal program. I chose methadone; back then my doctor explained to me it as a health problem - people on diabetes take insulin all their lives, for someone with opioid dependence methadone is the same.

Pat



Amongst the many reasons I choose not to be on a program is this one! I work Monday to Friday 9-5 and I treasure my weekends and the chance to sleep in. I don't have to get out of bed to go to the chemist for my dose, instead, I can stay in my bed, hang with my dog, eat yummy things, watch tv and have a shot.

Jane



This is my life now and without this medication I wouldn't survive. Without this life's choice I would be certainly dead.

Rick





The honour and privilege of being involved in the care of this new life. My granddaughter was born 6 weeks premature and came home into my care before she was technically meant to be born. A child represents the future and I believe I am contributing to her future, I hope she is kind and resilient and holds the same values as I.

Dayle



This kid is me and it is who I remember being before something very traumatic happened to me. I have had to live with that trauma and still relive it every day. I think trying to cope with it is why I ended up using heroin, getting high doesn't really help you cope with anything it just disguises it.

Jase

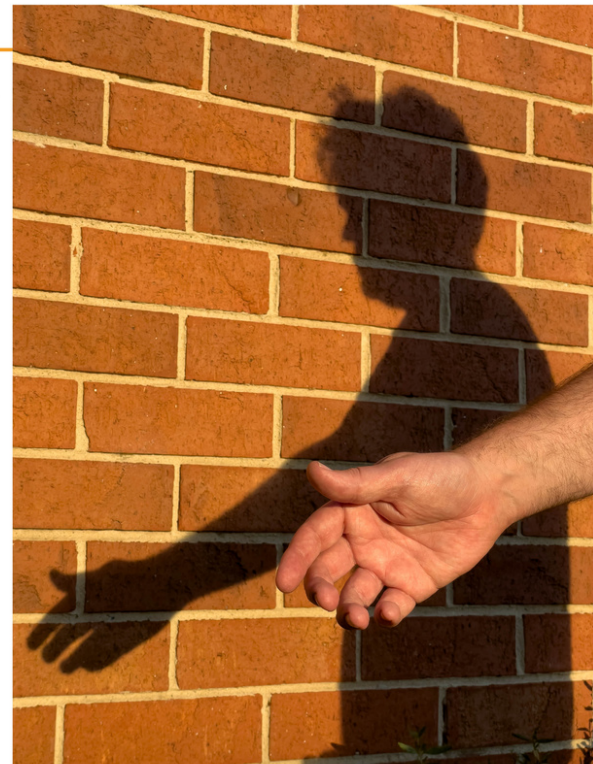
I have often heard people speak of their relationship with heroin as their mistress. I'm not sure I would describe my relationship this way, but I will always remember the feeling of safety as it takes the edge off the harshness of the world. It was there when things were hard to help me through my days, but it's always been love hate. It brought financial hardship, and a dependence that has come to define me. Maybe that's why people talk about it the way they do, it's a relationship that is complicated. I've been learning to live without it, to look at the things I tried to hide away.

Ben



I love being able to play with my daughter even though I am heaps better at hide and seek. My second daughter is quite young and becoming a father has really changed what I want to do with my life. I really want her to have what I didn't have, a good life, a stable home and plenty of opportunities.

Pat



Christmas is the most beautiful day, I absolutely love spending it together as a little family. Chayce has more fun with the bags and boxes than the toys, it's so special having a child that gives me so much love. But being special needs, we need to protect him from a lot of things (like real Christmas trees and tinsel) as he can hurt himself and accidentally pull out his feeding tube. I protect him the best way I can.

Laura



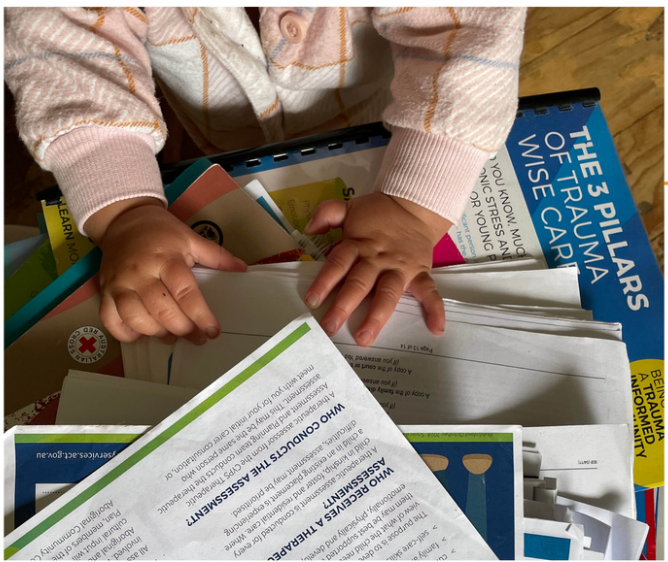
The orchards and bell flowers are so very special to me as it's a way to communicate to my mother who I wish to be closer to. Mum is my rock and I love to do gardening with her, these flowers are something special because we grew them together.

Rick





Khepa



The reality is that we're in a system that is meant to protect children but at times it actually creates more harm. This photo is a reminder that at the end of the day the system decides my granddaughter's future and I'm constrained in how much I can decide for her.

Dayle



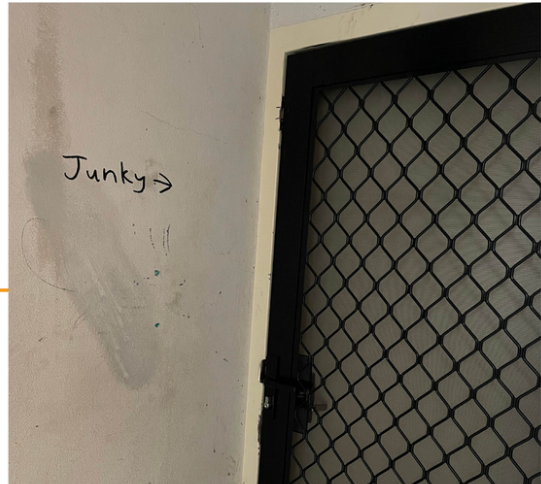
I was 14 the first time I had heroin. For someone who looks at my arms they might just think I don't care, but it couldn't be further from the truth. Each scar has a lot of heart ache, and they were all born before harm reduction was a known thing. If I knew what I know now, a lot of this wouldn't be necessary.

Pat



This image is about alienation, isolation and stigma. For the majority of people, they think of someone who uses drugs as dirty, filthy scum. Even a lot of users think this way about 'junkies'. I think we need to reclaim this word; we need to do something with it to remove the black and filth of it.

Marion



Each time you go to hospital they ask you what medication you're on. Telling them I am on depot bupe is a reminder of the stigma and discrimination that is alive and well in health care settings. I feel that there is a noticeable shift in attitudes and certainly the prescribed pain relief when you disclose your history or what OMT you're on.

Dayle



This photo is important to show some of the extreme violence I have been subjected to. I was never taken to hospital after this assault I had to take my own photos documenting all of the damage that was inflicted on to me. I was seen through the lens of a drug user and not an innocent victim. I was treated as if I had somehow deserved this because I used drugs.

Sophie





It's sometimes the only time I'm ever by myself without Scott or Chayce wanting me. They know to give me my time to just have a smoke and get my thoughts in order. When you have a huge life in your younger years you really learn to appreciate just 10 minutes to reflect and think.

Laura

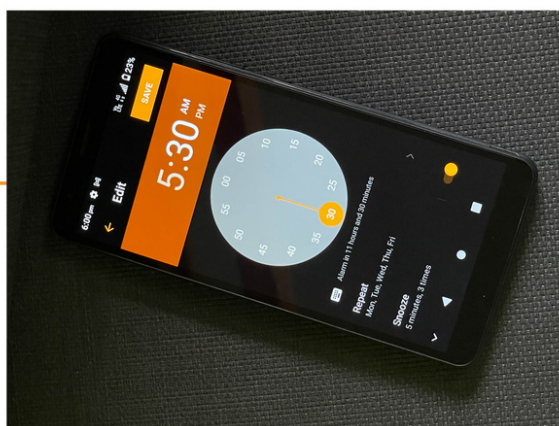


The phoenix rises from the ashes. I have spent more than three years in a therapeutic community in my life. From being a scum bag who would rob your grandma to become a peer educator who is focused on giving back. I want to give something useful to the community of "drug addicts" who in actual reality are just great people.

Sam

This memorial quilt is hanging in the hallway at work. Whilst it looks really colourful and pretty it represents something very dark and morbid. Each star represents a life lost as the result of the stupid pointless war on drugs. Every one of those deaths could have been avoided if there had been someone around who was willing to intervene. Do your mates a favour and make sure to always carry naloxone.

Jane



Six days a week I set an alarm for 5:30am. Even though I am tired I haul myself out of bed and off to work. This lifestyle while hard, I am still happier and more content and I earn more money than ever before and it's not going to waste.

Pat



After starting on depo bupe I was ready to make some change and one was moving out to the country for the first time in my life. I've really enjoyed embracing the lifestyle out here. In the past when I was using heavily \$200 might have been just a single taste for me. Out here today that buys me a fancy rooster named Kevin and his lady friend!

Sophie



This crocodile represents heroin and that at any moment it could come and get me. Today I am less worried about this than I was in the past because I have a strong support network around me including CAHMA, my brother, my counsellor and also my need as an aging woman to move past my history and live my life to where I am happy.

Karen





What is great about planning my travel now is that I don't need to plan so much in advance. Nowadays on depo bupe I can go away for up to a month while in the past it would've been more likely I could go for only a few weeks and would need significant planning. Now I can't wait to be reunited with my partner somewhere in SE Asia in a few months' time.

Dayle



This is one of my favourite places to visit. It is opposite my chemist where I pick up my suboxone and it overlooks the Hunter River. Whenever I visit this spot, I always meet someone I know and have a great chat.

Rick

Nowadays I've been on buprenorphine since about 2001. Nowadays I am on a minimum supervision program which means I pick up suboxone once a month and there is little bureaucracy involved asides going to a pharmacy to pick up my months' worth of medication. For the past 7 years I've been able to pick up any time months' worth in one go and it has massively simplified my life.

Sam



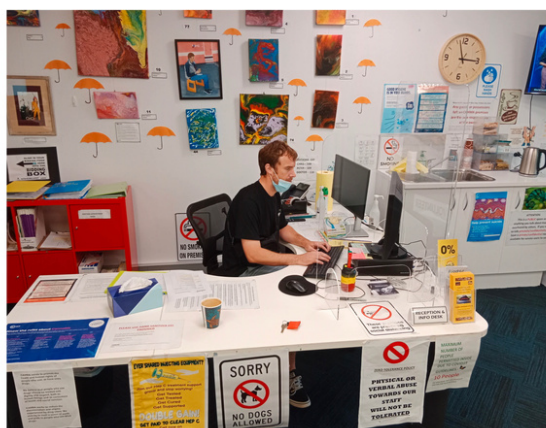
Twenty years ago, I was lucky to have travelled to India for a friend's wedding. That was the last time I left Australia. Since then, my lifestyle has impeded any real idea of travel, mainly due to the medications I had been taking that require dosing at the chemist every day or two. More recently with my move to monthly injections I have enjoyed the freedom of travel in Australia and feel India might be possible.

Ben



These photos are from my third trip to Jabaru in December 2021 visiting my brother. The first time I visited I was really sick and hanging out the whole time. My second trip I took a bunch of opioids to get through and I was quite high and couldn't really appreciate the beauty around me. This third trip being on the injection was totally different because the colours and the beauty jumped out at me.

Karen



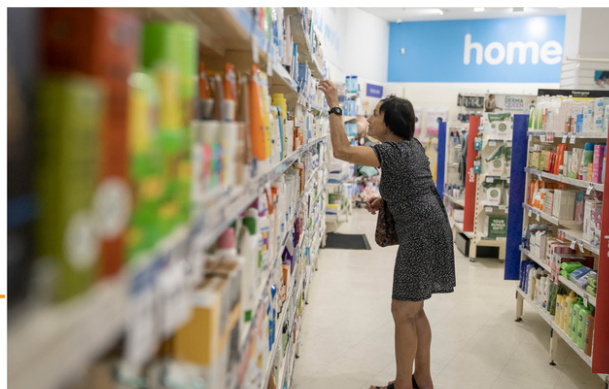
When I started working as a peer worker I was on methadone, and I found the work difficult because I was having to go into the pharmacy every day to be dosed. Just the travel to and from the pharmacy would take up quite a bit of time every day. For the past 18 months I have been on the depo bupe treatment which means I only need to have monthly visits to a doctor.

Nick





Jane and her housemate walk their dogs home from the local shops. Jane is a committed harm reduction activist and educator who has worked tirelessly to challenge stigma and discrimination towards people who use drugs. Jane has proudly identified as a person who injects drugs; and when asked about the importance of personal choice Jane said "as a drug user, with my drug use we don't get to make many choices because it's illegal. I like to be able to make my own decisions and the same with pharmacotherapy. It serves a great purpose for a lot of people but personally I don't need it every day. I weigh up the pros and cons and for me at this point in my life, yeah, it's just better to not be on it."



Heather browses at a chemist while waiting for her monthly depo buprenorphine injection at a chemist in Newcastle. Heather has been receiving the injections for the past two years and she finds it works really well for her lifestyle which includes regular travel between Sydney and Newcastle.



Karen looks out at the Belconnen Lake on her afternoon walk after finishing work for the day at Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy (CAHMA). Karen began using heroin in her mid 20's and for many years used on top of her methadone. Karen heard about the monthly depo bupe injections from her friend and she decided to join the program in early 2021. Soon after, Karen began volunteering at CAHMA before being offered a fulltime job just months later.

Rick walks through a local park in regional Australia. After seeking medical support for his codeine dependency, Rick was able to replace his 40-50 codeine tablets a day with suboxone. For the past four years Rick has been receiving suboxone from his local chemist. Rick has found it most effective to divide up the strips into smaller pieces and micro dose throughout the day and night.



Jase eats fish and chips at the beach in Newcastle. Jase has had a long relationship with injecting opioids and methamphetamines and has spent time in prison. When Jason first began receiving the monthly depo bupe injections he was surprised he didn't feel any dope sickness or a strong urge to 'get on'. Jase now receives his monthly injection from his local chemist.





Throughout much of his adult life, Ben has maintained a relationship with heroin and been prescribed methadone while working as a drug and alcohol support worker. In late 2021, Ben decided he wanted to cease using opioids so he tapered off methadone before transitioning to monthly injections of depo buprenorphine. When asked about his experience Ben said "I was very anxious about coming off methadone because I've tried quite a few times and it's always ended that I've been gone back to using and gone back on methadone. I feel like I've got a really good doctor that understands me, and I feel like I've got a relationship with her that I can be recently honest and talk about what's going on in my life."



For rural communities in Australia, affordable transport, accessing chemists and prescribing doctors are all major challenges when it comes to personal choice of Opioid Agonist Therapy (OAT).



Sam walks to his local chemist to pick up his methadone dose in downtown Canberra. Sam began using methamphetamine and heroin as a young teenager and was then prescribed methadone at 18. During the Covid 19 pandemic Sam ceased using opioids and largely tapered down off methadone when he was shifted to suboxone too quickly. After his first dose of suboxone, Sam went into precipitated withdrawal and within days was heavily using heroin again. Now a year later, Sam is once again on a high dose of methadone but hoping to start reducing in the coming months.

Sophia enjoys spending much of her free time working on creative projects in her woodworking shed. Since early adulthood, heroin and methadone were often in Sophia's life. After a long period of being encourage by her doctor, Sophie decided to try the monthly injections of depo buprenorphine. After six months, Sophia decided she didn't need the injections anymore and stopped receiving them.



Marion is a well-known activist for drug user rights around Australia. Throughout her life Marion has actively chosen not to use any OAT, as believes all OAT options remove her autonomy. Marion runs a weekly radio station program and is much loved among the peer community in Canberra.



Sam looks out to the crowd to a round of applause after finishing a gig in a bar in inner Melbourne. Sam is a well-known musician who toured the world in the 1980s. Sam has used heroin since his early twenties, prior to joining the methadone program. In 2000 Sam transitioned from methadone to suboxone and has found that it compliments his lifestyle really well. Sam said "Because of the freedom, that works for me, and that's my choice. I'm on such a low dose I wonder whether I actually need to take it or whether it's just a psychological crutch - or not."

