

# Facing up to the trauma of addiction? Don't think that you are on your own...

**For ten years Drug Alcohol Family Support (DAFS) has provided a lifeline for Gwent families trying to cope with the stress, fear, anger and hurt of living with a loved one who has a drug or alcohol problem. Help for families is a key aim of the Assembly's 10-year substance misuse strategy, but as ANDY RUTHERFORD reports, dafs is ahead of the game**

**D**ON'T feel you're on your own, give us a call - the words of encouragement on the front of the DAFS introductory leaflet are as relevant as ever.

Since 1999, DAFS has been urging people who are struggling to come to terms with having a family member with drug and/or alcohol habit, to get in touch

What began as a small self-help group in Blaenau Gwent is still based in the county borough - but its reach now takes in the whole of Gwent, with hundreds of people seeking out the expertise of its five staff and three volunteers.

But while DAFS has grown, its fundamental aim has remained constant - and it is busier than ever.

"At the time (1999) there was nothing dedicated to families," said Mike Blanche, a founder of DAFS and who runs the current project.

"I've been there, I know you look for some sort of support as a family, you're trying to help the person involved with drugs or alcohol, look after the family, look after yourself.

"But there was very little out there, and in many areas, particularly in Wales, there still isn't.

"There were five of us at first, all volunteers, After a while we got some funding and there was a paid worker and a few volunteers.

"A few years ago we decided it would make sense to come under the umbrella of GAP (Gwent Alcohol Project). There is a lot of others expertise we can tap into."

## BEHIND THE HEADLINES

DAFS ..... headquarters is a portable building behind the clinic and shops in Sofrydd. There, it hosts one-to-one and group support sessions at which a wide range of issues that families are having to deal with , are aired.

These can range from the disruptive behaviour of the person who is abusing drugs or alcohol, and involve factors such as ill health, crime, anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse. Such things can also affect other members of the family, particularly the younger ones, and for many people, there are feelings of anger, guilt, helplessness, to deal with too.

"Many people just do not have the coping mechanism to deal with situations like this, and we aim to create a safe and supportive environment for helping people share their experiences," said Mr Blanche.

From 23 contacts with people seeking help in 2000/01, DAFS last year had more than 2,000 contracts across Gwent.

"Some of those are people who come back to us regularly, and the figures do not include group sessions," said Mr Blanche..

"We were a self-help group initially and that is still part of the way things work, because people get together and exchange experiences.

"There are still very few organisations working with the families of drug and alcohol abusers.. We work exclusively with families, because that exclusivity means there is a lack of conflict."



**DAF's FOUNDER:** Mike Blanche runs the Drug Alcohol Family Support network

## Providing a spectrum of help for all

DAFS runs a telephone helpline - 01495 240824 - which is open during office hours, Monday - Thursday 9am-5pm, Friday 9am-4:40pm. It also has a 24-hour answering machine, with calls followed up the next day.

As well as one-to-one support and group meetings. DAFS has access to a wide range of information on drugs and alcohol, and other support services.

"We can offer support to anyone aged over 18 - parents, grandparents, partners, spouses, even people who are friends of a drug or alcohol abuser," said Mr Blanche.

"If we come into contact with a younger person who may need support we can ask Fusion, the young people's section of GAP, to help out.

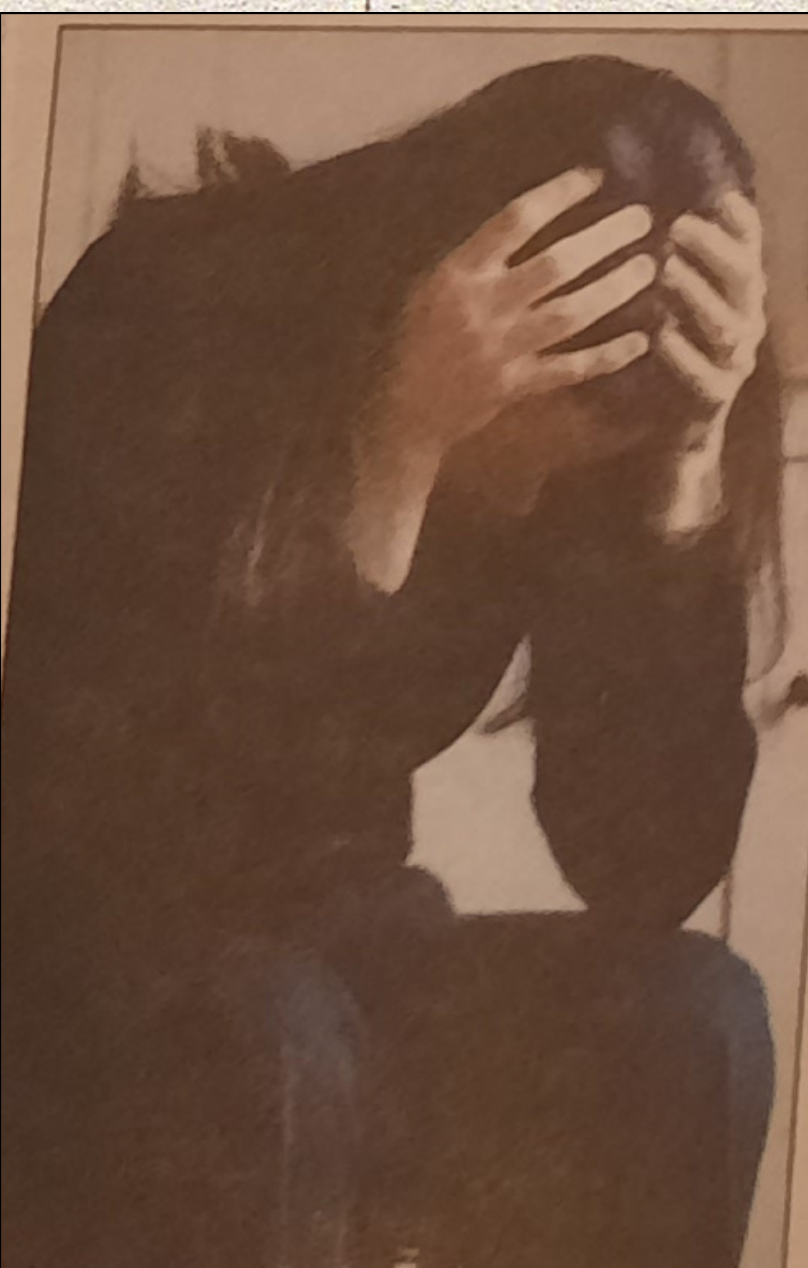
"We have a number of venues throughout Gwent where we hold meetings, because we need to be accessible.

"There is a lot more we would like to do, though it all comes down to resources. For instance, we would like to address the hidden harm issues, such as the effect on younger members of families. It would be great to have workers work with the younger siblings of people who have drug and alcohol problems.

"I'm proud of what we've achieved, but the fact we are busier than ever means there are more families out there struggling to cope."

DAFS can also be contacted at Sofrydd Clinic, Walters Avenue, Sofrydd, Gwent, NP11 5HT.

## 'DAFS was a way out of hell'



**DESPAIR:** But there is help out there for families

PEOPLE who use DAFS do so for a range of timescales depending in their needs and often, the changing circumstances of family life.

For Helen (not her real name), DAFS has been a lifeline for several years, as she endured the pain of seeing her son sink further into alcoholism and then had to go through the tragedy of his death in his 30s.

"I was stuck in a lonely, lonely place. Often, members of your own family don't want to know" she said.

"I heard about DAFS by accident and I'm still coming along, several years later. Suddenly there was someone who understood me and my situation.

"People think it is only the user but it affects the whole family - brothers, sisters, children. My son had two children and it was very hard seeing the effect on them.

"A lot of grandparents are put in the position of having to bring up their grandchildren, and it's important to realise there is no distinction with problems like drugs and alcohol, they go right across the social spectrum.

"DAFS has been a way out of hell for me. I know that if I feel I need more support, it is here."

Tina and David (not their real names), from Blaenavon have been using DAFS for six years, since Tina's teenage son's substance misuse became a major source of disruption.

"I was looking for emotional support. I was at my wits' end, but it has been a lifesaver," she said.

"I think I needed to hear about other people's problems, to know I wasn't on my own. It has been a way of getting out the stress, anger and pain, and being able to help bring it out of other people, helping others feel they aren't alone."

David said DAFS' main strength is its group sessions.

"That is its real success, finding the way to get people into open counselling groups.

"That really brings people out and there needs to be more of that,"he said.

**Drug Alcohol Family Support**

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**D.A.F.S**  
Don't feel your're on your own give us a call

## The changing nature of the drug problem

The Assembly's substance misuse strategy, called Working Together to Reduce Harm, includes a pledge to consult on the establishment of what it calls an Integrated Family Support Service, where substance misuse co-exists with concerns about the welfare of a child.

It also includes a proposal for a therapy programme for family members or carers of adults relatives with substance misuse problems.

The strategy proposes a greater focus on alcohol misuse, as this is the source of greater harm in health and societal terms in Wales today than drug misuse.



At DAFS, Mr Blanche said staff are dealing much more with alcohol-related problems than at any stage in the past 20 years.

"That has been really noticeable, and we do see changes in trends in terms of the drugs that are being used," he said.

"At the moment, we are hearing a lot about amphetamine use, and cocaine, cannabis, ketamine.

"We're not hearing so much about heroin at the moment, but these things come and go."

**SUBSTANCE MISUSE:** The Assembly has a strategy to deal with this