Drug counselor Marjorie Colvin has been with the Haight Ashbury Clinic for more than 20 years. She interviews a client who agreed to tell her story to help other people with drug problems.

Counselor: “When the client first came in, she was really terrified of the Clinic and she was terrified of people. She was not just a victim of violent abuse but in the process of detoxing, she discovered she was an incest survivor. She was in such a massively tormented state in terms of anxiety, panic, fear, and depression, behind her inappropriate use of benzodiazepines and codeine, that we had to start detoxing immediately and she knew she had to be detoxed. When I’m treating clients I start where the pain is. If the patient is so severely depressed, then that’s where the pain is and you start there.”

Q: “What brought you to the Clinic?”
“My son called to get me some help because I wanted help.”
Q: “Why did you think you needed help?”
“Well, I knew I was going down the drain. I just didn’t care about myself or the kids anymore.”
Q: “Was it the drugs or the depression that made you come in?”
“Well I was afraid, very afraid I was going to die . . . panic attacks. I felt like a little girl.”
Q: “When you first came into the clinic, what did you feel about the way you were treated?”
“I felt I was treated very good. I was really shocked and very scared and I wondered why these people wanted to help me.”
Q: “You didn’t think you were worth helping?”
“I guess not. That’s how far I’d gone.”
Q: “You said you had been using both codeine and Valium, right?”
“Yes.”
Q: “How many years did you use?”
“The codeine for 20 years and the Valium for 15 years.”
Q: “When you were detoxing from the drugs here at the Clinic did you start having memories of the past?”
“Oh yes. I told myself I didn’t want to remember but you remember.”
Q: “And some of these memories were about extremely painful things that you experienced both as a child and as an adult?”
“Yes.”
Q: “And what things have helped you the most here at the Clinic?”
“Support and medications.”
Q: “What about the group?”

“I love the group. I feel very special, like I’m somebody, you know, and I feel at ease. I can talk with everybody. I used to think, ‘I’ll never do this, never.’ But I am.”

Q: “So you found out you weren’t the only one who had drug problems and depression.”

“Yes, and I felt like I was somebody again. I just never felt like I was anybody special, even as a child, long before I started using drugs.”

Q: “What has been your experience when you tried to get help at other places?”

“I went into the hospital many times. I would tell them I had a problem, that I was on Valium and codeine. The first thing they would give me was a shot of Valium. And I’m trying to say, ‘Why are you giving me a shot of Valium?’ and ‘What are you giving me?’ And they would give it to me anyway. And I told them that was my problem. I just got very disgusted, like I felt that if they didn’t care why should I? And they told be to go home and when I said I was having problems and I thought I was going into withdrawal they said, ‘Go home and withdraw.’”

Q: “One of the times you were taken to the hospital your husband who was severely disturbed and a violent alcoholic tried to break into the hospital, didn’t he?”

“Yes. They had put a restraining order on him but he didn’t comply. He came into the courtroom, ran right to my table, and finally the judge had to tell them to put him out of the courtroom.”

Q: “What effect has all this had on your children?”

“Terrible. I’m seeing this now but I’m sure it has probably been there in front of me but I couldn’t see anything. I have a 14-year-old and not so long ago he got drunk. I could see my husband in him. I watched my daughter . . . he taught her how to hate.”

Q: “But you’re learning to love again?”

“Yes I am and I’m surprised because I thought that I had lost all feelings. I really thought I was cold. I didn’t give a shit about nobody, not even myself.”

Q: “What was the detox from the Valium and codeine like?”

“It was very crazy. I was hallucinating. I didn’t know half the time what I was saying. I was incoherent, nightmares.”

Q: “Where did you detox?”

“The Clinic supervised it but often I was at home with my children and I think that most of my support was from my two small children. They have stuck right by me through this whole detox and they’re still with me.”

Q: “You came here every day?”

“Yes. I looked at everybody and I didn’t trust anybody at first. I was taking the medication. But I knew they cared about me.”

Q: “Do you remember when you first started taking the Valium and codeine? Do you remember how you started?”
“At first they gave me codeine when I had just had my son, which was a very long labor. When I went in, the first thing they gave me was codeine, number 7 and they told me I was to take two every 4 hours. And by the time I went in and had the surgery, it was already in my system. And then I had the gall bladder surgery and had codeine again.”

Q: “Did using the codeine make the problems with your abusive husband go away?”

“No, it didn’t make them go away. It just surfaced more.”

Q: “You got the Valium later. Did they give you that to treat the codeine addiction?”

“Yes. That was 5 years later and I was just a mess. I was panicking worse and everything was worse. At the hospital they said, ‘You’re having a nervous breakdown.’ I remember some doctor saying, ‘Take these when you feel upset.’”

Q: “Did the Valium help?”

“It just made it ten times worse, you know. I thought it was going to take care of all my problems but they were there all around me.”

Q: “But you said you couldn’t feel.”

“Yeah. I couldn’t experience none of these feelings and when they come now, it’s scary because I haven’t felt these emotions in years—years.”

Q: “You were mentioning that some pain you felt recently brought back unwanted memories.”

“It just brought back a lot of memories that I used to get. The first thing that flashed through my mind was my uncle’s face when he was hurting me real bad. And I couldn’t tell anybody what happened because I thought they’re not going to believe me. They’re going to think somebody beat me up. And you know I felt better when I came here. I explained to them what happened. I couldn’t tell anybody this before because they always told me to shut up. Don’t tell them anything because they’re just going to put me in a crazy house and take the kids from me.”

Q: “Instead of a drug clinic like here, have you tried to go to mental health?

“Yeah. It was the same as the hospital. They didn’t want to be bothered with me, they didn’t care I guess because of the—I don’t really know.”

Q: “Did they ask, for instance, if you used drugs?

“They wanted to know what I was taking and I told them I said, ‘I’m on Valium,’ you know, and I was taking pain medications. I told them I was. They never did talk to me about it after that.”

Q: “Nobody ever noticed that you were loaded?”

“I don’t know why they didn’t because I went there every Wednesday. I had got to a very confused state, must have been withdrawal. I was coming down real fast. I remember I was sitting in the Clinic like that and nobody ever said anything. But I did tell them I was on Valium and codeine. I did, I really did. You know they didn’t say anything about the drugs, just the mental problems. And I didn’t know what to tell them. I had no feelings whatsoever.”
Q: “How long did it take to detoxify?”

“Months. It was like 6 or 7 months. They had to bring me down very very slowly. If they hadn’t, I would have gone off the deep end.”

(Counselor Marjorie Colvin continues): “I think that the bonding with the therapist is very important. Clients have to have faith that somebody is really there for them, that the person cares for them, that the person believes in them, that the person wants to see them get better. I get excited about seeing patients get better and this is important to patients. When they sense that the counselor is real, they’re safer being real themselves.”