

SMOKE & MIRRORS

RYAN'S STORY OF CANNABIS AND CHOICE

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Misuse Mental Health / Resilience
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MOKE & MIRRORS

Cannabis can feel harmless, just a way to relax or fit in. But for Ryan, 16, it slowly began to take control. Smoke & Mirrors follows his journey as he confronts the risks, learns resilience, and builds a SMART plan to take back choice and create a better path forward.

“What seemed like escape was just smoke. I learned to see through it, and choose better.”

What's
Your
Story?

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The background of the page features four wooden blocks with the letters R, Y, A, and N cut out of them, arranged to spell the name RYAN. The blocks are painted in different colors: R is green, Y is purple, A is blue, and N is green. They are set against a dark purple background.

MEET RYAN

Ryan was 16. He liked gaming, football, and making people laugh.

One evening after school, friends passed a joint around. The smell of smoke, the laughter, the pressure to join in, Ryan didn't want to look boring. He took his first drag.

FIRST SMOKES

At first, it felt light and easy. He laughed more, music seemed sharper, and worries faded.

But over time, Ryan noticed changes. Homework piled up, football practice was skipped, and his memory felt foggy.

"I thought I was chilling out. Really, I was zoning out."

FIRST SMOKES

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WHEN IT STOPPED FEELING FUN

The pattern crept in:

- Struggling to get out of bed in the morning
- Feeling irritable without smoking
- Losing interest in the things he once enjoyed

What once felt like freedom was now routine.

"It started as a choice, but then it felt like it was choosing for me."

WHAT OTHERS DIDN'T SEE

To his friends, Ryan was the laid-back one, always laughing, never stressed.

Teachers thought he just wasn't putting in effort. At home, his parents assumed he was simply tired or moody.

But none of them saw what was really happening: the cravings that crept in when he didn't smoke, the anxiety that tightened his chest, or the fog that made it hard to focus.

Behind the calm exterior, Ryan was fighting a quiet battle no one else could see.

THE SCIENCE & THE RISKS

Cannabis affects the brain's reward and memory systems. For young people, the risks are higher because the brain is still developing.

- Short term: memory lapses, reduced attention span mood swings, anxiety
- Long term: risk of dependence, worsening mental health, reduced academic or job performance
- Brain development: frequent cannabis use can disrupt decision making, focus, and motivation in teenagers
- Legal risks: possession can lead to a criminal record limiting future opportunities

Cannabis might look harmless, but the effects can last longer than the smoke itself.

SPOTTING TRIGGERS

With help from a mentor, Ryan began mapping his cravings:

- Red = Strong urge to smoke
- Blue = Low mood or boredom

He noticed urges came after stressful school days arguments, or when he felt left out.

Music, basketball and safe conversations helped break the pattern.

“When I spotted my triggers, I realised I wasn’t powerless. I could plan around them.”

STRONGER DAYS AHEAD

Ryan didn't stop overnight. He began with small changes:

- Talking honestly with his cousin
- Keeping busy with basketball after school
- Practising breathing tools when cravings came

The **MindShift app** introduced him to the thought, feelings and behaviour triangle.

"If I caught myself thinking, 'I need this,' and switched it to, 'I need a break,' it gave me control.

STEP 3

STEP 2

STEP 1

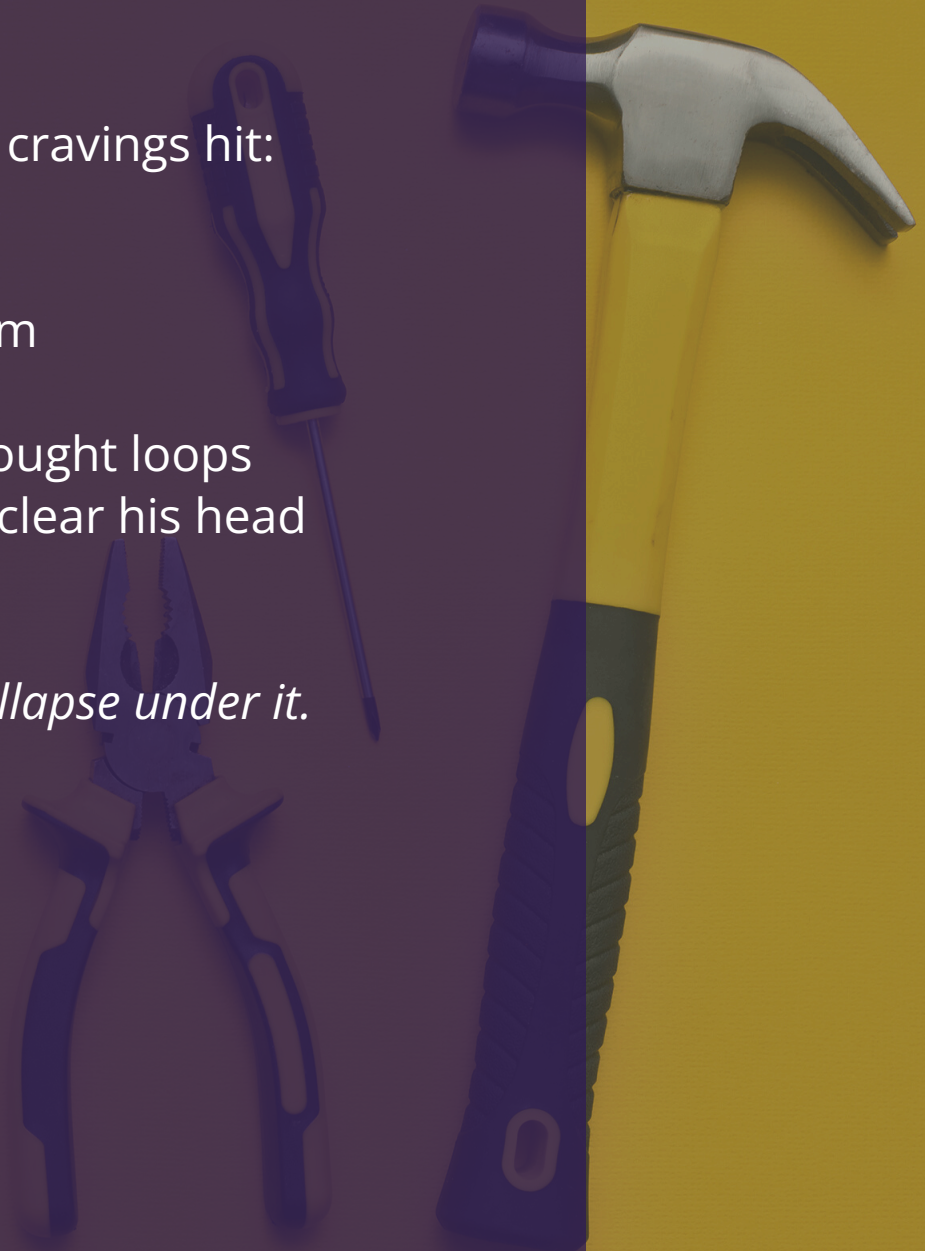


TOOLS THAT HELPED

Ryan built a “storm kit” to use when cravings hit:

- 4-5-4 breathing for calm
- Music playlists that grounded him
- Basketball to release pressure
- MindShift strategies to break thought loops
- Writing down quick thoughts to clear his head
- A reminder: This will pass

“The urge didn’t vanish, but I didn’t collapse under it. I stood through it.”





LIVING BEYOND THE SMOKE

Some days, Ryan slipped back. But slowly, he noticed the difference when he stayed clear:

- Better sleep
- More energy for football
- Sharper focus in class

“The smoke felt safe, but it was blinding me. Now I see clearer, and I’ve got more control.”



REFLECTION POINTS & POSITIVE STEPS FORWARD

Ryan created a SMART plan to guide his progress:

- **Simple:** Use one coping tool daily
- **Measurable:** Record 2 smoke free days each week
- **Achievable:** Replace one smoking session with basketball or gaming
- **Relevant:** Reconnect with hobbies and safe friends
- **Time-checked:** Review progress every Sunday

It wasn't about perfection. It was about stronger choices step by step.

HELP AND SUPPORT

Have You Felt the Same Way...

If you or someone you care about is struggling with cannabis, remember, support is always available.

 UK: **FRANK 0300 123 6600** — free, confidential, 24/7

International: **Samaritans International**
 **+44 8457 90 90 90** — support worldwide

Support