

Finding Rat Park

Written by
Denise Harrison

For Ryan 1983 - 2025

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What people are saying about this book...

I love this book. It feels like someone talking directly and quietly to me – it's both company and a wise friend, two things that are a vital support in life and in recovery. We need companionship with the right people and this book acknowledges that and helps us work out who the right people are, what the right places are and how to manage ourselves safely within them, plus, this book is a companion to me whenever I need, (I don't have to wait until a service is open or a friend is awake!) I love the fact that Finding Rat Park is direct in places and provides clear advice, suggestions and guidance, for example, develop routine, self care, notice headspace, slow down and pace yourself. I loved the reminder about Halt, the brilliant explanation of brain processes and chemistry around threat systems etc. And the anxiety ladder.

Nathan Rosier – The Peoples Recovery Project

Usually when we have a personal story of recovery, that story takes over, becomes the only story, and therefore the only way through addiction/recovery. In Finding Rat Park Denise keeps the personal elements, anecdotes and knowledge on point and in focus so that they don't dominate the larger narrative...it doesn't become the only way through is to do what she did. From the other (less personal) side - sure we get that stability, routine, triggers are all Important knowledge but it doesn't stick in our heads if they're not a little encrusted by someone's actual fuck-ups. It's the balance, the blend of these elements that make Finding Rat Park essential. Just enough lived experience to make it real, just enough knowledge to give readers the tools they need to choose their own path.

David Kendall – Man with books.

Hi Denise...So I've finally read the pages you sent me. I love it. It reminds me of some of the practical advice I got in early AA, though it is in a lot more palatable form than the big book. What I really like is how accessible it is, especially in the layout and with the helpful hints at the end of each chapter. The risk assessment section I think is really valuable, and I imagine the boundary setting section is vital for people who are in support centres, half-way houses. It really is a great piece of work.

Alex Mazonowicz - Editor, Performing Recovery Magazine

I absolutely love this book. Beautifully and thoughtfully written with the knowledge that can only come from a place of lived experience. I think that it's absolutely wonderful.

Prison Pharmacy Connect

Hi Denise,

I was very kindly sent your book by a friend who absolutely raved about it, and I can absolutely see why. I have never come across something so practical, helpful, kind and understanding without being patronising. I think that establishing a reading group and working through your book could be a really valuable tool to a lot of our men.

You should be so proud of your work.

(name withheld) HM Prison and Probation service

Finding Rat Park was a joy to read, like the perfect recipe for recovery. When I wanted to get sober I didn't know where to start, and so I went on-line and asked the question "what do I do?" - the Internet came back with many suggestions (an overwhelming amount probably) and it was my job, in the midst of my addiction, to fathom out what steps to take. If only I'd had this handbook, because all of the suggestions that were made to me are here (and more) but with each clearly laid out in an accessible way.

Finding Rat Park feels personal – like a friend has taken your hand and said "it's OK, there's a way through" as they lead you through the maze. Finding Rat Park unlocks recovery for all. It does not judge and it does not assume and it's an invaluable companion for any recovery journey.

Matt Green, Cornwall

I have just finished reading this incredible book written by a woman who has clearly psychoanalyzed her life and made sense of the chaos. The advice, routes and pathways to recovery in Finding Rat Park are backed up by Denise's personal experience, common sense and professional expertise, and her calm, non-judgemental tone provides comfort and reassurance. If this book helps one person to recover it will be a success, but I really believe it will go far to help many people who really need this sound, clear and honest pathway out of addiction. This book is amazing.

Jackie Cunliffe, Cornwall

Acknowledgements

There are so many people who offered their support and encouragement as I set out to write this book, and I'm grateful to them all, but the following people especially, deserve a little extra recognition.

To my friends Mat Amp and Steven Wyatt for their insights around opiate addiction, and to Harj Gahley for allowing me to share with you his harrowing story of gambling addiction.

To my friend, confidante and wing-woman Tracey S for keeping me sane as I wrote this book, and to my boyfriend Tony for all the love and support.

To Sarah, Nic, Lukas, David Tovey and Surfing Sofas, thank you all for being my mates...and to everyone who took the time to read this book and share their thoughts and feedback (Matt G, Matt P, David, Bekki, Khos, Nathan, Bobby, Tracey and more).

To Neil, Morgana, and Carl at Unheard-Voices / The endless bookcase for all of the advice and encouragement.

To Adam Knight for gifting me such a beautiful website.
(www.findingratpark.co.uk)

And finally... Last, but definitely not least, to my amazing friends at steeldoorstudios.com for the artwork and design of "Finding Rat Park" - You've made it so much bigger than I ever could have imagined.

Thank you all so, so much,

Denise x

Foreword

"Finding Rat Park" was written for anyone trying to find a way through the maze of addiction recovery, but as my well-thumbed copy of 'Finding Rat Park' will testify, this book can offer something for all of us.

The book is based around the groundbreaking 'Rat Park' experiments which helped scientists to understand that when it comes to addiction, environment and mental health are inextricably linked.

Poor mental health and drug abuse soared in rats that were kept in barren cages isolated and alone, but when these same rats were housed in social groups with access to everything that they needed to thrive, they shied away from harmful drug use, preferring the company and community of fellow rats instead.

Combining her own lived experience of addiction and poor mental health along with years of extensive research into trauma and addiction, Denise has taken this knowledge and turned it into a powerful recovery tool...one that can be helpful to anyone embarking on their recovery journey.

'Finding Rat Park' has been warmly embraced by many organisations that offer addiction recovery support but I truly believe that this book has the potential to help anyone, not just those in recovery, as I've found much of Denise's writing here incredibly useful when dealing with issues such as stress and anxiety. Turn the page, have a read and tell me if I'm wrong.

Matthew Wright

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Introduction:

Being admitted to detox was never a goal of mine.

I didn't ever aspire to become an alcoholic.

They were the guys on benches and people in doorways, clutching their cheap cans of cider or extra strength lager.

Not me.

It was never, ever supposed to be me.

Only it turns out that what I thought was irrelevant...because I became one anyway.

My name is Denise and I have been in recovery since 2016.

I'm not a doctor, scientist, or any kind of health professional. I'm not particularly religious and I don't follow a 12-step programme; I'm just a person in recovery who's been there, done that and puked on the T-shirt, who happens to know a few things about recovery and how to live a life free from addiction.

In 2014 after a really, truly, horrendous year which saw me lose my relationship, my home, my pets and almost all of my possessions, I had a mental breakdown. I drank excessively to cope and over the next couple of years I spiralled into a skeletal, suicidal mess.

I was admitted into detox in November 2016. I weighed six stone four, my periods had stopped, my hair was falling out and my legs were so thin that they struggled to carry me. I was only forty- three, but I looked a lot older and felt about ninety.

It was here, in this place, that I was finally able to take stock of the damage that addiction had done, not only to me but to everyone around me, and I witnessed some truly horrendous stories of loss, loneliness, trauma and grief.

Girls, half my age, caught up in sex work to try and fund a habit. Guys in their twenties, shades of orange and yellow, their livers wrecked in a couple of years by drinking too much cheap cider and sherry. Parents

who'd had their kids taken away because they were too intoxicated to care for them properly, and my best friend in there, already in a wheelchair with stage 4 liver failure at the age of 27, who died before I was able to write this book.

I haven't shared this information to scare you. I've shared it because I realised in detox that my life was in the balance and that now I had two choices. Follow the programme and try to get well or carry on drinking and die before I got to see forty-four.

I chose to live, and if you're currently sat there reading this book, then hopefully you have too...

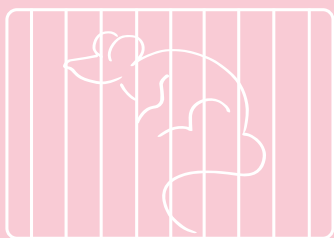
In total I spent four months in detox and rehab, and sat through countless meetings and therapy groups (the majority of which went over my head or passed me by in a haze) and then I came across the theory of "Rat Park" and suddenly everything that I thought I knew about addiction was flipped on its head in an instant.

In the 1970's, a series of experiments were conducted on lab rats to prove the theory that drugs alone cause drug addiction.

The rats were isolated, kept in barren cages, and given access to plain drinking water, or water laced with morphine or cocaine. The rats quickly became hooked on the drugs, self-medicating themselves until they overdosed and died (or simply wasted away from malnutrition) and so the scientists concluded that their theory was right. That drugs alone cause drug addiction.

But here's the thing... rats are highly intelligent, social creatures. Like us, they need company and mental stimulation if they are to be happy and thrive, and so a different scientist, Dr Bruce Alexander, suggested that they try a different approach.

***So, what is
"Rat Park"
and what can it
teach us?***



He suspected that the drug addicted rats were more susceptible to becoming addicted because of their environment and how they were living. Instead of leading a stimulating life as rats need to do, they were bored, lonely, completely isolated, and caught up in a "Groundhog Day" of nothing to do and with no hope of escape.

So, he devised his own experiment...creating a "heaven" for rats which he called "Rat Park".

The rats in this experiment had space to roam, fellow rats to play or mate with, toys and things to keep them occupied, and places to nest and raise their young. They were also given access to plain drinking water or water laced with drugs...but here's where the experiment gets interesting.

Almost all of the rats refused the drugged water, and those that did choose to drink it, did so only occasionally.

None of the rats got addicted.

None of them died from drug addiction.

Alexander then took the experiment a stage further and introduced heavily addicted rats into Rat Park, but now, instead of choosing the drug laced water as would be expected, the addicted rats began to shy away from it, choosing to drink the plain water instead and going through painful withdrawals to get themselves well again. Why? Because their environment had changed, ALL of their needs were now being met, and they finally had hope for a brighter future.

Alexander's experiment then taught us this about addiction...the rats weren't choosing the drugs because they liked being addicted, they were using them to escape a life of loneliness and pain.

Their environment was alien to them, only their very basic needs were being met (in the form of food and water)



and they had no hope of escape unless they were physically set free. By leaving behind a toxic environment and filling their lives with positive things, their desire to self-medicate began to fall away and as a result they began to get well.



So, if the rats chose escapism as a way of coping with their loneliness and pain and addiction was the result of that, then what if we could use the theory of Rat Park as a recovery tool?

One which can help people break free of their own “cages” by addressing the issues behind their addiction as well as treating the addiction itself.

I believe that we can. I also believe that applying the theory of Rat Park to my own life has helped me in my own recovery which is why I feel compelled to share it.

There was no “Recovery Handbook” when I started my recovery journey. Nothing that explained triggers or cravings to me, or how to manage my emotions when they started coming back so hard and so fast that they completely overwhelmed me.

Nothing to refer to if I felt lost, lonely or just a little bit unsure about how this whole “sobriety thing” was supposed to work once I left the safety-net of rehab and found myself back out in the “real world” (along with all my “real-world” problems) and so I wrote one; and in this book I share everything that kept me safe and helped me on my own journey, back in those early days when everything was weird and wobbly (and at times a little overwhelming) in the hope that this knowledge will help with your recovery too.

The handbook is written in two parts to make it easier to follow.

Part one focuses on the early days, and things that will help you to make rational, empowered decisions as you start out on your journey, and part two was written to help you to look towards the future and help you find your own “Rat Park” (bear with me on this, it will all make sense soon I promise!)

Throughout this book you'll find:

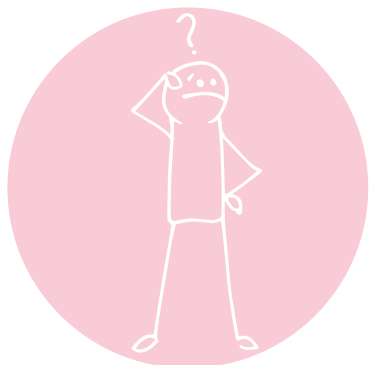
***Tips and tools to help
you on your journey***



***Personal stories
from people in recovery***



***Some important
questions to ask***



***Action Plans to
help keep you safe***



You can work through this book in your own time and at your own pace, and at the end of each chapter there will be a summary of everything we've covered (which means that if reading whole chapters isn't really your thing, you can still understand where we are and what we've talked about so don't panic!)

The aim of this book and how it can help you:

Waking up to the fact that you have an addiction can be terrifying, and you've done an incredible thing for yourself (and for your friends

and family) by starting on your recovery journey, so you should be incredibly proud.

Taking that first step and reaching out for help may be one of the hardest things you'll ever have to do, especially if "you've been here before" or if your addiction has spanned many years, so don't underestimate how brave that was or how big a step you've taken to start to take back control of your life.

The aim of this book is to help you successfully navigate early recovery, by explaining the stages you may go through, and providing you with the tips and tools to help you deal with some common pitfalls (relapse, peer pressure, feeling as though you have no idea how to live your life sober etc).

This book isn't "a magic cure" for addiction (spoiler alert: there isn't one!) neither is it a substitute for digging deep and putting in the groundwork, but it is something that I hope you find useful, and one more tool you have at your disposal to help you figure things out for yourself along the way.

I don't believe in a "one size fits all" approach when it comes to recovery. We all have different experiences and things that drove us to addiction, which means that we all have different needs when it comes to getting well again.

This book has been written to reflect that, meaning that each of the chapters will have outcomes that are unique to you.

This book covers some of the most important things we need to know about recovery, and I've started with a chapter called "What's in your cage?" (in this case, negative thought processes, or anything you may feel has been holding you back or keeping you stuck) as mental health is often one of the first things to be affected in times of stress or upheaval.

We can't always think straight when we're feeling under pressure, and we certainly can't think straight when we are under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Recovery

"You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending"

gives us the time we need to start to reconnect with ourselves and begin to process how we are feeling.

Not every chapter in this book will resonate or be relevant to you, but I suggest that you work through it in the order that it's written, and then cherry pick the bits you find most helpful (you may find it helpful to highlight any parts that resonate). Keep it somewhere close to hand and refer back to it as often as you need.

One of the things that I learned early in my own recovery is that while detox and rehab can help get you sober, ultimately it will be down to you to keep yourself sober. No one else can do it for you so the best advice I can offer you as you work your way through this book, is to remember why you chose this.

Think of all the good things that lie ahead and everything you've gained, and use those reasons to help drive you forward, and remember that with every abstinent minute, hour, day, and week, you are moving in the right direction and getting stronger and stronger.

Most of all, trust in the process and have faith in yourself. What you've already achieved is amazing...



To sum up...

People turn to substances for many different reasons, often as a way to cope with overwhelming or upsetting situations and events.

Change can often bring upheaval and this book can help you to understand addiction and why changes to our environment often play a starring role.

It can help you to navigate early recovery by providing you with useful tips and tools and it can help to build your confidence and your self-esteem as you work on your recovery.

Take your time, don't try to rush, believe in yourself, and trust in the process.

Everything else will follow.

01

First things first...What's in your cage?



What's in your cage?

While many people believe that addiction is simply caused by substance misuse, it's actually a lot more complex than that and we now know that a person's environment and the way that they react to it, can have a huge impact on their mental health and their happiness in general.

When things are running smoothly in our lives and we feel happy and fulfilled, we generally have the ability to deal with any issues, but if problems arise that we find harder to deal with, or we find ourselves in crisis due to unexpected loss or trauma, then things can feel a little harder to manage.

Relationship breakdowns, divorce, loss of a job or the death of a loved one are all major body blows, and waking up every day with the weight of the world on our shoulders can be exhausting. Depression can creep in, it gets harder to function, and ultimately we may find ourselves battling with our heads as well as trying to deal with everything that's going on around us.

Our thought processes become skewed, and we can start to seek escapism or look for ways to numb the pain, and while "coping-mechanisms" such as taking drugs or drinking to unwind may seem to help at first, gradually they may start to form a habit.

Over time tolerance builds, making it harder to find the escapism we crave, and our drug and alcohol intake starts to increase as we try (and fail) to get those feelings back, leaving us susceptible to becoming addicted.

Mentally we feel like those rats in a cage, completely worn down and with no hope of escape unless someone or something helps us break free.

"I came home from work and my partner was leaving me. I struggled to cope and I fell behind with paying the bills. I started to drink too much, mainly so that I wouldn't have to think too much about the situation I was in. A few years later and I was at death's door."

Looking at the things causing us worry, and finding ways to improve our situation, is often one of the first things that we need to do to help get ourselves back on track. Trying to do this whilst battling an addiction however, can often feel overwhelming and this is when professional advice and some structured support can often help.

Residential detox and rehab can offer both of these things, but waiting lists are huge, and demand for beds is massive, and so my advice to you, is this...if you are lucky enough to be offered any kind of detox treatment and you genuinely do want to change your life and break free of addiction, then take it.

Opportunities like this rarely knock twice.



