

YourLIFE

REAL STORIES YourLIFE

WHEN Joy Ford's son Edward admitted he smoked cannabis, the mum-of-three thought he was just being a rebellious teenager. But after his tortured life ended in suicide, she is convinced the drug is to blame for his death. Here, the 63-year-old from Dlebury, Oxon, tells her story...

Pictures: ADAM SORENSON

AT 2.30am the morning after Easter Sunday I was woken by Edward with his chest dripping with blood. "Mum, I've tried to kill myself. I've cut my throat," he spluttered. I could see the red slash across his throat and I rushed to call an ambulance while my fiancé Nigel tried to stem the bleeding.

Edward's behaviour had been erratic for years, but this was the most frightening moment yet.

Of course, no child is perfect and like many little boys Edward had been cheeky and mischievous. But he was also very loving.

As a youngster he was sporty and a talented artist but later he became argumentative and out himself off from his friends. I was worried, but I just put it down to him being a stroppy teenager.

But after me and his dad Richard split his behaviour got worse. Then, when he was 17, I noticed a strange smell in his room. "It's cannabis, isn't it?" I demanded and he blushed.

He admitted it. "Mum, I've been smoking it since I was 14. It's harmless," he said.

I thought there was some truth in that. The government had just downgraded cannabis to a Class C drug.

But I told him if I caught him smoking again, I'd call the police. My worry was it would lead to hard drugs like heroin.

Not long after, Edward dropped out of college. He'd stay up all night and his behaviour became bizarre.

He wedged things against his bedroom door, accused me of stalking him, of going through his things and listening in to his phone calls.

We asked the doctor about it and he said that Edward was depressed.

When he was 18 he moved to London and one day I got a call from the police saying he had been arrested.

He'd been outside his flat shouting at people. Officers had found a knife in his pocket.

My sister Sue and her husband Simon tried to help by letting Edward live with them. But a few weeks later she rang in a state.

"Edward's been awake all night talking to himself. He needs help," she said.

I told her to phone the police and when they arrived Edward told them very calmly he was the Messiah and was in communication with the Pope.

He was taken to a mental hospital and kept in a locked room. When I arrived, he cried. He thought he was in prison and didn't know what he'd done.

"He is on the edges of schizophrenia," the psychiatrist told me. The word filled me with terror. But at the same time I was relieved. Finally he was going to get help.

By this stage Edward was delusional. I felt that I had lost my son and there was an alien-being inside him. It looked like him but it didn't sound like him. From the start

GRIEF: Mum Joy

He told police he was communicating with the Pope and was the Messiah

TORTURED: Edward took his own life

Edward had been told he must not smoke cannabis ever again. The doctors were convinced that smoking it from such a young age had triggered his illness.

But when he was released a few weeks later he started smoking. Edward had never accepted the connection between his illness and cannabis. He saw it as self-medication.

Slowly, he improved and I felt there was some hope. After a while he went to live in a halfway house but after a few months I sensed he was starting to relapse.

By March 2002 he was hardly communicating and I told Fairmile Hospital, near Oxford, I was worried - but nothing was done.

Then came that awful moment in the early hours of Easter

TASTY TREATS TO

Did cannabis trigger my son's suicide?



HOPE: Edward's christening



FULL OF LIFE: Aged four

Monday 2002 when he tried to kill himself.

As Nigel and I rushed around, Edward had thrust a suicide note into my hand. His wound wasn't life-threatening - at hospital he kept saying, "Mum, I'm really scared - I don't want to die."

Edward was transferred back to Fairmile and although I wasn't sure when they said he was OK and we could go home, I was very tired so I gave him a hug and we left.

We'd only been home for a couple of hours when Edward's father, rang. Edward had gone missing from the hospital. I went online and when the phone rang a little while later, I knew it was bad news.

A young man had jumped from the multi-storey car park at Reading railway station.

The family, Richard, Nigel and our other children, Emma, 38, and James, 36, rushed to Royal Barks Hospital in Reading.

Edward had awful injuries. He was in surgery for hours but there was little they could do and we were told Edward would be in a vegetative state for the rest of his life.

Turning off his life support machine was one of the hardest decisions I've ever made but I couldn't

see my son suffer like that. He was 20. Afterwards I was numb but Nigel and I went to the car park where Edward had decided to take his life.

I looked for signs of where he fell and found the blood stains they'd tried to wash away. It made it more real.

Not long after Edward's death I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. I kept dreaming of him falling. It took a long time to accept that I would never see my son again.

The Berkshire Healthcare NHS Trust, which runs the Fairmile Hospital, wrote to me saying, "the treatment provided... by the hospital fell below an acceptable standard - as a result of those admitted failings, it is accepted that

death was due to an imbalance of the mind aggravated by lack of care. It was then I started writing my book, One in Four, which is the number of people with a mental illness who commit suicide.

It's now five years since his death and I wanted to tell others about Edward and warn people of the dangers of cannabis, especially skunk, the stronger form of it.

If you take a mind-altering drug, then expect your mind to be altered. Nothing is worth that risk.

One in four people with a mental illness ends up committing suicide

AS TOLD TO AMANDA REVELL WALTON

ONE in Four goes on sale on Thursday. It can be bought from www.chipmunkafoundation.com or www.amazon.co.uk and other book stores. Proceeds will be donated to the Chipmunka Foundation.



Boys hate my man..

I HAVE two sons aged 12 and eight and have started seeing a man. He thinks the boys are bad-mannered and he told off my younger son for talking to me disrespectfully. Now my sons say they hate him. How can I see him and keep my sons happy, too?

FLIC SAYS: Step-parenting is the trickiest of all emotional minefields and your new bloke crossed a very dangerous line. They will be feeling territorial about your family and treat all invaders with contempt.

Tell your sons they come first and your new man that he must let you parent your children as you decide.

However, if your children do treat you without respect, then you need to work on your parenting. Allowing them to get away with murder will do nobody any favours.

Being an effective parent means correcting poor behaviour and being willing to use punishment like removal of TV or groundings for the older one.

Children need boundaries and one day perhaps your bloke can help set them. At the moment, however, he's an outsider - so make it clear to them all where they stand.

How to cope

1 BE certain there's no reason beyond natural jealousy for the dislike. Be vigilant about his behaviour. Any inappropriate disciplining, smacking or any sexual remarks should be a loud warning bell.

2 IF it's pure jealousy and fear of change, it's essential to talk to your kids. Explain that grown-ups need other grown-ups, but they come first.

3 DON'T neglect the kids - the start of a relationship is thrilling but that doesn't mean the thrills have to be in your bed, next to the kids' room.

4 MAKE it clear to him his relationship with them is, at best, "friend" not "substitute dad". As far as your kids are concerned, he's just some bloke - so why should they accept tellings-off from him?

5 ENCOURAGE him to spend time with them, not just you with them tagging along. And make it clear that you come as a package - if he doesn't want your kids, too, he can't have you... and nor should he.

MAKE FOR EASTER.. TOMORROW