

Photograph by Neil Drabble

# The Ab Fab of rehab

The owner takes 'guests' for a spin in his Porsche and bundles them off to Prada in the company of a stylist. No, it's not the latest boutique hotel but arguably the most exclusive – and wackiest – treatment centre going. Caroline Phillips meets its aristocratic founder

**S**hoplifting is a surprising therapy for an addictions specialist to suggest to a recovering alcoholic, but it's just the sort of recommendation that Robert Batt is likely to make at the Recovery Centre, his new London practice for treating addicts. 'That patient's life was a little flat,' says Batt, smiling. 'She needed a challenge.'

Batt, 40, is 6ft 2in, fit, tanned and blue-eyed, and wearing an Armani suit and a reassuringly expensive watch. He is walking me around the streets of Chelsea near his clinic, to help me focus on the positive by listening to the birds. It is the kind of thing he likes to do with his patients – recovering sex addicts, bulimics, gamblers, drug addicts and alcoholics – along with taking them go-karting or for a spin in his Porsche. He has the demeanour of a contented child sunning himself, and at the moment he is fairly glowing with joy at his new creation.

The Recovery Centre is unique. It takes only five clients at any one time – mostly the time-pressed, cash-rich who value flexibility – which makes it achingly exclusive. It is a place where rock stars, aristocrats, oligarchs and Belgravia housewives flock. Patients choose their treatments from those offered by 80 freelance therapists, and decide when they attend and for how long. The centre is non-residential and operates weekdays only. There are no doctors, no nurses, no detox units – just staff gliding in and out like waiters in a Michelin-starred restaurant, offering fresh fruit and herbal teas.

When we arrive at the Recovery Centre, Batt's business partner and treatment manager,

Charisse Cooke, opens the door of the stuccoed house smiling. Inside, there are huge bouquets of white roses, cream walls, modern furniture and, in the bathrooms, fluffy white towels, Diptyque candles and Jo Malone lotions. We bump into the chef. He's preparing fresh lobster for the patients' lunch. Needless to say, rehabilitation doesn't come cheap here. It costs £1,000 per day. Batt founded the Recovery Centre, in December, out of his own pocket. 'I'm rich,' he says. 'I don't need to make money. I just want to cover our costs.'

The centre may be extraordinary, but then Batt's approach to therapy is hardly orthodox, to say the least. While Dr Robert Lefever, one of the leading experts on addiction and the founder of Promis Recovery Centre, says that his former employee has 'a first-rate mind and is very compassionate and caring', it is too early to tell what others in the field will make of Batt's methods. He might take a patient out for dinner or suggest another learn polo; he might send one to do yoga in Sri Lanka or one to go shopping at Prada with a stylist. All in the name of helping the patient's recovery. There are playwrights on hand, masseurs and painters. There are also more conventional approaches, such as one-to-one counselling and 12-step-based 'talking' therapies.

If one thing binds together these disparate therapies, it is Batt's ethos of 'finding the joy in life'. He has taken the 'learned optimism' theory of the psychologist Martin Seligman and intertwined it with endless strands of Batt Positivity. 'I ask patients what's been good in their week rather than what went wrong.'





Of course, Batt himself has a lot to be chipper about. He is lord of the manor of 18 Norfolk villages and the owner of an 1,100-acre estate that has been in his family since 1620. In just five years of practising, with no more than a masters in psychology to his name, he has enjoyed a meteoric rise. He started training five years ago after Dr Robert Lefever heard him at a support group for addicts and asked Batt if he'd like to work for him. 'I was doing nothing then,' says Batt, who has his own history of addiction, 'apart from going to yoga, therapy, support groups and shopping.' By the time he left Promis he was the clinical director of its London centre. He has since become the celebrities' therapist of choice.

Batt believes that one of his most valuable gifts to his patients is his own troubled past. Until 1998 he had gargantuan shopping, eating, drinking and drugging habits. 'This is a great asset with patients. I know exactly what it feels like,' he says. He had his first drink aged 14 at Harrow, where he was a pupil. 'I then spent two days lying in my own vomit while friends answered my name in roll-call.' He left, aged 15, by mutual consent. In 1985 he attempted a maths A-level at Hurtwood House in Surrey, 'but I'd taken LSD and the numbers started moving around the page'. Although he never needed to steal, he began to help himself to silver heirlooms from the family home.

In the following years Batt worked intermittently selling property, living in Cheyne Walk in Chelsea and snorting, drinking and shopping, sometimes to the tune of £50,000 a day. Sports cars were a favourite purchase. ('When I was drunk I drove my Ferrari through a field and wrote it off.') He must have binged for Britain because, despite his cocaine habit – which would normally lead to weight loss – he was nearly four stone heavier than he is now. 'I've no recollection of overeating. Talk about suppressing unhappy memories.' Thus he spent five years until he 'retired' in 1990. 'I went to run my country estate,' he says. His retirement culminated in Batt locking himself in his bedroom with a gun while snorting a 'pile' of cocaine. 'I was too terrified to go out.'

Batt says his addictions stemmed from 'loneliness and that negative addict voice that tells us horrible things about us and is so awful that we think it'll overwhelm us. I was always trying to fill a hole inside and a sense of inadequacy.' While he says his childhood was not difficult, it was nothing if not different. 'I inherited the estate aged five, when my father died. From then on I was brought up surrounded by women, servants called me Master Robert, I had accounts at all the local shops and a chauffeur, and my life was mapped out for me.' He has been clean for eight years now and is married (his wife is a descendant of the founder of WH Smith) with three daughters.

A defining feature of Batt's work is that he self-discloses in therapy sessions. Addiction counsellors sometimes reveal their own past to clients, but Batt goes a step further. 'I don't see how it benefits patients to keep my experiences hidden,'

he says. Is there no private domain? Marital arguments? Or his sex life, say? 'The question is always, "Why am I sharing this and for whose benefit?" If the answer is, "The patient's," then I share,' he says. 'If I walk past a car that has broken down and I know why, I can either tell the driver or walk by, thinking "It'll be good for him to find out for himself."'

'I believe in adapting the treatment to the patient rather than expecting them to comply with a predetermined methodology,' he continues. 'I find traditional psychodynamic therapists God-like and unreal. You don't know anything about them and can only project and fantasise.' But there's good reason for the traditional methodology: it allows the patient to re-enact earlier experiences without the therapist's personal details getting in the way. 'I'm not offering psychoanalysis,' Batt counters. 'I'm treating people with addictive behaviour – and addiction counselling is much more directive.'

This brings us to the tricky question of boundaries. 'I took a young patient to a support group the other day,' he says. 'At the end of it she was crying. So I took her for dinner and talked to her. For some people that would be very unboundaried.'

But I love the fact that I'm always available. Only being able to talk to your patients during their paying sessions doesn't feel friendly enough. I grow to love and like my patients.' Isn't this dangerous territory for a therapist, when you consider how Beechy Colclough, one-time therapist to Elton John and Michael Jackson, followed a similar career trajectory but fell thumpingly from grace after allegations were made that he'd been sleeping with his patients?

Some might say sex is a natural progression from such boundary-breaking. 'I've never had sex with a patient,' says Batt. 'For me that would be a total abuse of power. Besides, I'm very much in love with my wife.' Still, recommending a patient go shoplifting could surely backfire terribly. What if they had got caught? In the end Batt says they didn't go, and even if they had, he adds rather naively, he would have paid for the items afterwards.

Batt has taken on a big job for someone who has limited experience and is relatively new to recovery himself. ('Recovery is like the five rubber ducks in the bath. You can't keep them all [addictive behaviours] under all the time. Right now I want to steal a car and smoke a cigar. I won't.') But the Recovery Centre has been full since it opened, and of the one-to-one patients who have been seeing Batt regularly since before he set it up, 75 per cent are still clean after a year.

Batt looks out of the window at the birds. 'I'd like to start a bursary,' he says, suddenly. 'It'd be lovely to treat people regardless of whether they can afford it. I visited friends once, and someone who was talking said, "I have to thank him for saving my life," pointing at me. That's worth more than money. This may sound fantastically arrogant, but I don't doubt myself. I do this because I love doing it. I'm very good at it. And I know that I'm helping people because they get better.' ●

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