



## Drugs - A parent's journey ...

### Article 3

### Triggers & Walls

It had been 4 months since the first episode and our daughter had now finally come to terms with the fact that she needed help. Her specific rehab programme required attending individual and group therapy twice a week for 16 weeks and family sessions for 9 weeks....a major breakthrough for a person whose only previous commitment was to feeding an addiction.

As a family member in a support role, one does not realize until you attend family sessions, how an addiction of this nature can be so powerful that it takes hold of every minute of every day. The major initial hurdle is to get the addict to abstain from habits over which they have very little control due to the fact that the biochemistry of the brain has changed. Until this has adjusted to normal levels, which involves staying away from certain people, places and things, the healing process cannot begin....an initial window period of approximately 25 days of total abstinence. For a person who has not gone through addiction this may sound easy, until one realizes that relatively small, insignificant things can tip an addict over the edge and start an uncontrolled craving. These are known as triggers and differ from person to person. The simplest way to describe a trigger is through Pavlov's Dog Theory. Pavlov rang a bell every time he fed his dog. In time the dog related the ringing of the bell to feeding time and would automatically drool at the sound of the bell. This is exactly how an addict's mind works during the period of abstinence; they see certain things in their surroundings that bring on an uncontrollable urge in the brain to go out and look for their next fix. These triggers differ from addict to addict and in my daughter's case, she identified the following triggers;

- going to certain clubs and pubs
- seeing certain people
- driving a car in certain areas
- bottle store
- ATM machines
- Cape Town

As simple as these may seem to a normally functioning brain, every one of these triggers had some relationship to her addiction and until one gets through the critical periods of abstinence, these situations have to be avoided at all costs. This is where the family support structure plays a vital role due to the fact that the voice of reason is not present in an addict until the biochemistry of the brain has had time to heal itself.

As a mom or dad, you build yourself up to the first 25 days of abstinence. This period is not easy for anyone, let alone the addict...periods of highs and lows are frequent, even without the drug, and when abstinence stretches beyond this period you naively think that

the problem is solved forever. Not that simple!!!! Together, we achieved a clean & sober period of 42 days, controlling the triggers, giving support, praising our daughter for her achievements...and then one evening she happened to ride past a place that brought back memories of the dark past. She thought of phoning her therapist to help her through this feeling of uncertainty. She thought of making her way back home right away. She thought of stopping off at a 'clean' friend to let this thought pass. But, that bell had rung; she was drooling like Pavlov's dog and once again the voice of reason and the first steps of avoidance taught to her in rehabilitation were overcome by the taste of the past. She made the call to her dealer...

## **Learning's**

- Triggers are as strong as the drug itself, until the chemistry of the brain is normalized. Family support is critical during this period, as the addict cannot necessarily help themselves just yet.
- As parents, offer compassion and understanding of what they are going through. Help the addict to find hobbies & new interests that keep their thoughts away from the identified triggers as well as the people, places and things that may potentially draw them back to their past habits.
- If relapse occurs, don't give up. The longer the abstinence, the more rational the addict becomes and the more they begin to arm themselves with the education that is given to them during rehabilitation.
- Relapses do not mean that everyone has to start from scratch again; every day that is traded for addiction is another day in the healing process.
- Don't throw in the towel; the majority of addicts don't want to do drugs and need all of the support, education and motivation that they can get to buy their ticket out of that dark world.
- 'Abstinence' and 'window period' doesn't mean 'cure'. Addiction is a chronic illness that can be well managed through education and a change in lifestyle.
- As parents, try to talk to the addict about the bright future, not the dark past. In many cases, probing into the past can exacerbate the guilt feelings and the urge to 'drown sorrows' or get a 'quick fix'. Every parent has an inquisitive nature and would love to know the 'ins & outs' of the drug underworld, but leave that until addicts are ready to talk about it; it may be sooner than you thought, it may be never!

**Next week's article is about managing the ups & downs.**