



Drugs - A parent's journey ...

Article 4

The Ups & Downs

During the period that our daughter attended rehabilitation sessions, it was amazing to observe the 'tug of war' that happened between the brain and the drug. As she became more rational and no longer required an artificial stimulant to function properly, she began to realize how she was destroying her own mind and body and the relationships that had previously been important to her. She became more open about how regularly she had been using and admitted that there were times during the past 6 months, where she had no recollection of the past. Obsessions and addiction had totally overshadowed normality!

One of the most valuable tools for her was the group sessions during the rehabilitation programme, where she could speak openly to people her own age that had been through similar experiences. As a parent, you always feel that your children will confide in you no matter what they do, but one has to come to the realization that when dealing with addiction, it is far easier to share bad experiences with your own age group and with people who are going through a similar healing process.

As the window periods of abstinence increased, it was extremely rewarding to see an individual's compassion and personality returning. It does not happen overnight; there are periods of highs and lows that need to be managed subtly and carefully by parents and clean friends. That 6th sense always tells you when there is the possibility of the scale tilting towards a relapse, days before it actually happens. Although you feel drained by the thought of having to handle depressive periods, confrontation and potential relapse, this support period is crucial in helping the addict to maintain a clean & sober state during a period of 'hitting the wall'

We slipped up along the way and definitely learned by our mistakes and the further education which family group sessions provided. Our daughter happily attended every session of the 16-week rehabilitation programme and had been completely clean & sober for a period well beyond the norms. When she completed the formal programme, she had the feeling that she had 'graduated'; she had become educated about the harm that addiction causes to family, friends and herself; she had given herself time to sufficiently heal her body and mind and feel motivated about the challenges that lay ahead. She even insisted on going for a full medical, including a brain function test, all of which showed that there was no permanent damage evident. In a sense, she thought that she had been cured!

But the one thing that she had not personally come to terms with was the fact that she would probably never be able to consume any type of alcoholic beverage again. We encouraged total abstinence for a long period of time, but one night she happened to go to a club with clean friends. She had just one drink and it had no effect; the next time she had two and still arrived home clean and sober; the next time, not so lucky! She went to a popular hangout in Stellenbosch, had one too many, saw a person that she knew from the dark days, made excuses to her 'clean' friends to escape their protective clutches and once again did not arrive home until the late hours of the following

morning. That day she tested positive for cocaine and could not recall the process that led her to taking it!

One consolation of this relapse is that she had frightened herself into realizing how easy it was to lose control if one does not apply all of the addiction management principles learnt in rehabilitation. An addict cannot be selective. As her therapist said to her; 'It's never the last drink that pushes an addict over the edge; it's always the first'. There is a good reason why addicts should practice total abstinence; a 'legal and socially acceptable' substance such as alcohol is just another 'stepping stone' on a one-way path leading back to a dark and dangerous destination.

At the time of writing this article, we are getting close to the longest period of abstinence to date. Our daughter has taken on a new job, moved into a flat with a clean friend and is hopefully well on the way to changing her life for the better. Most importantly, she has won back the compassion and sensitivity that was brutally stolen from her by the addiction. Although the formal part of therapy has been completed, she still attends support groups on a regular basis of her own free will.

The road to recovery is long and there are many obstacles along the way, but the single most rewarding aspect for a 'passenger' on this journey, is seeing your child return to being the person that you knew before; loving, caring, bubbly and eternally grateful for the support and forgiveness that she has received from family and clean friends.

Learning's

- Addicts need ongoing encouragement in coming to terms with their illness. If they remain secretive to everyone, it can create complications in the future. For example, there are still certain medications on the market containing substances that could trigger a relapse. Certain anesthetics used by the medical fraternity can also potentially lead to relapse. It is therefore important for key people such as the family doctor and pharmacist to be aware that the individual has used addictive substances in the past.
- There are very few addicts who can manage the process of long-term abstinence without some form of formal rehabilitation. The psychological and social pitfalls are just too great to go it alone. **Swallow your pride, accept help and move on.**
- There is no such word in the addict's vocabulary as 'cure'. The chronic nature of addiction necessitates an ongoing management and support programme for the rest of the addict's life.
- The affected family should always strive for the return of normality within the household, no matter how hard it may seem at the time. This may involve some fairly harsh decisions, but be consistent and strict, not unreasonable. After all, there is a real world out there!
- Abusive substances will be readily available to everyone who goes looking for them for many years to come. Your duty as a parent is to love, support, nurture, educate and manage your child's transition into a world that is filled with obstacles.
- And lastly, **never give up in kicking the habit**, as an individual with an addiction or a family member sharing the ups & downs of those close to you.

'The flower that blooms in the face of adversity is the most rare and beautiful of all'.

Next week's article is entitled 'From the Horse's Mouth' and deals with some useful information and insights from our daughter as she continues down the road of living with an addiction.