

SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

"You cannot conquer that which you do not confront!" – Paula White

Substance use disorder or addiction does not just happen overnight; it's a complicated process that gradually unfolds over time. The process of substance use disorder has various phases.

Firstly, you enter into the initial or experimental phase. This is where it starts, with just experimenting and trying it for the first time. Then you find yourself using regularly and more frequently without really noticing.

Then your body builds up a tolerance level to the substance. This means that you don't get the same "high" as before, which results in needing more and more to obtain the much needed high.

Next, you become dependent on the substance and experience withdrawal symptoms, so you have to use to be able to function. As a result, you lose control and start doing things that have significant negative consequences in all aspects of life, including relationships, work and your physical and mental well-being.

This is when the final stage kicks in – full-blown addiction or substance use disorder. At this point, your life is significantly impacted by the compulsive need to use the substance.

The reason why I started off with this explanation is to give context to what I am about to share with you, that being my personal journey being diagnosed with substance use disorder.

IN THE BEGINNING

I had it all – I was living the dream. I was employed in the

banking industry, specialising in home loans. I got my learner's and license the first time round and was the youngest in my department, excelling in my career.

My parents and family were very proud of me, and I was a role model to some in the community.

On the other hand, I was partying every weekend, whether it was



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going to a club or a sports bar to shoot pool or just chilling at someone's house and drinking. I didn't know this was a steady build-up to a major change in my life and that of my family.

I felt good about myself, not knowing this was all a build-up to a part of my life that was not good. I always went out with friends every weekend, thinking I was drinking socially. Not knowing that I was headed for destruction.

I had many friends who always told me what I wanted to hear. Reflecting back on my life, I see now they were all there just for the fun times and the money I used to spend on them.

LIFE-CHANGING MOMENT

We were at a sports bar, shooting pool and drinking, when two friends of mine borrowed my car to pick up someone. They were gone a long time, and I went outside to see if they were back. I noticed my car standing far in the parking lot in a corner. As I approached the car, I saw the two of them sitting in front and smoking something. I got in the car and asked them what they were doing, and I also wanted to try it. I was drunk at that moment, and immediately after I had a "hit," I was sober again, and I couldn't understand it. That was the beginning of the end of the "good life."

After that first "hit," I couldn't get enough of the drug. I quickly spiralled out of control, and soon I was using every day. I had hit the regular use phase. With continued use, my tolerance levels went up, and I had to increase my usage every day, being dependent on the substance. I couldn't wait to finish work so that I could use. My work standard declined, and I wouldn't report for work on time regularly. I was dependent on crack cocaine now, and with this dependence came withdrawal symptoms, coupled with a range of emotional states like depression, isolation, anxiety, rage, anger, self-pity, regret. The list of negative feelings and emotions goes on and on.

Realising I'd lost control of my life and the use of the drug, things started to get real for me. I lost

my job, my car, my friends and my family, and most importantly, I had lost myself. I didn't recognise the person staring back at me from the mirror anymore. I was officially a drug addict.

This went on for many years until I got "sick and tired of being sick and tired," and I had to reach out for help. My family has always been there for me, always wanting to help and at the same time being very cautious of my manipulation. I even believed my own lies and couldn't even remember the lies I told people to get money, but my family was always there for me.

I went through a total of four rehabilitation centres: one private rehab, one government and twice in a Christian recovery home, namely Victory Outreach Cape Town, then years later, Victory Outreach Johannesburg. I got saved by the grace of God in Victory Outreach, and I was very well-equipped with leadership skills, life skills, not forgetting my spirituality. To this day, I am truly grateful for what was ingrained in me by Victory Outreach because it's what is helping me stay clean.

Coupled with this, the process of going through a secular treatment centre was unmatched. I got equipped with tools so I could look after my overall well-being as a person. Here I'm referring to skills like conflict management, how to manage stress, drug prevention plans, active listening, assertiveness, conflict resolution, and rebuilding trust amongst other things.

The rocky road of addiction is not an easy one to embark on, and I'd like to encourage anyone who is reading this article, who might be struggling with addiction or knows someone who is battling with addiction, that recovery is possible. Why I say that is because I am here as a living testimony. There are FREE resources available for assistance, especially through SADAG; their support is immeasurable, and the level of professionalism is unprecedented.

LIFE AFTER ADDICTION

I have started a SADAG Support Group for families and friends

of people who use substances, after having completed the free training and the support groups in Eersterust, Pretoria, at St. Joseph's Catholic church. We've had two sessions and are already averaging 12 attendees per session.

I can also very proudly say that it is by God's grace I'm now able to help others struggling with substance abuse by way of the organisation I started called Byron Veldman Addiction Support Services. Our services are Family Support, Referrals for Counselling/Treatment, and Educational Seminars on Substance abuse.

Why I use my name is a question I get asked a lot, and my answer is always the same – it's encouragement for others who are struggling with addiction, to say that once my name was synonymous with drug abuse and now it's known for the opposite - recovery. So, that eliminates the stigma attached to addiction and the so-called saying, once an addict, always an addict.

This past November, we had our first three-phase educational seminar on substance abuse on the first three Saturdays of November, with more than 150 people passing through the seminar across the three sessions. Focusing on the family and friends of the substance user is often overlooked, and this is where our focus is also.

In my experience, it has been helpful to believe in a higher power. This has provided me with the ability to let go of control and surrender to the process. Having a drug prevention plan in place and having an accountability partner are some of the strategies I have in place to support me on my journey of sobriety. Programs like NA, CA, and AA are also available as support on your journey of recovery.

Please don't give up on your loved one because there is always hope, and if you're battling with substance abuse, I implore you to "Make the choice to make the change" - Robin Sharma.

References available on request. MHM