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After hearing her heartbroken cry, addict knew he could no longer waste his life away and has now become an advocate of drug prevention



Since his prison release in 2006, Francis has been involved in various volunteer work and has used his past experiences to help others fight addiction. PHOTO: SPH MEDIA

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Looking at Francis How now, one would never have imagined that he has a checkered past.

The 49-year-old, who runs a sub-contracting business dealing with shipyard repair works and is a father of four, had a long battle with drug addiction, starting in his early teens, which led him to have multiple run-ins with the law throughout his life.

It all began when he dropped out of secondary school and joined a street gang when he was 12. Coming from a difficult family background, Francis recalls: "I was roaming the streets searching for love, acceptance and security but at that time, I did not know I was looking in the wrong places."



Pressurised by the fear of being left out, he would do what his fellow gang members did, which included abusing drugs. The first drug he abused was cannabis. Later, he would move on to heroin, methamphetamine and Ecstasy. Before he knew it, he was hooked.

"Honestly, I did not know why but I just kept doing it again and again," Francis shares. "Drugs were like a huge magnet, sucking me in after my first encounter."

This kickstarted a cycle of being "in and out of the police station" for a range of crimes including housebreaking and gambling to feed his drug addiction, worsened by the negative influences of the company he was hanging out with.

He says: "After I was released from prison at 20 years old, I ended up mixing with the same gang again. I wanted and needed friends, but I also wanted to stay out of drugs." Francis tried to go cold turkey once but could not fight the addiction on his own.



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When he turned 32, he had served a total of 10 years and nine months behind bars.

Despite his unchanging ways, his mother, whom he is still very close to now, visited him in prison monthly. "She did not abandon me and accepted me for who I was. She believed and hoped I would change."

But when he was jailed for the fourth time at the age of 26, Francis's heartbroken mother told him that she actually felt more relieved that he was behind bars. What she really meant: he would be kept away from bad company, drug abuse and a life of vice and crime that had plagued him since he was in his teens.

He was stunned speechless when she told him that she felt he was safer being in jail than on the streets, far away from the temptations that had wrecked his life. Her words were the wake-up call that he needed.

"All these years, I had made her cry, worry and have sleepless nights. I had disappointed her again and again. I felt useless and wanted to get out of this mess so that I could stay out of jail to love and care for her."

In the midst of his desperation, Francis found strength in his Christian faith. It also dawned on him that his entire life had been wasted on the wrong company and that the only way to change it for the better was to get away from his old life and friends.

From drug abuser to counsellor





Francis How has stayed clean for more than 17 years but he knows better than to be complacent, and admits that staying away from drugs is a lifelong battle. PHOTO: SPH MEDIA

Since his prison release in 2006, Francis has been involved in various volunteer work and has used his past, painful experiences to help others fight addiction.

For 14 years, he has been volunteering with the Boys' Brigade Share-a-Gift programme during Christmas, providing weekly counselling with Prison Fellowships Singapore and giving motivational talks with CNB once every two months. He also finds time to conduct sharing sessions with the residents of House of Anatole, a non-profit rehabilitation organisation.

His past has also influenced him to adopt a different parenting style from his own parents. Together with his 41-year-old wife Jolene, who helps him in his business, Francis spends quality time with his three daughters and one son, aged between two and 10. He ensures he keeps weekends purely for family time, and connects with them by playing games, watching movies, going for picnics and doing sports activities.

“Jolene and I are communicative and engaging, and always present for our children. We are affectionate and affirm our children that we love them throughout the day. We also praise them when they give suggestions.”

He has told his two older children about his past, sharing newspaper articles on drug abuse and asking them about their opinions in order to start conversations on drugs early. For instance, he highlights the consequences of taking drugs, such as not being able to see family regularly when one is behind bars, and the loss of his sense of smell.

“It’s important to teach them the right morals and values, so that they will continue to uphold them even after they’ve grown up,” Francis says. “We are more focused on character-building than academic progress.”

Building a strong parent-child relationship

He also feels it is important for parents to share what they do and feel every day with their kids and vice versa.

“Parenting isn’t just about asking children about their life but also about sharing with them our own daily lives and struggles. This allows us to have two-way communication and make them feel a sense of belonging at home.”

He adds that if parents don’t engage children, they will turn to the internet which poses risks with its negative influences, such as carrying platforms where drugs can be bought [fairly easily](#).

Francis also intentionally reminds his children to choose friends who inspire and motivate them. “The people you mix with have a significant impact on your mindset and outlook in life. Surround yourself with positive influences.”

He adds that parents who enjoy a strong relationship with their children will be able to influence them positively too.

“Parents are every child’s heroes. They look up to us, watching and learning from us. It is very important to set a good example for our children. I believe every parent does not wish to see his or her child find acceptance and security on the streets.”

And while he has stayed clean for more than 17 years, Francis knows better than to be complacent. He says: “Staying away from drugs is a lifelong battle and I won’t let my guard down.”

Don’t underestimate the impact of speaking to children about drugs before they are exposed to them. Start a conversation about being permissive about drugs abuse with your loved ones today with materials at <https://www.cnb.gov.sg/educational-resources/pde-publications>

To seek help for those who need intervention:

Central Narcotics Bureau: 1800.325 6666

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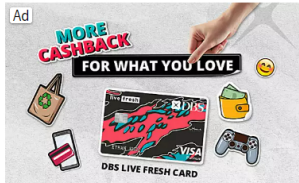
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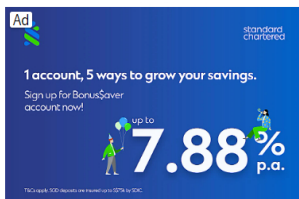
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54,229	39,372	30,710	50,549	54,229
53,724	37,608	30,634	50,422	53,724
52,532	33,972	30,240	45,149	52,532
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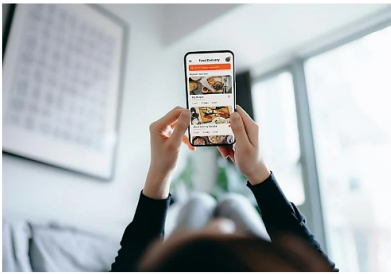
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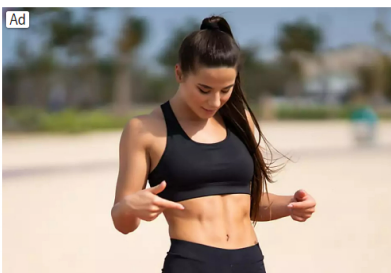


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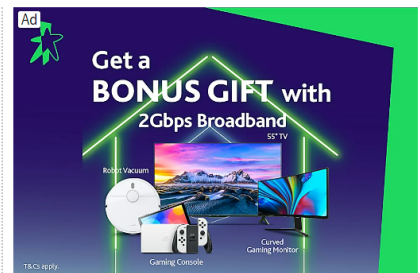
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