

BRANDED CONTENT

She missed out on her kids' growing up years to drugs

Arrested and put into rehab, this mother of three had her turning point and now mentors others to turn their lives around



Ms Syamlia, 35, shares her experience with other former drug abusers through her role as a Peer Leader at the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA), in the hopes of motivating and encouraging them to turn their lives around. PHOTO: MS SYAMLIA

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A friend had told her that taking 'Ice', also known as methamphetamine, would boost her energy levels and help her to lose weight. Lacking confidence, despite having a stable job and family life, Ms Syamlia, then 22 years old, decided to give the drug a try.

"When I took the drug for the first time, I was blown away," she recounts. "It boosted my energy to work, and I had so much confidence in myself. I thought it was what I needed for work, so I continued taking it."

According to the Drug Situation Report 2021 by the Central Narcotics Bureau, methamphetamine, heroin, and cannabis were the three most abused drugs in Singapore, with methamphetamine having been the most abused drug in Singapore since 2015.

Among younger drug abusers in particular, a misconception that drugs like methamphetamine, cannabis, and new psychoactive substances are less harmful and addictive than “traditional” drugs like heroin and cocaine have led to many youths abusing these controlled drugs. The report found that 60 per cent of new drug abusers arrested in 2021 were under age 30.

Ms Syamlia, however, quickly became addicted to methamphetamine and soon could not function without taking it.

“My addiction was so bad that I spent most of my time taking the drug. I was often late for work and could not sleep at night because I felt full of energy every time I took it,” she says.

“I would spend hundreds of dollars on it every week. I worked just so I had money to get drugs and would neglect paying my bills.”



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Turning point

Ms Syamlia was eventually arrested and sentenced to a year at the Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC) in 2018, a period which she describes as a turning point.

“I had to get used to using a shared toilet where everyone could look at you, sleeping on the hard concrete flooring with no pillows, and not being able to choose what food to eat,” she shares.

“Besides having to adapt to the loss of privacy, the toughest part of life there was losing my freedom and missing my family. It made me realise how I’d wasted the life I used to have.”

She is thankful for the support of her husband, who had visited her, brought her books, and wrote her letters frequently.

As part of her rehabilitation programmes at DRC, Ms Syamlia was partnered with the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA), which works with volunteers and community partners to deliver preventive, aftercare, and reintegration programmes for drug offenders.

“I was lucky to have counsellors and officers who were very motivating. It helped me change my mindset and I made a promise to myself that I would change my lifestyle,” she recalls.

It was through the help of a specific counsellor, whom she said “went through ups and downs with [her]” that made Ms Syamila realise she wants to do the same to help others.

Changing lives

Upon her early release from DRC, Ms Syamlia joined SANA as a Peer Leader and has since also secured a full-time job as an office administrator. Through her role at SANA, she shares her experience with other former drug abusers, in the hopes of motivating and encouraging them to turn their lives around.

“As a Peer Leader, it is important that I let those who are going through what I had before know that I am here for them, and that they are not alone,” she says.

Ms Syamlia also laments about the time she lost while she was in DRC and not having been able to see her children grow up. That is why she decided to become a Peer Leader.

“I hope that by giving interviews and talks, I can remind everyone that we can always learn from our past, and always have a chance to change our future.”

She also wants to remind youths to not succumb to peer pressure like she once did, saying: “Drugs are not something you should be curious about, because they can destroy your life and future. Look around you and appreciate what you have – it’s what you could lose if you take drugs.”

Just like how she had the support of her family during her time in DRC, she hopes that other fellow parents will remember the same for their own children.

“Some warning signs of your children abusing drugs could include them becoming very rebellious or blaming others for things that happen to them,” she shares.

“For methamphetamine abuse, in particular, look out for red eyes, clenching teeth, or excessive focus on a particular activity for an extended period of time.”

Other changes in behaviour or appearance that could be tell-tale signs of drug abuse include stained yellowish teeth, “damp” breath or foul-smelling hands, laziness, and poor hygiene.

Ultimately, however, she says it’s important that parents do not “immediately condemn their children” if they suspect them of abusing drugs.

“Talk to them. Be patient and find out if they are facing any challenges or problems. Family support is important in helping people to stay away from drugs.”

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To seek help for those who need intervention:

Central Narcotics Bureau: 1800 325 6666

National Addictions Management Service: 6732 6837

Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association: Anonymous live chat (Mondays to Fridays: 2 to 9pm)


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