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From 13-year-old heroin addict to anti-drug mentor: This school dropout wants to help others in need

Former drug abuser turned anti-drug advocate shares his story of how a strong parent-child relationship can prevent drug addiction, despite a tumultuous upbringing



Mr Nicholas Tan believes that spending time with family and engaging in deep conversations from a young age will reduce the chances of young children falling prey to bad company and drugs. PHOTO. CAROLINE CHIA

PUBLISHED FEB 6, 2023, 4:00 AM SGT



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By the age of 13, Nicholas Tan had become a heroin addict, consuming as many as six straws of the drug in one day.

Today, the anti-drug advocate proves that it is possible to turn one's life around – even if you do not succeed on the first try. He has stayed clean for eight years.

"Being free from drugs is a blessing. I'm truly grateful and lucky that I'm able to survive until now," he says. "I'm now fulfilling my purpose in life, which is to help people in need."





The 29-year-old works in the operations line and serves as a mentor with Architects of Life, a social enterprise that helps at-risk youth, drug addicts, and former convicts.

Since 2022, Architects of Life has collaborated with the National Council Against Drug Abuse on "What's Your Fix?" – a two-year campaign aimed at raising awareness of the realities of drug use and igniting societal discussions about drug abuse.

Nicholas is one of the people featured in this campaign, as he knows first-hand how growing up in a broken family can make a young person vulnerable to bad company and drug abuse.

When he was 10, his parents divorced. When his mother left the family home with his two siblings and him, the sight of his father kneeling and begging them to stay left him with a profound sense of abandonment.



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As his mother had to work hard to raise three kids and he wasn't close to his siblings back then, he sought solace in a group of older friends who were taking drugs. Like many addicts, Nicholas had thought that "taking one puff" wouldn't get him into any trouble, but soon, he was hooked and had to drop out of school at secondary two to work part-time and feed his addiction.

As he found it harder to buy drugs, he decided to go cold turkey when he was 15. By then, his mother, who had noticed that he was getting skinnier, was aware of his addiction. She tried her best to help him by locking him indoors, but her efforts were in vain.

On why he went back to drugs, Nicholas says: "When you are going through withdrawal symptoms, you can't think, and I was so young too. I ran away many times and didn't return home. I wished my mum had called the authorities to arrest me."



In 2011, when he was 17, the law caught up with him, and he served his first sentence at the Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC). After his release, he tried to stay clean, but frequent quarrels with his then-girlfriend made him reconnect with his drug-addict friends. Two years later, Nicholas was once again arrested and sent back to the DRC.





Mr Tan hopes that sharing his past experiences with drugs will show others that they are never alone, even at their lowest point in life.
PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

The final straw: He nearly died from a drug overdose

Nicholas admits that despite having a tough life as a single parent of three, his mother has always tried to keep an eye on him.

One day, when he was 18, he was mixing drugs in his home toilet when he fell unconscious from an overdose. His mother slapped his face over and over to wake him up because he was barely breathing.

"According to her, I was shivering and biting my tongue, and my eyes were rolling upwards, as if I were getting a stroke. She was hitting me so hard that I came back," recalls Nicholas.

That was the final straw. He decided it was time to break his drug habit once and for all. He started by avoiding friends who are addicts. Nicholas also changed his phone number three times and joined a few rehabilitation groups.

But the road to recovery was tough. "It is a very lonely road and a never-ending battle. It's easy to stay physically away from the company that you used to hang out with. But mentally, it's so hard."

To keep his mind off drugs, he worked two to three jobs for a few years to tire himself out. "Get up at 5 am, work out, work, get home at midnight, and repeat," he says.

His advice to those wanting to kick their drug habit: "Change your environment and your circle of friends, have goals to work on – for me, it was working hard and saving enough to buy my mum a house – and keep fighting your demons."

In 2020 he enrolled in a six-month programme at Architects of Life, as he had met its founder, Mr Glenn, when he was serving his second sentence in the DR. C.

To become a mentor, Nicholas went through some counselling courses and mentorship and leadership programmes at Architects of Life. He hopes that sharing his past experiences with drugs will show others that they are never alone, even at their lowest point in life.

"Drugs will only ruin your life and hurt the ones you love. Speak up whenever you need help. You're never alone."

Because of his own "traumatising" childhood, he believes that spending time with family and engaging in deep conversations from a young age will reduce the chances of young children falling prey to bad company and drugs.

"Have open conversations and give your children the freedom to bring their friends home so you know who they are hanging out with. Guide them along the way and be the fire that lights their darkness," he says.

Never underestimate the impact of speaking to children about drugs before they are exposed to them. Start a conversation about being permissive about drugs with your loved ones today with materials at <https://www.cnb.gov.sg/educational-resources/pde-publications>.

To seek help:

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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