

INSIDE THE KIDS-ONLY REHAB CLINIC (STRICTLY NO PARENTS ALLOWED)

Three hours of sport a day, self-improvement lectures and no visits from parents – a new kind of private rehab clinic is tackling addiction in young people. By Sally Williams



Inside the Yes We Can Clinic in the Netherlands, with staff members, seated, Shem Hanekroot and Insa Ndiaye. The 'fellows' pictured are aged 13-18. Portraits by Tom Jackson

Lotte was far from indulged as a child, despite living in a large house equipped with a playroom and a sprawling garden. Rather, she experienced a form of neglect from her parents that was all the more shocking because their intention had only ever been to give her a head start.

She grew up in the Netherlands, the oldest of three children; her father was a doctor and her mother an architect. They were ambitious for Lotte, especially on the academic achievement front, wanting her to prosper as they had done. From an early age, Lotte talked of landing a well-paid job as a divorce lawyer. As she progressed through the education system, her workload became heavier and heavier. When she was 13, she got a below-average result in a school test. “My parents went mad. My father said I was stupid and didn’t belong in my school. That really hit me. It made me feel I wasn’t good enough in their eyes and I couldn’t reach their expectations, even though my grades in other subjects were good.”

Lotte not only faced a heavy academic programme – she also had a strenuous timetable of extracurricular activities. “I played hockey and was on the field six times a week, and I played classical piano. Grade 8.” Whether her parents were aware of it or not, Lotte felt they prioritised achievement over love, or rather love was irrevocably tied up with achievement. “I always had the feeling I wasn’t good enough. I still have the feeling that if I make one mistake everything will collapse.”

Along with achievement pressure, Lotte felt her parents’ absence – even when they were at home. “My parents are both hard workers. They didn’t really talk to me. They would talk to each other about how their day was. There wasn’t much space to talk about my day.”

By the time she was in her mid-teens, her parents would leave Lotte to spend many nights alone with only a large-screen TV for company. “They have two holiday houses and went away at weekends and on vacations. I was alone a lot,” she says. She was on her own after her paternal grandparents, whom she adored, were killed in a car crash in 2010. “The death of my grandparents was very emotional for me. I was alone at home. I began to eat, eating my emotions away, and I made myself crazy, eating junk food, biscuits, crisps.”

When she was 14 she began to drink – vodka, beer, wine – “Lots of it. I’d invite friends to come over, just chill with booze and cigarettes. I began to drink from 9 o’clock in the morning until I went to sleep. I began skipping school and smoking weed.”

But what hurts Lotte most is her parents were so busy with their lives they didn’t notice what was happening. “They finally noticed last

year,” she says, after four years of rebellion. “I’m not angry,” she says, swallowing hard. “Just sad, because they weren’t around.”

Yes We Can Youth Clinics is a private rehab facility for young people (13-25 years) with complex behavioural disorders, problems and addictions, in Hilvarenbeek, a small town a 90-minute drive south from Amsterdam. The only one of its kind in Europe, Yes We Can is well known in the Netherlands, having featured on Dutch TV. Lotte, 18, is one of 93 residents, whom the staff refer to as “fellows” (friendlier, they say, than “client” or “patient”) currently receiving treatment at the centre.

Founded by Jan Willem Poot, 40, a former addict turned entrepreneur in 2011, the clinic is now welcoming international families. Next month it will open a new facility in the clinic’s 17-acre grounds for 24 foreign teenagers and young adults (11 are already booked in, including child addicts from the UK).

“For the past two years, more and more families from outside Holland who have heard of us via friends have been calling us, emailing, to see if we can help them with the problems they’re facing with their kids,” Poot explains. Yes We Can charges €64,000 (£55,000) for a room (fellows are encouraged to share) and the length of treatment is ten weeks, plus an optional four-week aftercare programme which costs €16,000 (£14,000). Dutch residents are paid for by local authorities or by insurance companies – it is mandatory to have health insurance in the Netherlands. International families, however, will be self-funding (and treated separately from the Dutch contingent).

They maintain the expense is down to the labour-intensive nature of the treatment. Every therapist has a caseload of four fellows. “The number more typically is one therapist for 40 or 50 patients,” says Derek van Enk, the

treatment centre head. Yes We Can asserts that its establishment offers a “unique programme” of group therapy, one-to-one counselling, psycho-education (lectures, talks, documentaries), combined with three hours of sport a day (anything from football and boxing to mountain biking). Poot argues that the teenagers need limits, and structure.

Fellows are not allowed to have mobile phones, laptops or iPods. Nicotine is the only addictive substance permitted: no coffee or fizzy drinks, only water (sparkling or still) and tea. There must be no sex in the clinic and no contact with their family for the first five weeks of their stay, after which parents are invited to a bonding week (bonding day for Dutch children), the objective of which is for both sides to come clean about what has happened. “It means they can start afresh after treatment,” says Van Enk.

Poot is a businessman and has seen a gap in the market. Not just the widespread use of illicit drugs by young people, particularly marijuana (a recent survey by the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs, which questioned 15 to 16-year-olds from schools in 35 European countries, reported that 16 per cent of students had used it), but also new addictive behaviours. “People laugh at it, but I predict screen addiction will be the number one addiction within five years,” Poot says, “We tell young people alcohol is highly addictive, but social media, gaming, gives you exactly the same dopamine rush as alcohol or drugs.” Dopamine is commonly associated with the pleasure system of the brain, providing feelings of enjoyment that motivate us to do, or continue doing, certain activities.

Mental-health experts disagree over whether excessive attachment to technology should be considered an addiction at all. “What we experience is kids looking for ways

‘I’D DRINK VODKA, WINE AND BEER. I HAD NO HOPE FOR THE FUTURE’



An 18-year-old fellow



A 17-year-old fellow

‘MY PARENTS ONLY NOTICED MY ADDICTION AFTER FOUR YEARS’

to get out of it, to change their feelings, and alcohol, drugs, self-harming, locking yourself up gaming, can be a perfect escape.” Poot says that gaming has taken over the lives of about 20 per cent of the boys and young men at Yes We Can. “They isolate themselves in their bedrooms. They don’t come down for dinner. They stop going out. They’re playing computer games 16 hours a day.”

Sexting – sending someone sexually explicit texts or photographs – is also a new concern. “It’s not so much an addiction to sexting,” Poot explains, “but it’s an addiction to the feeling they get from sending the picture. The boy or girl on the other side of the phone or computer is saying, ‘Hey, you’re looking good. I want to meet you,’ and that feeling, that dopamine rush, is more important than any consequences that could come from sending another picture. It’s exactly the same thing we see when young girls go clubbing week in and week out and start kissing strange guys or worse, having sex in the toilets of the club. It’s that endorsement: I am pretty; I am wanted; they like me.”

But he is also seeing a new breed of unhappy teenager. Children from affluent backgrounds are exhibiting greater levels of psychological ill-health, according to experts.

Suniya Luthar, an American psychologist who has been studying the lives of privileged children for 25 years, claims that drug and alcohol use among affluent teens is higher than among kids of the same age group in inner cities. Furthermore, children growing up in wealthier households are more likely to be suffering from anxiety and depression compared with the national average.

“Check with the principals of many of our most expensive schools and most desirable universities, and you will hear the same story: mental wellbeing is a significant and growing problem,” Lord Puttnam, the film producer and Labour peer, recently highlighted. “It’s

a mistake to think that deprivation exists only with the very poorest in society.”

According to Luthar, the evidence points to one cause, “the pressure for high-octane achievement”. In other words, overly competitive parents piling pressure on their children to excel (being average is tantamount to having failed) both in school and at extracurricular activities – tennis lessons, Mandarin classes, etc – to maximise their long-term prospects. “Too often what parents want is over the top,” she has said.

But children feeling isolated from parents is thought to be another major culprit. Parents in fast-paced, lucrative careers may be feeling an insecurity bred of the global economy – the higher the status, the greater the fall – and work long hours, not out of greed but to provide their children with the best they can.

“What we see is adults are working harder, communicating less with their husband or their wife and regarding children as more of a burden,” says Poot. “And what the kids experience is that parents have less time.”

He says that the wealthy have considerable resources for masking their addictions. “If you are an addict and every day you have to search for money, then you go to rock-bottom quicker than when you have all the money in the world. When money is not an issue, people ask for help at a later stage.”

Jan Willem Poot grew up in the Hague where his father was a successful businessman and his mother a housewife. His parents divorced when he was four and he went to live with his mother. Life was good – until his mother’s new partner moved in when he was 12. “I felt like he was trespassing,” says Poot, “and didn’t belong there.” He escaped the deteriorating atmosphere in the house – fights, his mother’s growing anger and sadness – by sliding into addiction. First marijuana and

slot machines. Then vodka and cocaine. “I pretended to be this tough guy who always showed up at parties and had a lot of girlfriends, but in the back of my mind I was this small, lonely kid.” He became a wasted young man, drinking himself senseless behind closed curtains in a gloomy bedsit in the Hague. Despite time spent in four rehab clinics he failed to change. “In my first inpatient treatment centre the average age was 40 and I was 19. I couldn’t relate.” In other clinics he felt safer on the streets. “There was a lot of fighting, drugs and sex. Women felt unsafe and were even being sexually abused – inside the clinic.”

At 27 he made a final attempt at recovery. He called Castle Craig Hospital, a private drug and alcohol rehab clinic, in Peeblesshire, Scotland, after hearing about it from a friend. “They just said, ‘Come over. We’ll have a nice cup of coffee ready for you and we’ll see what we can do.’ They didn’t ask for my cellphone number, didn’t ask for my insurance details. They were just really there for me.” He says that what most helped him was being treated by former addicts. “I’d never had a therapist or a counsellor sitting in a chair opposite me saying, ‘Stop lying. I’ve been there. Shut up. You are full of shit.’ They confronted me with so much love, fun, warmth, they gave me a reason to be honest.” Poot uses the same approach at Yes We Can. It is a prerequisite, he says, that counsellors are former addicts who have personal experience of making a mess of things, and a plus for therapists and coaches.

After leaving Castle Craig in 2004, he started a business running residential sporting and outdoor camps for young people, in the Ardennes, Belgium. Within three years the company was working with 10,000 kids a year. These included children from youth care institutions and addiction clinics. “I heard their stories about being put in adult institutions or closed institutions such as youth jail, and I thought these are all small Jan Willems leading the same life I did.”

He sold his company and started his pilot for Yes We Can (inspired by the slogan used in the 2008 Barack Obama presidential campaign) with a group of 12 teenagers in 2010. The clinic received official recognition by the Dutch government the following year.

Poot is no longer a drug addict, and has been sober for 12 years. He is married – his wife also works for the clinic – and they have been trying for a family for almost seven years. “Unfortunately, we cannot have children,” he says. “But I’ve got about 93 in the clinic.”

Yes We Can occupies a sizeable estate that used to be a training and conference facility for Philips, the electronics company. Set behind a massive iron gate, and down a long winding path, the Dutch arm is in the high-tech ➔

former training centre, with 120 rooms, 2 auditoria and more than 30 meeting rooms. The 14th-century castle, once used by Philips' senior executives, will be the international wing. The en suite bedrooms here are simple, with crisp white duvets (and, when I visit, are still fitted with Philips TVs, which will, of course, be removed). Fellows are not permitted to decorate their rooms, and are only expected to keep them tidy. "We want them to focus on the main problem, whatever that is. Not how do you clean your room," says Poot.

There are French windows opening onto two sprawling patios (one with a calming view of ducks and a canal). Here, between sessions, in the limited free time available (four thirty-minute slots a day), residents will lounge on wrought-iron furniture, talk and smoke.

Every morning, fellows are woken up at 6.45. They do ten minutes of exercise to music under the supervision of a coach. They eat breakfast (bread, cheese, yoghurt, ham). During the day, they attend group sessions with titles like "Aggression Regulation". After dinner (sample menu: chicken, rice, satay sauce), they wind down with an improving documentary or listen to a talk by employees or former fellows. They are not allowed back into their rooms until 10pm. Coaches guard the rooms during the day and even at night. A warning light flashes on a security alarm pad if someone tries to get out of their room after lights out. There is 24-hour supervision.

At around 3pm, a group of fellows begin taking seats in the large living room of the Dutch clinic. They are fresh-faced after weeks of clean living, and articulate about their troubles after long hours of self-scrutiny.

Rutger, 20, who is here to kick a six-year vodka-wine-beer habit, spoke from the end of the sofa. "Six months ago, I was depressed and didn't have any hope for the future and now I do," he says. He was born the younger of three brothers, into a happy family in a small Dutch village, where his father was a fireman and his mother a psychiatrist. But his older brother, who had a congenital heart condition, died in 2007 from a heart attack. "At first I was really sad, but I didn't know what it meant to our family because I was ten years old. But I saw my parents' sadness. They cried a lot and I didn't see a lot of happiness in their eyes." Rutger felt responsible. "I was their only child left and I felt I should make them happy."

But Rutger couldn't make it better. At 14, he escaped into what was abundantly available: booze. "From that moment I didn't feel pain any more." When he was 16 his parents separated. "My dad is a closed person when it comes to his feelings and my mother is really open – they grew apart. At first I thought the death of my brother would connect us, bond us for ever, but it was the opposite, actually.

"They always cared for me and made time

The clinic's founder, Jan Willem Poot



I HEARD OF STORIES OF KIDS PUT IN ADULT INSTITUTIONS OR YOUTH JAIL

for me," he continues. But they unwittingly inflicted more misery on Rutger. After their divorce, his parents continued to live together until the house was sold. This took a year. "So the three of us lived together," Rutger explains. He played the role of the adult quite well – cooking supper, keeping his warring parents apart – but he was really always a child, full of pain. "On the bonding day I told them I still feel angry about that year. It was a relief to speak about it," he says.

About five months ago, exhausted with the strain of not giving anything away, and by now an alcoholic who had dropped out of school, he finally asked for help. His mother suggested Yes We Can after seeing it on TV. On his last night before he was admitted, he binged on three bottles of vodka.

Gerard, 18, who is here for behavioural issues, laughs. He also had a last hurrah before coming into the clinic. "I was really tense and this guy said something wrong – I don't even remember what – and I knew in the back of my mind I had to come here, so I thought, 'Oh, f*** it,' and punched him." Gerard's problem is that his mother is an addict – first alcohol and now morphine – and so wasn't available for basic mothering tasks. (He never knew his father.) When he was eight, he'd get himself up, make breakfast – bread and chocolate sprinkles – and a packed lunch – bread and chocolate sprinkles – and get himself to school. "It made me feel lonely and ashamed. I didn't take friends back because of my mum." He was pulled into an underworld of lying and then stealing (to feed himself),

and became angry and violent. It was his great-uncle who suggested the clinic. He spent the first few days staring out of the window. "I thought, f*** this," he says. But then got drawn in. He now has some clarity. "I missed my mother in my life," he reflects. "I am glad that everything is going all right with her and she is still alive. She says she isn't addicted, but I don't believe her. We never had a close bond and I don't think we ever will."

One of the fellows' running jokes is that psychologists and psychiatrists are easy to deceive. "You never really told them how you felt because it was just one hour," says Sofie, a 16-year-old who spent most of 2 years in bed, too depressed to get up for anything more than food and a shower. "You'd sit down, tell them about your week, and then go home. Here, you can't walk away or go home. You can't have that mask on all the time, because it takes too much energy."

Sofie is smart, pretty, comfortably off; a daddy's girl, whose daddy ran off with another woman when she was six, leaving Sofie with an unhealthy need for male approval. "I'm not an addict, but we are all the same. We are not happy and we feel emptiness. Some people do it with alcohol or drugs. I do it with boys or just lying in bed." She was also "adultified" by her parents' divorce – they still don't really speak – and Sofie felt she had to look after her mother and little brother. "I was six," she says.

Yes We Can claims a success rate of 65 per cent, which Poot defines as "staying abstinent, staying healthy, reconciled with family". The clinic measures the effectiveness of treatment by a series of questionnaires which clients fill out when they arrive and when they leave.

Residential treatment programmes have abysmally low rates of success, according to the US-based Treatment Research Institute. But Yes We Can argues that even "if a client is still dealing with issues, clients, parents, caregivers, often rate YWC positively".

The clinic's clean and sober alumni include Insa Ndiaye, 24 ("I was often awake for four or five days because of all the drugs I used"), who is now doing a BA in social work (and his internship at the clinic). "Just seeing the transformation and being a part of it – that's the reason why I chose to do this work," he says.

Another is Shem Hanekroot, 22, a coach at the centre who can often be glimpsed in the grounds of the clinic in a red sweatshirt with the company logo of a phoenix, supervising tennis or boxing and getting the message out that it's cool to be clean and sober – life isn't going to be a drag.

"Parents do a lot for their kids, but at the same time they are doing a lot of things that kids don't need," he says "All kids really need is love and attention." ■

yeswecanclinics.com