

# AN ESTATE OF MIND

Morning hikes, movie nights and no mobile phones: how a clinic in a Dutch castle is helping young people tackle addictions and mental health issues. By Tori Cadogan

**THEIR STORIES ARE** harrowing. A 13-year-old in the process of transitioning gender, whose difficult home life led them to start using drugs at 11, overdosing so many times they stopped bothering to call for help and attempted suicide on numerous occasions. A 16-year-old who, reeling from bereavement, sexual abuse and neglect from an alcoholic parent, turned to self-harm, drugs and alcohol. Another, who has a loving family but whose behavioural issues spiralled into addictive gaming, alcohol dependency and drug abuse. And yet, all speak with optimism about their futures.

The reason for their newfound positivity is a 10-week stay in a 13th-century castle in rural Holland. The Yes We Can youth

clinic is one of the only private residential clinics in the world to exclusively cater for young people aged between 13 and 25 with mental, behavioural and addiction issues. For £60,000 (and a further £36,000 for 12 weeks' residential aftercare in London), Yes We Can offers a lifeline to families who have reached breaking point.

The medieval white building is surrounded by water and 17 acres of tranquil woodland. Inside, therapeutic spaces are light and modern, and residents sleep in the castle's wings with views onto lily-patch-speckled streams. If ever there was a place to heal, this is it.

Every Tuesday, two new 'fellows' – as residents are called – arrive, and two depart, marked by the lighting of a fire pit, farewell

speeches and a necklace to remind them of their recovery.

Help for young people has never been more urgent. According to the Anna Freud Centre in London, in 2017 there were 2,000 referrals per 100,000 people to the NHS's Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services. That number has now more than doubled to 4,700. Meanwhile, the number of young people presenting with acute eating disorders requiring urgent care has tripled since 2019.

And yet treatment options are limited. Frustrated by waiting lists and full beds, one mother whose daughter had exhausted all available options in the UK explains: 'There are no places for these children in this country. There is nowhere these children can get

better. And we had health insurance. We had everything. There was nothing out there.' But she persevered. 'I searched the world. And I discovered Yes We Can.'

Yes We Can's international facility opened in 2017 and receives referrals from London-based Dr Paul Bain, a leading child and adolescent psychiatrist: 'The child is taken out of their family environment, their peer environment, their school environment and placed where they can have a more trusting relationship,' he says.

With 22 fellows and 50 members of staff – counsellors, therapists, psychiatrists, nurses and a top-class chef – Yes We Can offers 24/7 bespoke care. Many who work there have experienced their own mental health struggles. Over time, the clinic has created a programme centred entirely on offering fellows love, compassion, understanding and, crucially, the sense of belonging that so many have lacked.

For would-be fellows, admissions start with numerous phone consultations between the clinic and the family before a suitability assessment is made. It is not a medical facility, so there are limits to the type of care the clinic can provide: if a teenager needs to be fed via a nasal tube (sometimes necessary with eating disorders), has psychosis, is at very high risk of suicide or requires a hospital detox, they will have to be deemed medically stable before travelling to the Netherlands.

Dr Bain emphasises that timing is everything when helping with a young person's worsening mental health. 'In my experience, the best time for residential treatment is when a significant event has taken place but, importantly, before a clinical situation has deteriorated too extensively. Suicidal feelings, excessive antisocial behaviour or loss of all parental authority – which come more rapidly than parents usually anticipate – can jeopardise the opportunity for residential treatment.'

The first five weeks are tough. Fellows aren't allowed any contact

with home, their phones are taken away (during weeks seven or eight, they work with a counsellor to clean their devices of negative content, from drug dealers' numbers to gaming accounts), and they are kept busy from the moment they wake to the moment they go to sleep. There are morning hikes, group therapy, one-to-one sessions and movie nights – Disney's *Inside Out* is popular.

But the real revelation is living alongside peers who are experiencing the same difficulties. As former fellow Lowell\* says: 'I've spoken to therapists, psychiatrists, counsellors, my parents... Everyone was old and I just felt like I was being lectured. But when it came from someone my age, I was, like, "Maybe there is some truth in what they're saying."'

Josie, another past fellow, agrees. 'For my whole life, I thought I was the only person who felt the way I felt. And [here] there's a bunch of kids sitting in a circle, saying exactly what I feel. That's when I really connected for the first time with people.'

Helping families is almost as vital as helping their struggling children, so parents and carers are also asked to attend an intensive four-day coaching programme with a family counsellor and therapist. One mother, whose divorce had been acrimonious, says: 'It was hard work. But by the end of it, we were all going out for dinner, and we were solid as a rock.'

Daily sporting activities help fellows discover new ways to release natural endorphins and increase positive energy. The facilities include squash courts, a 'dojo' room for martial arts, football pitches, a fishing pond and a high-ropes course – which helps engender trust with others. Every Friday, they hike in the countryside and, on Sundays, they head out for canoeing, cycling, surfing or swimming.

**SPECIAL TREATMENT**  
Yes We Can provides 24/7 bespoke care to teenagers and young adults aged 13-25



Towards the end of their stay, a special experience is organised for every fellow; one went to Paris to climb the Eiffel Tower.

Josie says she found a joy she could never have expected. 'I hadn't belly laughed in so long, and there's no place in the world I've laughed more than at Yes We Can – which is crazy because it's a rehabilitation centre for kids.'

But 10 weeks at Yes We Can is not the end of the road to recovery. In many ways, it's just the beginning. 'In the last couple of weeks, I was taken to Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings,' says Josie. 'That gave me a relapse-prevention plan, so I knew what I needed to do. I found the transition really, really hard, but it's worked out.'

To ease the transfer from clinic to home, Yes We Can recommends that fellows go to Lions Campus, their residential aftercare programme in Marylebone. It's run in conjunction with Lionheart Education, which builds tutoring programmes around the learning needs of the individual. There's no pressure to attend lessons, and it is expected that the first one to three months will be entirely focused on recovery. Residents are encouraged to attend local AA and NA meetings, and there are now several Notting Hill groups brimming with former fellows wearing their Yes We Can necklace with pride.

The clinic has proved a transformational lifeline for young people at risk and their families. As Josie says: 'It's a lighthouse. Yes We Can showed up at a time when I felt like I needed drugs to survive because I was so unhappy.'

But they were also killing me. So I felt there was no solution for me. But the clinic was, like: "We have a solution for you. You just have to trust us." And they were right.' □

[yeswecanclinics.com](http://yeswecanclinics.com)



**TIME TO REFLECT**  
The clinic is surrounded by water and 17 acres of tranquil woodland

\*NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED FOR PRIVACY. PHOTOGRAPH: JENNY VAN SOMMERS/TRUNK ARCHIVE