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I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it

MAYA ANGELOU



12 steps to recovery

From a destructive childhood, talking drugs, drinking, and gambling, Jan tried countless treatments that all fell short. But with a new, warmer approach, he finally allowed himself to be vulnerable and found his way out of the negative spiral

Writing | Jan Willem Poot

From a very dark period of my life, I turned things around. When I was 12, I smoked weed, started gambling, and by the age of 18 I was using cocaine and drinking a bottle of vodka a day. But following my recovery, I put all my life lessons into practice, and am now running the biggest youth clinic in Europe.

The rise of Yes We Can Youth Clinics has everything to do with how I broke down in my younger years. I come from a destructive family, where there was chaos, fights, and alcohol abuse. I was only nine years old when I started smoking cigarettes and skipping school. Between the ages of 10 and 12, my mom had a partner who terrorised my family, drinking profusely, was aggressive, and cursed all day.

It was horrible, but I didn't do anything with all those violent experiences – and nobody gave me a reason to talk about it. That's why, since the age of 12, I mainly lived on the streets. I was surrounded by people who had experienced similar issues, and I got stuck in a downward spiral. We kept each other in this bad situation.

Smoking weed and gambling: that seemed to be the solution for me to not think about anything, and to not have to *feel* anything.

When I hit puberty, my parents started to see that things weren't going well. They tried everything, and in 1991 they sent me to a re-education camp. At the end, my friends and I were sent on a solo bivouac with money for food and drinks. But of course, we ended up buying cigarettes and alcohol instead.

This was also the time that school didn't work out. I was held back three times, and in the end the school removed me. The next year, things got so bad I needed mental healthcare, and my search for change and answers began. This search, which lasted nine years, consisted of different treatments and hospitalisations, and I saw and felt a lot of unsafe situations – including drug abuse, fights, little-to-no connection with therapists, and absolutely no love or warmth.

After my first admission to rehab, everything went downhill. I was completely isolated for two years, I used 24/7, my guilt doubled every day, while my self-esteem decreased. I truly hated myself and I pushed my boundaries. I was lonely. Very lonely. I continuously thought about taking my own life, and even my dad came by to say farewell. After this, I couldn't do anything. I was emotionally and physically broken. >>>



Left: Jan with his wife, Petra



In 2004, when I was 27, I accidentally received a note with a phone number to a helpline. I decided to call, and for the first time a friendly voice on the other end said: “It’s so brave that you are calling. Are you able to come by tomorrow morning? I’ll make sure you have a nice cup of tea.” Because of this warm person, and the way she treated me, I decided to give rehabilitation one last try. That’s how I arrived in a clinic in Scotland. I was extremely anxious. I couldn’t look people in the eyes. I lied about everything. I was an enormous ‘people pleaser’, scared that other people would harm me.

In Scotland, after more than nine years of different mental healthcare services, and 20 psychiatrists, psychologists, and God knows how many other people, without any result, they realised they had to do something different. So instead they pushed me to connect, and overloaded me with attention and warmth. I spoke with experienced experts, who showed me their vulnerability. This gave me trust to be vulnerable, too. Very slowly, I was able to truly face myself and show my emotions. I felt warmth, love, and safety, for the first time.

With the 12 Steps and the Minnesota Model, which was the core of the treatment in Scotland, I learned to acknowledge my problems and addictions, ask

for help, face my own bad behavior, show my intention to work on this behavior, make amends with those people to whom I caused pain, and share my experience with others in need.

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You can get off-track sometimes, but by never giving up and finding the right help, there is always a solution

I’d been in the clinic from 16 November 2004 until 5 May 2005, and it was an incredible journey – life changing, I can say. One of the most important changes was forgiving the partner of my mom. As an addict, I was manipulating and cheating on people. I came to understand that through this bad behavior, I actually became a copy of him. Everything I blamed him for, I was doing myself. The same pain and grudge I felt, I saw in the people in my environment as well. That was extremely confronting.

Below: Jan with Dutch Secretary of State for Health, Paulus Blokhuis



After the treatment, I did my utmost to put everything I had learned into practice. I went to meetings four times a week, I searched for a sponsor, and I followed the 12 Steps over and over again. But above all, I wanted to spread the love I had received, and to be thankful every day. I learned that if you want to keep what you have received, you need to give it away every single day. And that's why I started Yes We Can Youth Clinics in 2011.

Nowadays, Yes We Can Youth Clinics is a treatment centre in the Netherlands for youngsters between the ages of 13 and 25 years old, with mental health issues, addictions, and behavioral problems. More than 5,000 young people and their families have been treated, and

more than 330 caring colleagues are working on the recovery of these youngsters and their families each day.

I think that every child growing up deserves a chance to live the best life they can. Very bad things have often happened to the youngsters arriving at Yes We Can Youth Clinics, and sometimes they did bad things to others as well. They took the wrong direction, because they didn't see a way out anymore. It is our responsibility to bring those young people, with a full life ahead, back on the (right) track.

With all the treatments I experienced myself, I got to know what people need to find a way out. We have found that our approach at Yes We Can Youth Clinics is working; more than 70% of the fellows leaving the clinic are not in need of specialised mental healthcare anymore. That is something we are very proud of!

You can get off-track sometimes, but by never giving up and finding the right help, there is always a solution. *We pay it forward*; that is what I truly believe in, and that's my mission now. Yes We Can! **LI**

OUR EXPERT SAYS

Growing up, Jan had a difficult adolescence, with a sometimes chaotic family background that was often dangerous and violent. Feeling that there was nowhere to turn, he ended up using addictive behaviours to cope.

Though he tried many treatments, he found it difficult to engage in his recovery until he experienced the acceptance of a kind individual

from a helpline. This call led to his success in a programme where he found the understanding and vulnerability he needed to heal. This is a crucial revelation: part of our recovery is about finding the right treatment for us. Now, he helps others with their own recovery.

Graeme Orr | MBACP (Accred) counsellor

