CHASED BY THE DRAGON:
THE EXPERIENCE OF RELAPSE IN COCAINE AND HEROIN USERS

by

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He is no hero who never met the dragon,
or who, if he once saw it, declared afterwards that he saw nothing.
Equally, only one who has risked the fight with the dragon and is not overcome by it wins the hoard, the ‘treasure hard to attain’.
He alone has a genuine claim to self-confidence,
for he has faced the dark ground of his self
and thereby has gained…
an inner certainty which makes him capable of self-reliance.

Carl Gustav Jung

Dedicated to my dragons and all those
who have helped me face them
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SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is to describe the subjective psychological experience of relapse in cocaine/crack and heroin users with the aim of identifying the significant cognitive, emotional and social themes involved in relapse. A better understanding of relapse may aid in providing more effective treatment for substance users. Both the intra- and interpsychic factors involved in relapse that emerge from the study are viewed from within a broad systems theory approach. In this study, not only the whole system is of relevance, but also the subsystems. Various sub systems are also identified to allow for the recognition of patterns, functions and recursive feedback loops that maintain substance-using behaviour. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the context surrounding substance abuse and the substance users assumes vital importance. The interrelationships between the various intrapsychic structures, the family unit, the social contexts, the drugs themselves and the physiological aspects of substance abuse are identified.

A qualitative research design was applied. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from the eight participants, who were crack and heroin users who attended the in-patient rehabilitation programme at Phoenix House. Seven of the participants were still in the in-patient rehabilitation programme at the time of the interview, while one participant was in the aftercare programme. All have been through a rehabilitation process before and were at Phoenix House due to a relapse. A thematic analysis was conducted and the process of analysis settled on eight overall themes. Extensive descriptions of these themes are provided. The discussion highlights the role of relapse in the cycle of self-destruction that constitutes substance abuse, in addition to the role relapse plays in the process of recovery. Connection seems to be the key to breaking the cycle of alienation that users experience. Falling into the trap of rejecting users without looking beyond their behaviour allows them to continue functioning in a way that confirms their view of themselves as unlovable, which, in turn, maintains their behaviour. Although systems theory is an independent approach in its own right, the nature of its view allows for the incorporation of other approaches. Where possible and relevant, other theories are incorporated into the discussion of the results, with the aim of gaining
an integrated understanding of the findings of the study within the broader field of substance abuse.

KEY TERMS

Relapse; substance abuse; substance dependence; heroin use; cocaine/crack use; identity; control; coping; denial; detachment; splitting; repression; suppression; self-destruction; systems theory; cybernetics; psychodynamics
Die doel van hierdie studie is om die subjektiewe sielkundige ervaring van terugvalle in kokaien en heroiengebruikers te beskryf met die doel om kritieke emosionele, kognitiewe en sosiale temas te identifiseer. Die beter verstaan van terugvalle kan behulpsaam wees in die voorsiening van meer effektiewe behandeling aan substansmisbruikers. Beide intrapsigiese en interpsigiese faktore word ontleed aan die hand van ‘n brêe sistemies-teoreties-teoretiese benadering. In die studie word aan beide volledige, sowel as sub-sisteme aandag gegee. Dele van die sisteme word ook geïdentifiseer om die herkenning van patrone, funksies en terugkerende terugvoersiklusse wat die substansgebruikende gedrag onderhou, te faciliteer. As gevolg van die kwalitatiewe onderbou van die studie, sal die kontekstuele omgewing van substansmisbruik en van die substansmisbruiker ‘n sentrale rol speel. Die interverwantskappe tussen intrapsigiese strukture, die familie eenheid, die sosiale konteks, die dwelms en die fysiologiese aspekte van substansmisbruik word geïdentifiseer.

‘n Kwaliatiewe navorsingsontwerp is in die studie gebruik. In-diepe, semi-gestureerde onderhoude is gebruik om data van die agt deelnemers te verkry. Sewe van die agt deelnemers was binne-pasiënte in ‘n rehabilitasieprogram by Phoenix House; een was in ‘n nasorgprogram. Hulle het ook almal voorheen deelgeneem aan ‘n rehabilitasieprogram by Phoenix House en is weer opgeneem as gevolg van terugvalle. ‘n Tematiese analyse is gebruik om die rou data te verwerk en daar is op agt hooftemas besluit. Gedetailleerde bespreking van die agt temas word onderneem. Die bespreking fokus op die rol wat terugvalle speel in die proses van herstel. Dit wil voorkom asof verbintenis die sletuel is om die siklus van isolasie en verwydering wat substansmisbruikers ervaar, te verbreek. Deur die verwerping van substansmisbruikers sonder om verder as hulle gedrag te let, blyk dit dat hierdie verwerping hulle toelaat om voort te gaan met die manier waarop hulle funksioneer. Die verwerping blyk die substansmisbruiker se beeld van homself as onwaardig, te beklemtoon, wat die misbruikgedrag onderhou. Alhoewel sisteemteorie ‘n onafhanklike teorie in eie reg is, laat dit spasie vir die inkorporering van ander teoreties-teoreties-teoretiese benaderings. Soos toepaslik en relevant, is ander teorieë geïnkorporeer in die bespreking van die resultate, met die doel
om ’n geïntegreerde beeld van die bevindinge in die studie, asook die breer veld van substansmisbruik, te verkry.

SLEUTEL TERME

Terugvalle; substansmisbruik; substansafhanlikheid; heroien gebruik; kokaien gebruik; identiteit; beheer; hantering; ontkenning; afgetrokkenheid; splitsing; regressie; onderdrukking; selfvernietiging; sisteemteorie; kubernetika; psigodinamika.