

# My struggle with drugs and alcoholism

BY BEATRICE NAKIBUUKA  
bnakibuuka@ug.nationmedia.com

“My wish is to stay sober forever but once an addict, forever an addict, so, I need to keep alert because a relapse can happen any time and each is worse than before. I cannot tell when I will totally be off the drugs but it is about keeping busy,” says Brian Kahuka, who, for several years has fought addiction to alcohol and reliance on drugs. Today, he is focusing on recovery.

Although he still takes marijuana and smokes cigarettes “on the rare occasions when he feels down”, the 32-year-old swears he has given up the bottle and thinks one day, he will be free from all drug use. One of the reasons he says he gets relapses is because when he sobers up, he realises he has lost many things due to addiction. He sold his property including household electricals and clothes, missed out on several job opportunities, and lost all respect from family. This misery eventually sets him spiraling backward to the

drugs and alcohol. Kahuka started taking marijuana in Senior Two convinced by his friends that it would make him a big footballer. He explains; “I did not really get any better at the game. Instead, I got hooked on the drug and also started smoking around the same time too.”

At first, he says the smoking and marijuana was harmless; he still attended school and led an ordinary life. Not after too long though, he was escaping from school to get access to the drugs and was resultantly expelled from different schools.

According to Bridget Kezaabu, his sister; “We thought he was just being stubborn like other boys that age. He acted normal so we did notice he was using marijuana. He was able to successfully complete his A’Level without any incident.”

### **The switch to alcohol**

After Senior Six, he joined Makerere University where he pursued Development Economics.

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Uganda has an international reputation for its high alcohol consumption rate. Kahuka picked up the habit in adult life to fit in with peers at work. Today, it has taken over his life.

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He graduated in 2009 with First Class honours and got a job at the Ministry of Finance as an economist.

Kahuka's drug consumption was not interfering with his life in any way. "When I got a professional job, I substituted the marijuana with alcohol in an effort to be classy like my colleagues, but I continued smoking. Unfortunately, I was a binge drinker right away, with no limits. I would drink until I lose my senses," recounts Kahuka.

His work suffered first. "I would drink and forget that I had to work the next day. I was always late for work even before the probation period was over. I would leave office before official closing hours," he says. He had also enrolled for a Master's degree at Makerere but would always pass by Wandegeya for a "small drink" before heading to class. Kahuka says, "I was always too late for the lectures so I depended on photocopied notes from friends. I gave up after one semester after realising I could not catch up."

### Rehabilitation attempts

In 2011, he got a one month break from work and his boss and mother took him to a rehabilitation centre. He was transferred to Ministry of Justice as an economist but the problem worsened. "I worked there for eight months until I felt guilty for getting a salary I was not working for," he says. "My addiction worsened. I felt unfit for the job because all I thought about was alcohol, I sold all my property to buy it."

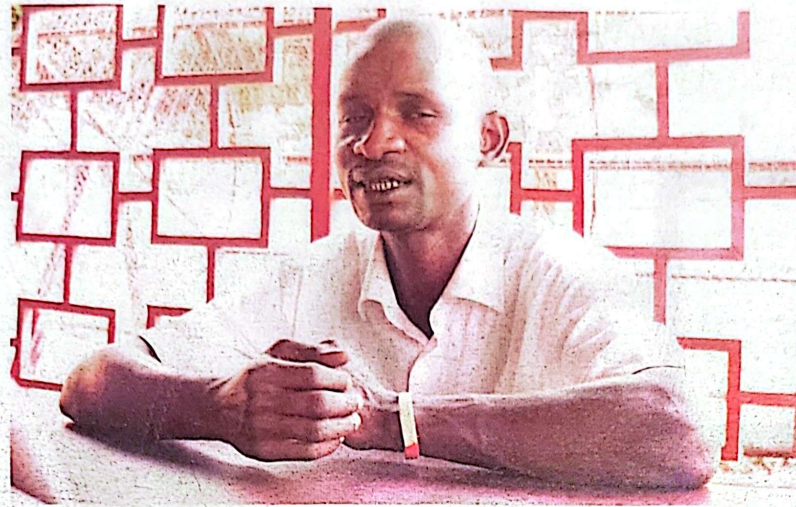
Between 2012 to 2016, Kahuka has been in and out of several rehabilitation centres including Butabika Hospital, Hope and Beyond, among others whose names he cannot recall. He would sometimes walk to the centre himself, but other times, he was taken there by his mother, with the help of police.

### In the rehabs

Rehabilitation centres charge between Shs30,000 to Shs50,000 every day. Kahuka says different centres have different programmes and ways of operation. He recalls a Christian-based one where they only prayed, got counselling and kept busy with church work.

In others, Kahuka and the other addicts are counselled, given de-

# Struggling with alcoholism



It may be the 'drug' he started consuming in his adult life, but alcohol is what is destroying Kahuka's life. PHOTO BY RACHAEL MABALA

toxicating drugs, given occupational and cognitive therapy to help them become better people but he says it starts with the victim accepting that they have a problem.

The most traumatising thing for him at the centres is the fact that addicts are mixed with people with mental problems.

"Also, as an addict, there are times when you are arrested purely out of malice. The way we are handled during arrests is very appalling and when we get to the rehab, we are put with people who are mad. This really bothers me because I only want to be loved and understood."

He, nonetheless, acknowledges that getting off the addiction is a gradual process with love and support from the family, counsellors and former addicts.

He says, "When one wants to recover, they first acknowledge that they have a problem and need help. At the rehab centres, the drug intake is less because they are not allowed although some sneak them in."

### Worst moment

In 2015, Kahuka had managed to secure himself a job in the UAE but was arrested for being drunk. "I went to Abu Dhabi as a driver and was arrested for being drunk and in possession of alcohol yet I had no drinking license. I was told to pay a fine of 2000Dhs (about Shs1.95m) or be in jail for 20 days."



### Healing strategy

Dr Edward Ssemplira a clinical coordinator at Hope and Beyond remarks that Kahuka had been at the rehab centre two times and the time he first left he was a bit sober.

"He was first brought here in 2015 and he was sober for about eight months. When he was brought in the second time late last year after a relapse, he was worse than the first time. He was very negative but with counselling, he was able to change and accept that he needed help."

For six months now, Kahuka has been sober but still fails to drop the smoking habit. He has composed a song *Nkooyo* that tells people about the bad effects of alcohol and drugs.

He says, "I attend church, play indoor games, watch movies, listen, compose and write music, and attend Alcoholic Anonymous meetings that remind me of my commitment to remain sober."

### FACTS ON ALCOHOLISM

Dr Edward Ssemplira of Hope and Beyond rehabilitation centre describes alcoholism as a disease of the mind and body that results into chronic and habitual intake of alcoholic drinks to the degree that it interferes with one daily life activities.

According to Dr Ssemplira: The statistics: So many people in Uganda are affected by alcoholism and about 70 per cent of the youth start tasting alcohol as early as 13 years. About 40 per cent of the people between the ages of 30 and 45 take alcohol, and 20 per cent of the elderly from 65 to 70 years old.

Signs of alcoholism: When a person becomes an alcoholic, they cannot do without the bottle. They drink even after they have known the consequences of drinking alcohol, have an overwhelming desire to drink and become sad and withdrawn when they are sober.

A cause: People in the working class start drinking because they are able to afford it and/or are influenced by their peers at the places of work. Those who adopt the habit in their old age are depressed from being idle or lonely.

Children: Children of drinking parents are prone to becoming alcoholics since most times they are sent to buy the alcohol, open it or even taste. They, therefore, learn to drink at a young age and it is hard to convince them that alcohol is bad later in life.

Support, healing: While helping an addict recover, family support is very important because the addict usually wants to be understood. The family should understand and bear with the addict, although it gets tiring and disgusting, especially with continued relapses.

The major healing process for an addict is for him to accept that they have a problem and need help. Then, we give them treatment to detoxify the liver, sleep and fight the withdrawal symptoms.

