

THE SUSAN STORY

The Susan Story is based on the case histories of three clients of Breaking the Cycle, and it represents the stories of the majority of the women and children seen in the program. "The Susan Story" was published in IMPrint, Vol.39, 2004.

THE SUSAN STORY

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Susan is aged 2 and lives with her mother in a one-bedroom apartment. Susan's mother drinks alcohol. Her father is in jail on fraud charges. There is very little money and Susan is often hungry. Before her father went to jail, he used to hit her mother. This makes Susan feel scared. Sometimes her mother would be lying on the floor and have blood all over her face. Sometimes she would not get up for a long time. Sometimes after her mother was hit, she would hit Susan. There are parties at the house and lots of people come over. They make so much noise that she can't get to sleep. There are often fights at the parties and the police come. They do not notice Susan who is hiding in the closet of the bedroom. After the parties at the house her mother is sick. Susan has to be very quiet or her mother will shout at her.

Over the years Susan's mother has a boyfriend. Sometimes late at night he comes into her room and touches her in a way that makes her feel scared and yucky. He gives her candy after and tells her that he loves her, that it is their secret. He tells her that her mother would be very angry with her if she knew about it. Susan has discovered that if she looks at the ceiling she can imagine she is a bird flying high in the sky and this helps her feel better. The boyfriend hits her mother and each day she drinks more and more.

Susan struggles during her school life. She has difficulty making friends. She has trouble paying attention in class. She worries about fitting in. She worries about going home. When she is 13 she starts to skip school. No one seems to notice. She goes to the arcade in town. She meets others just like her, and they seem to like her. They even let her hang out with them. She enjoys their company and they share their cigarettes with her. When they offer her some glue to sniff, she doesn't hesitate.

In the 10th grade Susan just doesn't go back to school. She spends more and more time away from home. Eventually she moves out to sleep on a friend's couch. They spend their days on the street asking for spare change. People shout at her, they ignore her, they spit on her, but sometimes she gets lucky and they give her money.

By age 17 Susan is often in trouble with the law. She has been unable to hold down a job. She has to steal food and clothes to get by. She moves from rooming house to friends' couches to other rooming houses. She can't keep up the rent; she is now drinking daily and has been working on the streets for the last year. Her dates pay her more money if she doesn't make them wear a condom. She would rather make the money. She understands the rules of the street, she knows whose territory is whose.

Susan has a few bad dates. She is raped but the police don't want to take a report. She is a known prostitute. She is beaten and robbed. She drinks before and after working. She doesn't eat for days. Although she is underweight, she feels fat and ugly. When she eats she feels

disgusted in herself. Her stomach feels bloated and she makes herself vomit. She is afraid of gaining weight. She wants to feel in control.

Susan spends a lot of her time hating herself and feeling afraid. But Susan makes sure that people are afraid of her. You can't work the streets if they know you are scared. She feels like she will burst with the anger she feels. She starts to burn herself with cigarettes and cut herself with a razor. She likes the way that it feels. Like air coming out of a balloon, relief, and a sense of control. If a date gets out of hand she cuts herself and it really freaks them out.

At age 18 Susan has a boyfriend, Gary, who was one of her regular dates. He works in a bar and wants her to move in with him. He tells her that he doesn't like her working and that he will look after her. Susan likes the way that this feels. He must really love her. Her welfare is cut off because Gary works. Gary drinks a lot. One day Susan comes back home after shopping and he accuses her of working again. He punches her in the face and drags her around the room by her hair; he kicks her in the stomach and leaves. Later he comes back and tells her that he's sorry, and says it will never happen again. He says that he's jealous because he loves her so much, and he just loses it when she's late getting home. He makes her promise that she'll call him when she's out. Susan thinks that he must really love her to be that angry. Over the next year Gary has hit her a few times every month. He calls her names like "fat ugly bitch" and "whore". He tells her that if she were not so fat and lazy he wouldn't have to hit her. She has no friends, she is afraid to go out, she has no money. Gary brings home the food and alcohol. Gary brings home the crack. Susan starts to smoke it and it feels great. Gary makes her go out and work again to make the money to buy more. He will be her pimp.

Susan can't sleep, she can't eat, she feels trapped and afraid and out of control. She smokes crack to get high, she smokes crack to escape. She drinks to come down; she takes pills to come down. And when there's no money, she cuts. Susan tries to remember how she got here. There must be a better life, but where? Susan takes an overdose of pills and alcohol.

After a 3-day admission to a psychiatric unit at her local hospital, Susan is discharged. She doesn't want to go home, and is discharged to a shelter. The social worker at the hospital gives Susan her card and an appointment. She doesn't keep the appointment and loses the card. One night after drinking Susan returns to the shelter and is discharged. They find her a bed in a detoxification centre. She stays with them for 3 weeks. The counselors are nice. But she experiences alcohol withdrawal. In her second week, she starts to have nightmares about her childhood, feelings of being suffocated. She is scared that Gary will come looking for her. She finds that she is unable to shake these thoughts and, in groups, she floats off. Most of the time her hands are shaking, she feels such a terrible anxiety. She can't drink or smoke crack so she cuts herself, and she feels better. But a few days later her dreams are back. Susan can't take it. She leaves to have a drink, and goes back home to Gary.

Over the next 6 months, Susan has been assaulted by Gary 10 times. She has been to an emergency room 3 times. She is back working as a prostitute again and smoking crack daily. She has been stabbed by a date; she has had one abortion and one miscarriage. She is deaf in one ear from being punched in the head and her nose has been broken. She lives between Gary, the detox centre, hostels and the street. When she can't smoke crack, she drinks; when she can't drink or smoke she cuts herself. She binges and purges on food. Susan takes another overdose of her anti-anxiety medication and alcohol.

At age 20, Susan is in a detox and decides that she has had enough. She has had 14 admissions there in the last year. She stays at the detox until a bed becomes available in a treatment centre.

She struggles with her nightmares, and feelings of wanting to cut and use. She completes the program at the treatment centre and moves into a small, furnished room. She is able to remain abstinent for 3 months. She lives in poverty: her rent is \$400 and she struggles on the remaining \$125. She travels to food banks, her aftercare meetings, and she has even joined a self-help group. Having the money to keep her appointments is difficult ... the places are so far apart. She has a few slips and starts to feel like a failure. Susan returns to active use.

At age 21 Susan is pregnant by a date. She finds this out in her 5th month. She is smoking crack and drinking. She did not gain any weight. She hasn't had a period for over a year. Susan has mixed feelings. She can't connect with herself and she doesn't feel pregnant. She sees a doctor three times. She doesn't say that she is drinking or smoking crack. She is afraid that they will take her baby away. So she tries to cut back on her own.

Susan has a 6 lb. baby girl. She calls her Emma. She is able to rent a one-bedroom apartment in a low rent neighbourhood in Toronto. But she struggles to make ends meet on her welfare cheque and her child tax credit. Her rent is \$550 a month and this leaves her with \$550. It is expensive to buy diapers and to feed herself. The hydro bills, the telephone bills, the Laundromat, the baby's clothes, the bedding, the crib, the stroller. The money she has is soon gone.

Susan has high hopes for this baby, she wants the best for her, and she is filled with love. She is breastfeeding and want to spend time with Emma but she is so demanding. Emma cries a lot and Susan never gets a break. She doesn't know anyone she can trust. She feels anxious and alone. She starts to drink a little more each week. She tells herself that it helps her relax with Emma.

Time moves on.

Emma is a 2 year old and she lives with her mother in a one-bedroom apartment. Emma's mother drinks alcohol.

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