A clear glass filled with water sits on a light-colored wooden surface. The glass is partially filled, and the water level is visible. The background is a soft-focus wooden table.

WHY WOMEN LIKE YOU ARE BECOMING *addicted* TO



Pain medication's reputation as an easy stress reliever has given rise to a new kind of addict: the 30-something woman juggling too many demands. But too many pills can cause irreparable damage to your health, warns Susan Hayden

After a long, demanding day at court where she works as a translator, Danielle*, 38, is confronted at home by two niggling children and a husband who's dashing out the door to play squash. The au pair has used the last of the milk, and the chicken breasts she planned to cook for supper are past their sell-by date. Feeling exhausted and depleted, and with a tension headache gripping her temples, Danielle pours herself a large glass of white wine and throws back four Myprodols. Within 20 minutes, her headache is gone and she's pleasantly relaxed and better able to cope with the onslaught of dinner, homework and online banking that demand her attention before she is allowed to collapse into bed. But the next morning Danielle wakes up feeling edgy and irritable, and her tension headache has returned. With a full day ahead juggling work, meetings and the kids, she can't afford to feel unwell. She swallows four more Myprodols, then pops the pill bottle into her bag – just in case.

And this is how Danielle's addiction to pain medication starts. Ten months later, a skeletal, hollow-eyed version of the gorgeous, elegant, self-assured woman she once was checks into a Cape Town rehabilitation centre, where she undergoes a hellish detox programme to wean herself off the 30-plus over-the-counter pain pills

Withdrawal from pain medication is just as severe as withdrawal from heroin

she now swallows daily. Dressed in a Juicy Couture tracksuit and seated on a bench in the gentle, autumn sunshine, this once-attractive, successful career woman looks like a heroin addict. Danielle confesses that she is still shocked that this could have happened to her: "It seemed so un-major – I mean, they weren't drugs, they were just pain pills that I'd bought over the counter. I took them for the first few days of my period; if I had a tension headache or a bit of a hangover, they got me through the day. But then they stopped doing the trick, and my headaches were getting worse. So, two became four and four became six till I was taking eight or 10 at one go. I would get panicky if my pills were running out. By the time I started to realise this wasn't normal, it was too late – I was addicted."

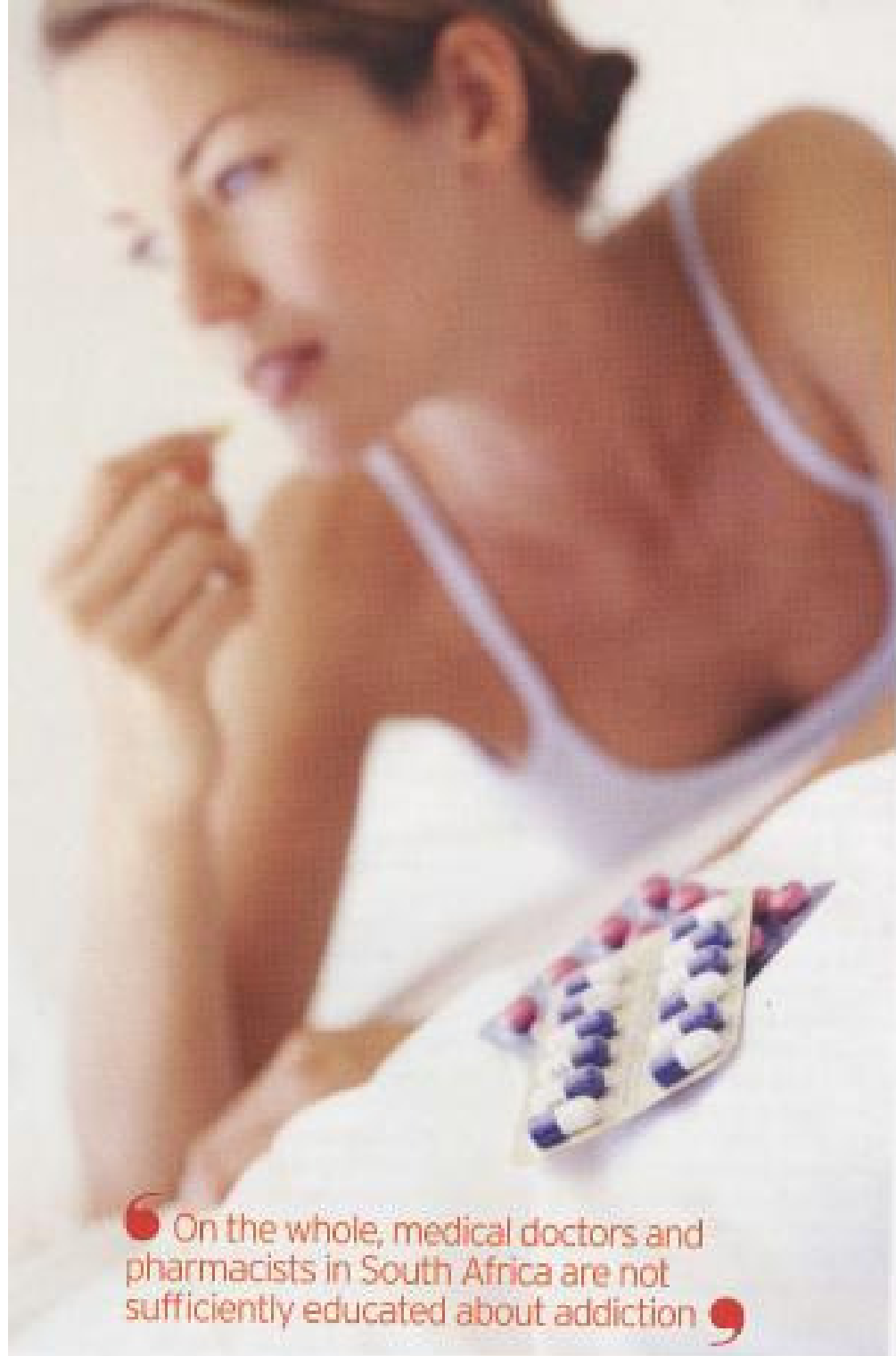
The abuse of both prescription and over-the-counter painkillers is on the increase in South Africa, and statistics show that higher earning women aged 30–40 are the biggest users.

Although statistics for people admitted to rehab for painkiller abuse remain low at less than five percent, according to the Medical Research Council of South Africa, this figure does not reflect its preponderance as many women successfully hide

their habit from even those closest to them. As Dr Elliot Shevel of the Headache Clinic in Johannesburg explains, "18 percent of women suffer from migraines, and 20 percent suffer regular tension headaches. Most self-medicate, so the problem is huge. Painkiller abuse is much more common among women than men for a number of reasons, a simple one being that women suffer three times as many migraines as men." But there are also complicated psycho-social and physiological factors that make women more vulnerable.

Toni Shakad, a social worker who worked in rehab centres for 11 years before going into private practice, says the reasons why women are more predisposed to abusing pain medication are complex, but one common example is the stay-at-home mom: "Because society dictates that women take on the role of primary child-minder, they are home a lot more than men. It's easier, practically, for them to abuse medication without it being noticed. While being a stay-at-home mom is still not regarded as a 'real' job, anyone who has cared for young children will testify how stressful, and demanding this role can be. Often women don't know how to express their frustration, and are





“On the whole, medical doctors and pharmacists in South Africa are not sufficiently educated about addiction.”

met with criticism if they don't relish every aspect of motherhood. Lacking the means to elicit support, taking a couple of pills to get themselves through the day is tempting.”

Says Carry Bekker of Stepping Stones Addiction Centre in Kommetjie, Cape Town: “It's very common for women in their late 30s to 40s to pop headache pills. Life is stressful; often they are juggling work, motherhood and running their homes, with huge pressure to perform all these

tasks well. The stress takes its toll on the body, and tension headaches and back and neck pain are often a consequence. Rather than deal with the cause of the pain, we reach for medication. What many people don't realise is that even the pain pills purchased over-the-counter contain a substance called codeine that is an opiate, mimicking heroin, and that it can be highly addictive when taken over a period of time. People are shocked to discover that withdrawal

from pain medication is just as severe as withdrawal from heroin.”

Paul Kruger of Narconon South Africa explains: “What many users discover is that pain pills are also an effective means of numbing emotional pain and blunting reality. Opiates numb the central nervous system, and the calm, ‘spacey’ sensation they evoke can be a welcome relief from anxiety and stress. Evidence also suggests that a woman's endocrine system has an effect on the way the pills work, physiologically – that the uptake may be different for women than it is for men, making women increasingly vulnerable to the cycle of abuse.”

Melanie*, 36, a freelance copywriter who is married to a tennis coach and has a two-year-old daughter, admits she's currently wrestling with a “tendency” to take two paracetamol with two ibuprofen in a little painkiller “cocktail”. “Being at home with our daughter and trying to work at the same time really stresses me out some days. I go to the supermarket and if the cashier is taking too long, I have to resist the urge to yell at her. When I take my ‘cocktail’, I feel calm and relaxed, it's really effective and it makes me happy.”

We live in a pill-popping society – many women take anti-depressants, anti-anxiety medication and sleeping pills on a regular basis. The leap from taking a tablet to relieve anxiety to taking a cocktail of painkillers to achieve the same effect isn't a very big one, but the problem with painkillers is that tolerance increases very quickly. In many European countries there is strict governmental control over the sale of drugs but in SA this level of control is lacking, which aids the risk of abuse.

“In South Africa, people doctor-hop and pharmacy-hop with great ease and success. There are pharmacists who will dispense medication without a prescription, even when they know the patient in question has a problem,” says Shaked. “On the whole,

local medical doctors and pharmacists are not sufficiently educated about addiction. Usually, painkillers are taken initially for a good reason – the patient has post-operative pain or an acute condition for which they require pain relief. They take them in good faith without understanding the risks. The pain goes, but they continue taking the drugs because they've become addicted without knowing it. Withdrawal is unpleasant; it is easier to get a repeat prescription from their doctor, or find a pharmacist who will give them the pills without asking any questions."

Many women who self-medicate with painkillers are quick to swallow tablets without considering the effects they have on the body. "Painkillers, like all medication, have side effects. With the overuse of headache tablets, a special condition occurs known as 'medication overuse headache' (MOH). MOH is a problem that occurs in headache sufferers who have to take painkillers on a regular basis, and it results in a patient's headaches becoming more frequent and more severe. Because of this, the patient increases the dosage and takes drugs more often until a vicious cycle begins. This can happen with any painkillers, but is more likely to occur when the medication contains more than one drug, and especially if it contains caffeine or codeine. The worst culprit is a substance called ergotamine that's sometimes included in the 'migraine kits', which are com-

monly available from pharmacies," says Dr Shevel.

There's a difference between admitting to and accepting the problem. "Admitting to it means there is awareness, but not necessarily a willingness to change behaviour. Acceptance of the problem is what is required in order for the next step to be taken. Signs that you, or somebody you know, have a problem include preoccupation with the substance in question, using it over a longer period of time than is normal or required, using more than the recommended dose, social isolation and spending excessive amounts of money on obtaining the drugs," explains Shaked. The problem with painkiller abuse is that it is relatively cheap, so you can afford to purchase it in large amounts.

In our quick-fix world, we've become accustomed to addressing symptoms rather than causes. While self-medicating might feel like a good temporary solution to stress, the effects of painkiller abuse are serious, and getting into that downward spiral of addiction can happen very quickly.

A much more effective solution is taking a good, hard look at your life, removing what stressors you can and finding some practical solutions in the form of better time management and eliciting extra help. As many women have discovered, the distance is very short between throwing back a few pills to "ease the pain" and dealing with the serious pain of addiction and withdrawal. ❊

*Not her real name

How to stop the cycle of abuse

1. Understand that you are not in control, and can't do this alone.
2. Go back to the GP who prescribed the pills in the first place and explain what has happened. She will know your history, and advise you on the next step. If necessary, you will be referred to a rehabilitation centre.
3. Elicit the help and support of friends and family by explaining the situation and asking for practical help (for example with your children or the running of the household).
4. Talk to a professional; there are reasons why you started abusing painkillers in the first place.

What painkillers do to your body

All medication has side effects, and painkillers are no exception. Taken in high doses over a long period of time, painkillers can:

- ▶ cause irreversible liver damage;
- ▶ cause stomach ulcers and internal bleeding;
- ▶ result in extreme mood swings with side-effects of tension and depression;
- ▶ affect mental awareness, causing hallucinations, memory-loss, confusion, dizziness and light-headedness, while withdrawal results in restlessness, muscle or bone pain and insomnia;
- ▶ damage the heart;
- ▶ depress the central nervous system, which controls the whole body, slowing reflexes and affecting blood flow, muscle contractions and the release of hormones.

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