

Problematic Substance Use in Pregnancy: Delia's Story

Delia is a 22-year-old who has been on methadone since the birth of her last child. She is from a 2nd generation Puerto Rican family and, although she speaks some "Spanglish", English is her preferred language.

She was skipping school, acting out and became pregnant at 16. Her mother and step-father threw her out. She had multiple partners, beginning with her teenage boyfriend who initiated her into heroin use, followed by several other partners who were also involved in buying and using drugs. She lived with her partners or on the street, shoplifting or hooking in order to pay for her habit.

What issues in Delia's life may have contributed to her use of substances?

In her first pregnancy, Delia went to the hospital in labour with Angela, her long and steady friend, who was also dealing with a SUD. The hospital staff refused to allow Angela to support Delia during labour because she was not family. When Delia complained of ongoing severe pain even after a shot of narcotic analgesic, one staff suggested she was drug-seeking and would not call for further orders. The delivery was uneventful and the baby was taken to the NICU.

During labor Delia tested positive for marijuana, cocaine, and heroin, mandating the involvement of social services. Delia did not have a chance to hold the baby, and once stabilized in the NICU, the baby was taken into custody by child protection services. Little was done by the staff to ease Delia's sense of loss. No one inquired if Delia was safe on her discharge from the hospital.

What went wrong in Delia's first pregnancy?

What barriers to care did she experience?

Delia was soon back on the streets staying with friends or living in derelict buildings and, within 10 months, she was pregnant again at age 18. She made attempts to change her life and even went to an out-patient rehab centre, but found the program too male-dominated and she felt intimidated to speak up at meetings. She could not stay clean. During this pregnancy, Delia spent 4 months in the regional detention center for shoplifting.

While in prison, she was treated with methadone, but was also able to “score” cocaine and marijuana through friends. This pregnancy ended with her second child also taken into custody because of her chaotic lifestyle and ongoing addiction to heroin. She had no on-going contact with the children and was given no information about their well-being or whereabouts.

What issues contributed to Delia’s becoming pregnant again and continued use of substances?

After the 2nd pregnancy, motivated by support from Angela and other non-using friends, Delia went through a 28-day in-patient rehab program and was successfully initiated on methadone maintenance therapy.

Delia made a strong connection with the social worker in the program and revealed to her the details of her past history of sexual assault by her step-father during adolescence.

What circumstances changed to allow Delia to become clean?

Delia's revelation to the social worker of her childhood sexual abuse facilitated a deeper connection than she had previously ever made with a clinician, and she was able to voice her anger, without relapsing.

She found a part-time job as a cashier at a grocery store and entered into a stable relationship with a new partner, Paco, a welder. Paco, also a former drug user, has been on methadone for the last 2 years. They met at Narcotics Anonymous meetings and have tried to support each other in staying clean.

During Delia's third pregnancy and delivery, she was supported emotionally and financially by Paco, who was very involved as a new father. His presence at prenatal appointments and during labour impressed the staff who perceived Delia differently, and provided more compassionate care. Under close surveillance by Social Services, she and Paco were allowed to take home her third baby, Jeromey.

What contributed to Delia finally begin to change her life around?
