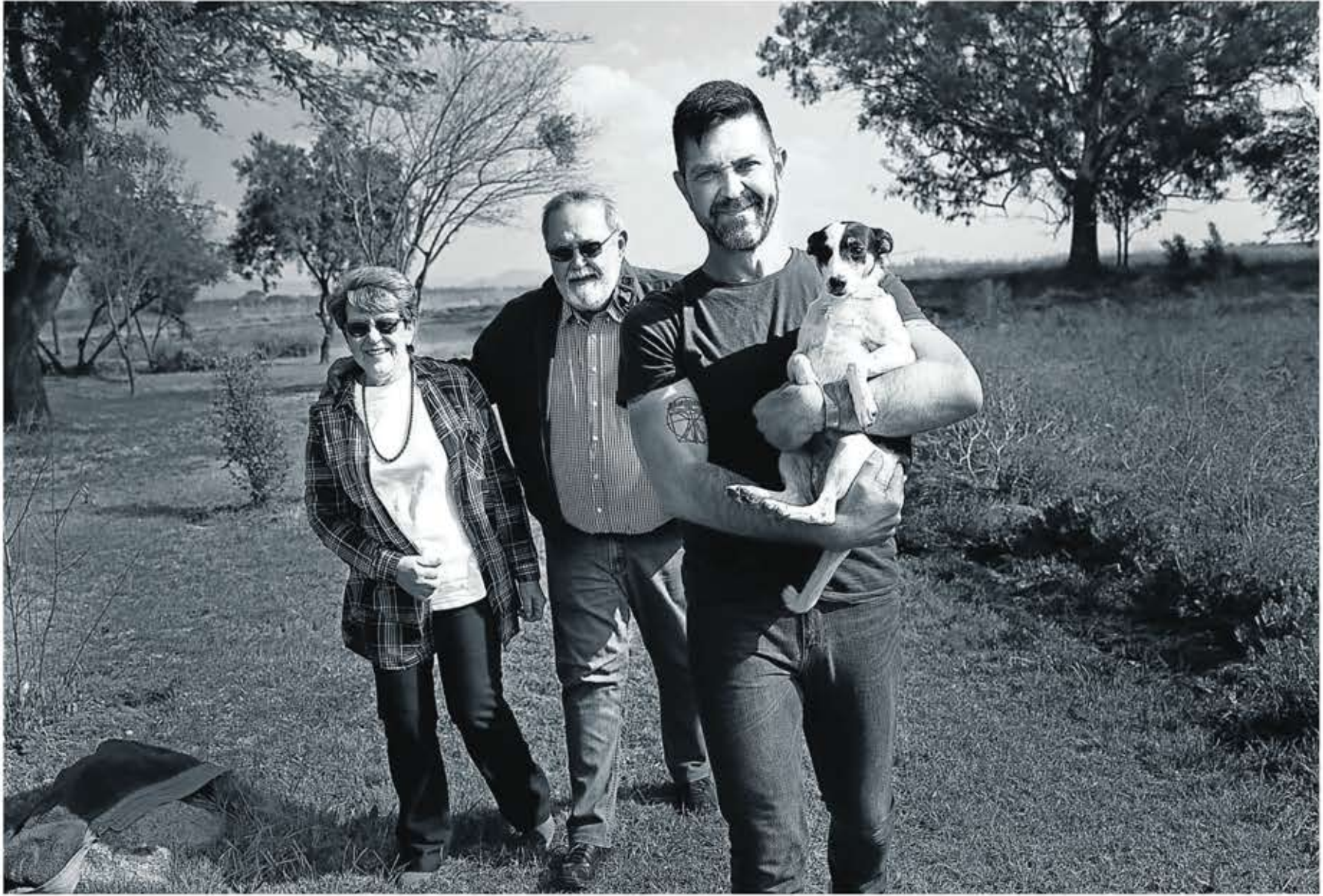


# LOST & FOUND

A plant native to Gabon long used for healing and in traditional initiation ceremonies helps trauma victims and drug addicts come to terms with their demons. By Ufrieda Ho



Johann Hattingh, with dog Kodak and parents Dirk and Anne, in Brits. Picture: Alon Skuy

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The heavens didn't come crashing down on Johann Hattingh's head, more like the blue emptied out of the former photojournalist's sky little by little and left in its place a grey haze. And the grey grew steely with rage and melancholy, guilt and despair.

Hattingh worked on South African newspapers and for the UN, finding angles and bending light with a camera even as he stepped over bodies at crime scenes and cheated death by near misses while embedded with the US military in Iraq.

In 2007 he was diagnosed with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), but "I felt like I was born to this job", he says of how easily he ignored the root of his mental illness.

In 2012 he says "the industry spat me out". His couldn't pick up a camera again, his relationship ended and he was forced to move in with his parents in Brits in the North West. He didn't emerge from his cottage for days at a time as the dark hells of remembering and regret turned in pursuit, chasing him to the edge of suicide.

Today Hattingh says it was ibogaine treatment that saved him. Ibogaine is a psychoactive alkaloid derived from the bark of a plant called iboga, native to Gabon. Hattingh had tried several types of treatments and therapists over the years with little success and had heard about ibogaine four years earlier but couldn't afford the treatment.

There's also scant clinical data on ibogaine

*It's not for everyone, but patients call it 'a lifetime of therapy in a night' and a 'near miracle'*

ANSO TALJAARD  
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST



The Iboga fruit and leaves.  
Illustration: Keith Tamkei

and lingering concerns and controversies over its safety. Even though the plant is non-addictive it is toxic in high levels and can cause heart failure. There's also a blurred legal and regulatory framework in which treatment facilities operate. In countries like the US ibogaine is banned outright.

By chance Hattingh found the Magalies Ibogaine Wellness Centre in January. "My dad worked on a labour law issue for them, so we met with the clinical psychologist and I remember just crying my eyes out," says Hattingh.

"It was a like a nuclear bomb was dropped on my head," he says of taking the first dose of ibogaine in a five-day-long supervised treatment. It started a 24-hour trance of visions, looping through emotions and brutal confrontation of Hattingh's truths and lies. This was followed by a "grey day" of physical weakness and purging. Next came reflection, but with clarity and compassion, not judgment and guilt, and his treatment ended with re-integration therapy, focusing on coping mechanisms for everyday life.

"It was profound; I feel connected now to myself and everyone around me; I can see beauty in the world again and I have a sense of purpose," says Hattingh, seven months after his treatment. He continues to microdose intermittently - using a sub-perceptual amount of the iboga root for particularly down days. He's also become an unapologetic ibogaine treatment evangelist and plans to give talks to help others process trauma and he volunteers at the wellness centre.

Clinical psychologist Anso Taljaard started the centre in 2013. Taljaard says the iboga plant has long been used in Gabon as a healing plant and in traditional initiation ceremonies. It hasn't had significant uptake in the West because it's never been a club drug and big pharma hasn't seen commoditising potential in a maintenance drug that is used once or maybe twice by a patient and is microdosed intermittently.

"Since 2013 we've had about 1,400 patients, with a relapse rate of about 25%," she says. Those seeking a psycho-spiritual experience with ibogaine also check in to the centre.

Taljaard says meticulous screening and assessment of patients are essential, so is having an on-site doctor, nursing staff, counselling and integration therapy. Her centre is in the process of being registered, which Taljaard says will introduce minimum-standard guidelines for all facilities and reduce costs through medical aid coverage.

"Ibogaine is not a magic bullet, it's not for everyone, but patients call it 'a lifetime of therapy in a night' and a 'near miracle'," says Taljaard.

She plays back voice messages on her phone from former patients who arrived with trauma, depression, anxiety and substance abuse. They speak about a deeper understanding and acceptance of things just as they are, worrying less and loving themselves more. Others speak about being able to "defrag" or "reset" their lives.



Programme director Anso Taljaard started the Magalies Ibogaine Wellness Centre in 2013. Picture: Alon Skuy

Kerryn Matthews (Elske), a therapist at the centre, says this “resetting” is the beauty of ibogaine. “Psychoactive drugs like ibogaine allow us to alter our default neural mode that can be full of negative programming, trauma and anxiety. Ibogaine can actually fix parts of our brain through processes called neural regeneration and neural plasticity; it gives us new chemical pathways and new perspectives to create new realities.”

She adds that ibogaine’s dissociative power makes visions lucid while being experienced with objective distance.

Izelle Pitman underwent treatment at the Magalies Wellness Centre in April. Pitman had buried trauma from abuse she endured till she was 12 years old. Then in 2016, when she was expecting her first child, the emotions came flooding back.

Seeing a psychologist weekly and being prescribed drugs didn’t work and when her baby was born, severe post-partum depression set in. Ten years earlier she had been in rehab for alcohol, cat (Methcathinone) and cocaine abuse.

“The basics like taking a shower were impossible. I would clench my jaw all day and

I was just sad. I had a beautiful baby, a wonderful husband and a gorgeous home but I felt like I wasn’t good enough,” she says.

Ibogaine treatment turned out to be the alternative she needed, even though she experienced apocalyptic, warlike visions and the purging wiped her out.

“It was hard, but by the third day my head felt lighter, like the files full of negative thoughts were cleaned out and I could start again,” she says.

Pitman is expecting a second child and says: “Things haven’t been 100% since my treatment; some days are really tough. The point, though, is I’m not depressed about it anymore. I can own my story, I feel connected and I know what I need to do to cope better.”

“Brian (identity withheld) had his ibogaine treatment in 2014 with a practitioner in Cape Town. Brian’s tik (Crystal Methamphetamine) addiction took over his life in a matter of months, destroying his relationships and bringing out his most destructive nature. When he was eventually “ready to not die” he started on microdoses of ibogaine for six weeks before his supervised treatment.

“I would call it an experience, not a trip. It



Dried roots and bark of the iboga plant sourced from Gabon. Picture: YouTube.com



Photojournalist Johann Hattingh  
Picture: supplied

## Plant that helps in eternal search for happiness



Illustration of the iboga plant Pic: 123rf.com/iamnee

Clinical psychologist Jennie Ashwal puts the resurgence of psychedelic drugs and the trend of microdosing on natural healing plants down to humans’ eternal questing. “People are always searching for a richer meaning to life and for psychological wellbeing and good health. The likes of ibogaine and psilocybin (magic mushrooms, which are illegal in SA) are showing huge potential and there’s an allure to using ancient healing plants combined with modern methods like microdosing.”

Ashwal says research is showing that psychoactive plants have positive effects on serotonin and dopamine – the feel-good chemicals in the brain.

“More than a pseudo-spiritual effect, ibogaine and psilocybin can build and change the brain chemically. They appear to have long-term effects and unlike club drugs there isn’t the after-effect of depleting feel-good chemicals. Ibogaine also appears to be able to tap into early traumas quicker,” she says.

Her caution is to do the homework in researching distributors, medical professionals and treatment facilities. As she says, “Ibogaine is not play-play; it’s not for fun.”

Conventional therapy has its place, as does supervised ibogaine treatment and microdosing in a world where people need to make sense of incessant rushing, isolation and empty goals, she says.

“We need more connection, rapport and love. We need to know that anger, sadness and pain are also healthy feelings and that getting through bad days is how we learn to build resilience and coping skills.”

*‘It was a like a nuclear bomb was dropped on my head’*

JOHANN HATTINGH  
PHOTOJOURNALIST

was insane. I remember a presence I call an iboga god sitting on me and I couldn’t move. Everything slowed down and he showed all the parts of me that needed fixing and told me I had to fix it. I was also shown stuff not worth fixing or stuff I would never be able to fix and told to just throw these away,” says Brian.

Five years on Brian has successfully changed his career to be involved in lifesaving, as he had wanted to do before his drugging.

“Your craving for the drugs just goes, I eventually even quit smoking. But ibogaine treatment is hard work – it can kill you. I also had to break from the old relationships that took me to drugs in the first place,” he says.

For Hattingh, meanwhile, his next chapter is just beginning. On the stoep at his parents’ home he sits down to coffee with them and his dog, Kodak. It’s something that hasn’t happened for years. Hattingh’s mother, Anne, talks about her own ibogaine treatment that she underwent this autumn after watching her son’s transformation. At 70, her victory has been coming off years of anti-depressant medication and setting down anxieties and tiptoeing around others.

She says she’s found her voice – she also found her son again.