



Thokozile the meerkat

Authors: *Else Röhrs and Edith Kriel*

Artwork: *Angelica Eftyehis*

Theme: *Substance abuse*

Appropriate age group: *All age groups*



Thokozile was a happy meerkat, always cheerful and with an easy smile. (His name suited him perfectly because it means happiness in isiZulu, one of the languages of South Africa.) Thokozile – his friends called him Thoko for short – loved playing with the other teenage meerkats. He lived with his family and the rest of his troop in a hot, sandy, desert-like area. During the day they looked for food and at night they slept in their underground tunnels. Any time they sensed danger they could disappear into their tunnels as quick as a flash.

One day a strange meerkat came to visit the troop. At first they chased him away but he kept coming back. He asked the elders if he could stay because he'd been chased away from the other troops. The elders had a meeting. They didn't really like the new meerkat but they felt sorry for him. They let him join the troop but right from the beginning he caused trouble. That's how he got the name Bengu, short for Skebengu, which means crook in isiZulu.

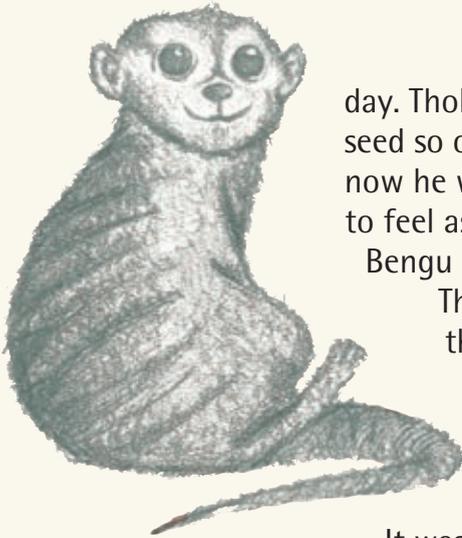
Bengu spent most of his time hanging around with the teenage meerkats. One day, while the troop were out in the veld looking for food, Bengu had a quiet conversation with the three youngest teenagers, Thoko and two of his friends. Bengu ended up saying: 'You'll get the most delicious things to eat if you come with me – it's not too far, just out of sight of the grownups and the rest of the troop.' Of course, the three teenagers were interested and they went along with Bengu and were surprised when he stopped at an ordinary-looking bush and scratched around to find what he'd hidden underneath it.

The three young meerkats couldn't wait to see the delicious food Bengu had promised them. They were confused and disappointed when he offered them seeds. When Thoko said: "We're hungry but we don't like eating seeds", Bengu insisted: "These seeds you really must eat – they'll make you feel SO GOOD!" In the end he persuaded two of the teenagers to eat the seeds but Thoko refused.

Thoko could see his two friends changing after they ate the seeds. They started giggling and talking loudly and they acted as if the world belonged to them. They walked away from the bush onto the open veld. When Thoko shouted, "Watch out – you're an easy target for an eagle", they just laughed. Luckily there were no eagles around so they got home safely. Thoko went to play with the other young ones but the two friends went straight into their tunnels and passed out.

Bengu had made them promise not to tell anyone about the seeds but somehow the news spread among the young meerkats. Every morning, more of the young ones joined Bengu on the trip. There were different reactions to the seeds – some of the young meerkats became very aggressive, others laughed a lot, some fell asleep, others ran around at top speed for hours. But they all became careless and took risks. One youngster who went to sleep in the open veld was never seen again, after an eagle spotted him.

Soon Thoko's friends became addicted to the seeds – they had to have a seed every single



day. Thoko was always being teased because he'd never even tasted a seed so one day he decided to try one. All the others clapped because now he was one of them. At first Thoko felt awful but soon he began to feel as if he was drifting on a cloud without a worry in the world.

Bengu smiled to himself. His plan was working.

The elders tried to figure out what was happening. They saw now the young meerkats disappeared for a while and then came back and slept most of the day. The youngsters no longer went out looking for food so they were getting very thin. They weren't looking after themselves, their families or their sleeping burrows.

It was all going according to Bengu's plan. Every morning the young meerkats waited anxiously to get their free fix for the day. But one day morning Bengu announced: "From now on I expect six beetles in exchange for a seed. Come back tomorrow with the beetles." The addicts were desperate. They begged and shouted and threatened but Bengu just smiled.

Suddenly, an eagle swooped down and caught Thoko and started to fly off with him. Thoko was stronger than usual because he hadn't had his seed that morning so he managed to free himself from the eagle's strong talons. He landed on the ground with a very hard bump, bruised and grazed but alive. Meanwhile the other teenagers ran back to their burrows to hide from the eagle. They didn't realise that Thoko had survived.

Thoko called the elders together. The other teenagers were all hiding in their burrows. Thoko told the elders about the seeds that Bengu kept hidden under the bush. He told them of how Bengu had encouraged them to eat the seeds, and how they had become addicted to them, and now needed them every day. He also explained about how the seeds made them feel good at first, but how they behaved strangely after taking them.

The elders dragged Bengu out of the burrow. They began to shout at him, bite him with their sharp teeth and others even scratched him. They told Bengu to leave and never come back. Bengu ran real fast and was never seen again. The elders went to the bush where Bengu had hidden the seeds. They collected them and threw them into a deep snake hole.

The elders called all the teenage meerkats. They explained that the seeds that Bengu had given them were addictive and very dangerous to their bodies, minds and hearts. They were lucky that Thoko had told them about Bengu, and they had chased him away. It would take time for the young meerkats to get used to living without the seeds, and they might feel sick until the effect of the seeds was out of their systems, before things would go back to normal again for the troop.

Some time later, when passing by one could see that the troop was happy again, and all the youngsters were playing, having a good time.



Possible discussion points:

Discuss the various types of addiction.

What impact does addiction have on children and their families?

What impact does addiction have in your community?