

An Indomitable Spirit

I had just joined a major hospital and was starting on suicide counselling when Halim was referred to me. He was single and staying with one of his brothers who was mentally challenged. An earnest man and fiercely independent, Halim was earning a modest income and had little resources.

Halim's world took a major turn after being knocked down by a trailer. He was admitted to the hospital for traumatic injuries, including serious fractures to his right arm. In addition, he had to have both legs amputated. His injuries rendered him permanently wheelchair-bound and he required assistance in his daily activities.

Initially I was at a loss for words. As a Medical Social Worker (MSW), what could I possibly say to Halim to make him feel better? In my heart, I knew that no amount of empathy could compensate for the loss that he had suffered. As I stood beside him, I had to mentally tell myself that in times like this, lending a listening ear would be the least I could do for him.

Halim started to grieve for his loss and embark on his journey of recovery, a process that was slow and exhausting. There were many other difficulties and hurdles to overcome as well. Being the one person who was equipped with the knowledge of social and community resources, I found myself constantly updating and liaising with Halim's siblings, so as to get them more involved in his care.

As trained social workers, we are attuned to see the situation from a family-centred perspective. The family would need emotional support to cope with this tragic accident as well as information and direction on how to care for their brother. Throughout his prolonged

hospitalization, I proactively discussed with Halim and his family the available options in terms of community resources, procedures on insurance claims, and financial assistance schemes. I also reminded them that they would have to look after themselves while looking after their sibling.

Worries about finances were weighing heavily on Halim's mind, as he required long-term hospitalization and vacuum therapy treatment for his wounds and the latter was not cheap. Fortunately, we managed to place him on a goodwill programme offered by the vendor. In order to help relieve his financial burden, I spoke to his employers to advocate for the filing of a Workmen's Compensation claim as Halim had sustained the injuries during work hours. This would enable Halim to receive insurance coverage for his hospitalization and medical expenses.

Halim's social circumstances were presented to the medical team with a recommendation for his rehabilitation in the hospital despite the tight bed situation. Soon Halim was ready for discharge. Initially, the plan was for him to be admitted to a home for the disabled, as his siblings felt they could not cope with his care at home. I was inclined to agree with them. During one of our sessions, as I was exploring care options with him, Halim kept silent for a long while and then said, "I want to go home..."

In view of his disability, I was concerned and had my doubts about his abilities to cope at home without a caregiver. Halim was referred to the occupational therapist. In no time, he was able to demonstrate his functional abilities, moving freely on the wheelchair and transferring from the wheelchair to the bed by himself.

I was amazed by Halim's tenacity and faith. Despite having gone through a tragedy, he chose to channel his energy towards his recovery. He was awe-inspiring, with a "can-do" attitude during the daily rehabilitation sessions.

Subsequently, arrangements were made to purchase a commode and a lightweight wheelchair for Halim to prepare him for home. Prior to discharge, further contact was made with one of his relatives who planned to stay with him. This was to ensure that someone would be around to assist Halim minimally in his daily activities. Since that time, Halim has been coping well at home and leading a relatively independent life. He even shared with me his plans to set up a stall with the help of his older sibling!

Many lessons were learned in the course of working with Halim and his family. More importantly, Halim had shown me that many possibilities could be unlocked with a strong fortitude. He worked against great odds to regain his independence and chose to live his life with such mettle. I am glad to have met Halim and I am thankful to him for showing me the value of hope, faith and perseverance when faced with adversity.

In this story, the MSW uses the strengths-based approach, which looks at strength-building rather than flaw fixing or deficiency focusing. This approach is person-centred and it places more control and direction in the hands of the patient to navigate their own life experiences. The MSW looks for inherent strengths like resilience, perseverance and motivation as a starting point for growth and change. The MSW's strengths-based intervention clearly demonstrates that when individuals are faced with adversities like illnesses and disabilities, they have the innate potential to survive, recover and possibly thrive. When one thrives, the individual functions at a higher level. In this manner, he or she is able to cultivate new skills that were not present before the adverse event, gain a new sense of confidence, strengthen supportive relationships and acquire an evolved philosophy of life with new priorities and directions.