

Masters of the Universe

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

My patient sat across from me the other day and her eyes were brimming with tears. Her husband had left the house, giving her some puzzling and heart-breaking excuses about “finding himself” and that he did not know when he would be back. He did try to reassure her that he still loved her but needed to go away for a while. Needless to say, I reached out for the box of tissues that I keep on my table for such occasions and placed it in front of her.

In my years of practice, I have seen this phenomenon again and again. I

have finally figured it out and have given it a moniker. I call it the “Masters of the Universe” syndrome. Before your mind propels you back to the early eighties, there is indeed a line of toys manufactured by Mattel and an accompanying animated series called *He Man and the Masters of the Universe*. There is also the reference made in a novel by Tom Wolfe, entitled *Bonfire of the Vanities* where the principal character, Sherman McCoy, was a bond trader at Salomon Brothers. The Wall Street traders regarded themselves as “Masters of the Universe” because of their ability to move markets and make obscene amounts of money. The hubris

of the traders strikes a chord within us today in the aftermath of the Lehman Brothers’ collapse of September 2008 and the financial crisis that followed.

But I digress and bring us back to that afternoon when I started to explain the phenomenon to my patient. I told her that we men are brought up from young and programmed by society to be “warriors”. We have our body armour, our weapons and we go to war every day. We fight and compete for all things in school, in sports, in love, and from careers to business to all manner of trophies linked to one’s status.

However at the height of our prowess, it suddenly dawns upon us

that there is a hole in our body armour. At that instance we feel a sense of intense vulnerability and come face to face with our greatest enemy: Death himself. This confrontation with mortality does not just appear out of the blue. This is usually brought on by a few triggering events, including the passing of a close friend, walking away intact from a car wreck or a close brush with death. It might also be due to a setback in career or finances from losing a job, getting demoted or losing a sizeable amount in the capital markets. Yet other triggers include diagnosis of a disease like hypertension, diabetes or coronary artery disease.

This newly-found sense of vulnerability creates a spectrum of responses. I have seen the typical reactions of having a mistress, multiple affairs and of course; desertion and divorce. Sadly this disastrous course is a costly price borne by the wife and children. Other responses include buying a fast car, running the Standard Chartered marathon or climbing a mountain; one of my patients went to a remote valley in the Himalayas and stayed there for three weeks to re-think the purpose of his life!

My patient's eyes stopped tearing and there was a gleam of understanding that replaced her tears. She started asking me questions, "Isn't that a mid-life crisis? What about the possibility of affairs? How can I forgive him?" I told her I had no answers for all her questions. At best my theory is just that, and there may be many who disagree with me and brand all this as psycho-babble. I have merely tried to formulate an idea to explain the observed phenomena.

But I did tell her there were some interesting observations that I had gathered. I noticed that the more successful the man was, the harder such

a crisis would be for him. Some very successful career women exhibited such a syndrome as well. I also observed that having a faith helped to ameliorate the situation. As for orthopedic injuries like meniscal tears, ruptured cruciates, fractures and dislocations, these were proudly exhibited as battle wounds and scars, especially when they were derived from contact sports. These injuries were not triggers indicating mortality but rather, were similar to medals of honour that were brought out, worn and displayed on special occasions.

As for the solution to such a syndrome, I would usually tell the wife or companion that this is a very vulnerable time for the other half, and she should really take care and support him through this difficult transition. For most, the transition ends with their coming to terms and acceptance of their mortality. For others the crisis never ends and resurfaces from time to time.

For myself, I have been through this passage; it was triggered by a death of a good friend and hopefully I have come to terms with my mortality. As an aside, I happened to look at life tables the other day and noted that if one were 65 years old today, males would have a life expectancy of 78 years and females would have an expectancy of 84 years. To me, this is longevity and I realised that one needs to prepare for such an increased life span. We need to make sure that we reduce our weight, build muscle and core stability for the long haul. We also need to have a circle of friends, especially those who are much younger than ourselves.

Other important aspects include social activities that one can participate in like ballroom dancing, golf, and even tennis.

With increased life expectancy, chronic diseases will be a huge burden

and arteriosclerosis inevitable. I am presently thinking of whether to take a statin at some point so I will not be stroked out, moribund or a cardiac cripple. I intend to have a good quality of life for as long as possible, then do a quick exit stage left so as not to burden my family or society.

In the meantime, let us understand that we are as vulnerable to these phenomena as our patients; let us not be paralysed by these morbid thoughts but instead focus on the issues at hand. We have our patients who need us, our children to bring up and hopefully impart the right values to, our communities to contribute to, and our social networks and committees that depend on us. Above all we still need to make our mark, leave a legacy and continue to look after those who have trusted us with their lives. **SMA**



Dr Chong is the President of the 50th SMA Council. He has been in private practice since 1993 and has seen his fair share of the human condition. He pines for a good pinot noir, loves the FT Weekend and of course, wishes for world peace...