

Helplessness

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

I was startled awake early one Saturday morning. There had been a massive screech of brakes followed by a huge crash. The clincher was the sound of the horn that went on for a long time. I got out of bed and looked out the window, but could not see the accident that had occurred a little further up the road.

I had previously lived near a winding road for a decade and had been conditioned to respond to the sound of a bad accident. I made my way out of my house and walked up the road. There was a light lorry that had smashed into the wall of my neighbour's house and the wall had collapsed on the crushed cabin. There was a girl at the scene calling the police on her mobile. I later found out that she was a staff nurse on her way to work at Singapore General Hospital for the morning shift. The driver was pinned by the crushed cabin and in a bad shape. The dashboard had caved in and trapped the lower half of his body. But he was conscious, with bleeding from facial wounds caused by broken glass.

I quickly surveyed the scene and could see his right thigh was twice its usual size. I was instantly worried about a pelvic fracture, scrotal bleeding and ruptured viscus, but reassured him. Unfortunately, I did not have an IV drip set at home and therefore could not do anything for him. I feared that he would exsanguinate on us.

The staff nurse and I felt totally helpless as we did not have anything on hand but our presence and our assurance for the hapless victim. We waited for an agonising ten minutes before the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) finally arrived in full force, as the staff nurse had been very clear in her call to the police. To the SCDF's credit, they arrived with a full complement of two paramedic outriders, a Red Rhino, an ambulance and a fire engine. They proceeded to insert an IV drip into the victim and started cutting away at the wreckage. After 20 minutes, they managed to extricate him and rushed him to the hospital.

I found out the next day that he had perished five hours later, with no life insurance and three young children aged from six to 13. He might have fallen asleep at the wheel, as he drove a taxi in the day and delivered fish at night.

What disturbed me was the sense of helplessness that I felt as I waited for help to arrive. We have often experienced this feeling in our work. We often listen to our patients as they describe situations in their lives, and run through a gamut of emotions from being aghast to empathy to a sense of helplessness, because we could not help them other than lending a listening ear or giving suggestions. Sometimes patients or their families have no resources to tap on, or have exhausted all their monies and goodwill.

I had a patient who underwent a long acrimonious divorce. She was driven to such desperation as she had been a dependent for a long time, and her ex-husband was always making her life miserable in all kinds of ways, from financial to emotional blackmail. She did tell me that her divorce lawyer and I were probably her pillars of strength throughout the whole process. In all honesty, I had considered myself rather helpless when

she told me about all the trials and tribulations she was undergoing.

I understand that there is such a thing called learned helplessness. For example, during experiments, animals are subjected to painful stimuli repeatedly but are not allowed to escape. They eventually stop trying to escape the pain and become so helpless that even when presented with an avenue of escape, could not do so.

In humans, learned helplessness very often leads straight into poor self esteem and depressive or even suicidal thoughts. Examples of such abound in child and marital abuse, disruptive behaviour by bosses at work, prisoners of war and hostage victims.

I have even come across helplessness in medical students, junior doctors and senior doctors both in public and private sectors.

In a sense, some of the students or doctors feel trapped in their situations. They feel overwhelmed by their work environments and their immediate superiors who may be coming down hard on them. Some of them say that they feel unappreciated and worry about their financial statuses and whether they can afford a home and a car in view of the escalating asset prices and COEs. They compare themselves with other professionals, not just in Singapore, but also from other first world nations like Australia, Hong Kong and the UK.

The doctors in private practice also feel overwhelmed by escalating rentals and prices of medical units, pressure by demanding and difficult patients, competition from younger doctors, lawsuits and enquiries by the Singapore Medical Council. It seems like the profession is under siege at the moment, with overcharging, liposuction deaths, inappropriate photographs, and falsification of consent forms, just to mention a few incidents that are currently in the headlines.

Blaming the government, the hospital administrators, the conglomerates or the Ministry of Health, is yet another of the symptoms of learned helplessness.

Frankly, I do not have the panacea to our woes. I do know that in the midst of all this pressure on an individual doctor, we must not end up in learned helplessness. Rather, we must focus on those areas where we have some control and influence. Forming helping relationships and alliances with fellow professionals is important. Moving from a pessimistic perspective of the world where "things are always like that", blaming oneself or setting oneself up to fail, to a more optimistic view is paramount.

Do rethink your basics: focusing on your family, talking to your friends, taking a holiday, getting into a fitness routine, relooking your dietary habits, giving up smoking and cutting back your tipples, are all important things you can do to improve your circumstances. I am sure with your drive, determination, sense of achievement and tenacity, you will be able to do so. **SMA**



Dr Chong is the President of the 52nd 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...