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The Day of Compassion

"Resolve to be tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant with the weak and wrong. Sometime in your life, you will have been all of these."

—Gautama Buddha

I came across this quote awhile ago, but I never really fully absorbed the meaning of it until I began seeing the suffering of others in daily life. I am an ordinary female doctor who wished to major in psychology for my undergraduate degree; however, I ended up going to medical school despite my passion for understanding human behaviour. To continue learning about psychology, I spent many summer holidays reading about it, and now I'm taking this online course!

On my Day of Compassion, I felt obliged to use my medical training and interest in psychology to the fullest by caring for people who are stigmatized, marginalized, and isolated from the rest of the community. We see them lurking the streets at night—a hidden yet large group that's in desperate need of compassion. The lay term for the people I'm referring to is "prostitutes," but in this essay I'll use the less judgmental label "female sex workers" (FSWs).

A sex worker is a female, male, or transgender person who works in the sex industry and exchanges sexual services for money or other gifts (Harcourt & Donovan, 2005). The motives of sex workers vary widely and often include pressures arising from debt, physical risk, or even threats of death. I live in Sudan—a country that, like many, legally bans any form of sex trade or premarital sexual intercourse. This ban is the result of certain religious beliefs, and it strictly prohibits any actions that do not conform with widely embraced religious teachings. Yet the fact that sex trade is prohibited does not mean it never occurs. On the contrary, sex trade is common in Sudan; it simply goes unnoticed, and laws banning it are rarely enforced by police officers.

The reason I wanted to be compassionate toward sex workers is not just because they are a neglected population in my society, but because they are more susceptible to HIV/AIDS and have the potential to transmit HIV/AIDS to a wide number of people. The first study of HIV among female sex workers found that they were 14 times more likely to be infected with the virus than were women in the general population. According to a national survey conducted by the national AIDS Programme, the adult prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS in Sudan is 1.6%; nearly 100,000 people are infected with HIV, and more than 10,000 new cases occur each year (Sudan National AIDS Control Program, 2002). Female sex work is an important contributor to the HIV pandemic and the global HIV burden. FSWs suffer from high HIV burden and are a core population for HIV transmission. Worldwide, an estimated 15% of HIV in the general female adult population is attributable to unsafe female sex work (UNAIDS, 2008).

My Plan of Action

After several days of planning and brainstorming, I finally settled on how to spend my Day of Compassion. I decided to counsel FSWs about HIV/AIDS and encourage them to get tested. The counseling approach I adopted was non-judgmental, non-discriminatory, and was done with empathy. It was a "heart to heart" approach in which my aim was to empower these women to help spread knowledge to other FSWs in the community.

According to the World Health Organization, "In order to achieve risk-reducing practices, it is essential to avoid discrimination against people engaged in prostitution, and to ensure their active participation in prevention and care efforts." Most countries, however, legislate against such an approach, and this legislation only places more social pressure on sex workers and cuts them off (not only from prevention and care services, but from their community and society as a whole). The end result is that FSWs are often left on their own, abused and disregarded.

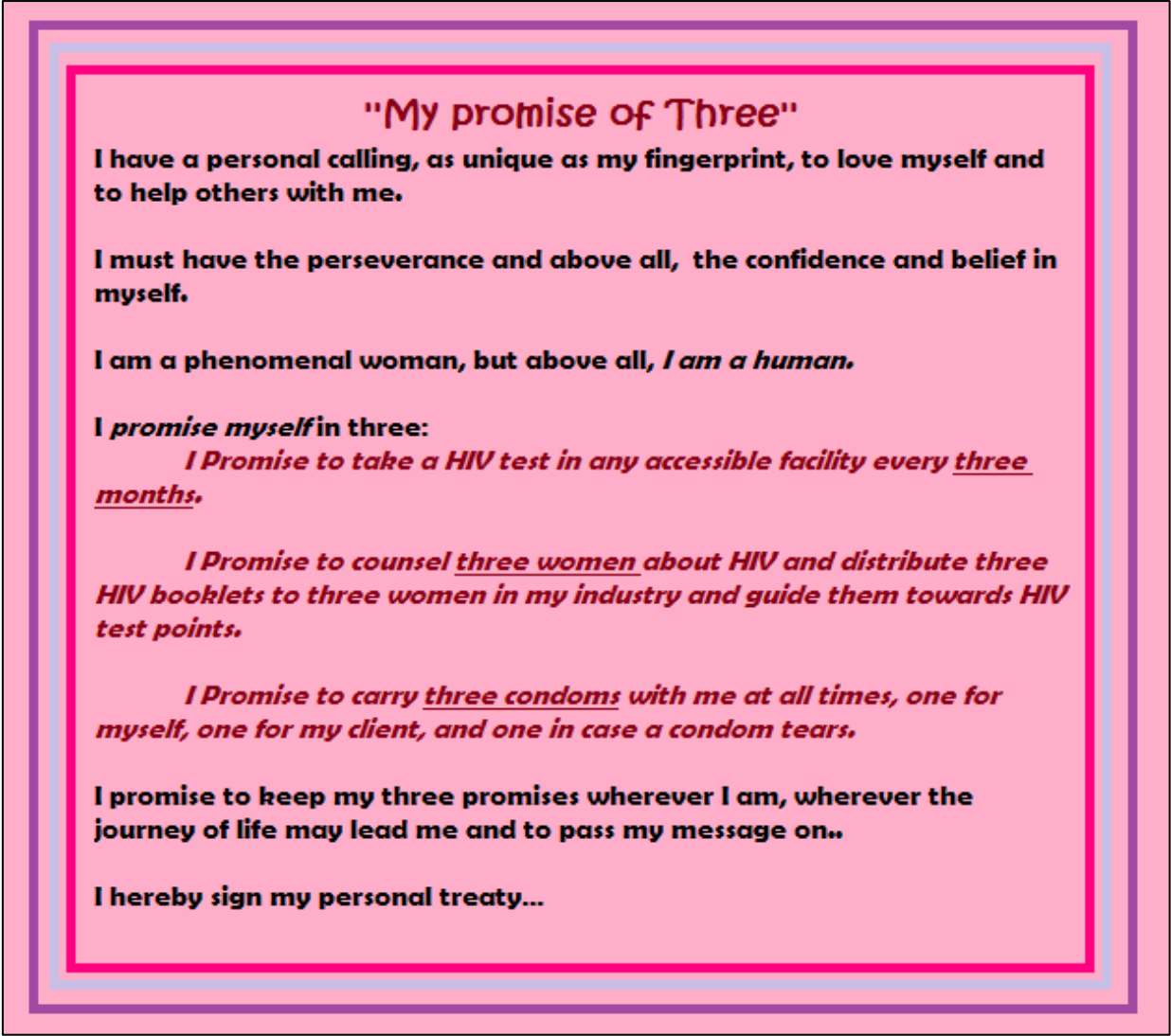
After counselling individual FSWs on HIV/AIDS during the Day of Compassion, I gave them small booklets summarizing and consolidating the information covered. The booklet was illustrated and discussed the meaning of HIV, signs and symptoms of the disease, risk factors, available testing options, and prevention and care measures. The main aim of the booklet was to educate the women without intimidating them. More generally, my effort was designed to gain the trust of these vulnerable members of the community and to emphasize the importance of their health and well-being.

The centerpiece of this effort was a health message I developed not only for use on the Day of Compassion but, I hope, for future use with FSWs in Sudan and elsewhere—something that might have a large impact. I named it "My Promise of Three." This promise is like a personal treaty and is based on the idea that people find it easy to remember lists made of three items. I printed My Promise of Three on a small piece of pink paper as a contract for each woman to make with herself to protect her own body. Here are the three promises:

- ✓ The first promise is to take an anonymous HIV test in any accessible facility of her choice every 3 months (such tests are available without fee in Sudan).
- ✓ The second promise is to spread the knowledge she gained from the counselling session and distribute a booklet to 3 other female sex workers, providing each worker with an illustrated booklet and encouraging her to get tested for HIV.
- ✓ The last promise is to always carry 3 condoms in her bag: A female condom (diaphragm) for herself, a male condom for her client, and another male condom in case the first one tears.

By signing this pact, each woman makes a treaty to protect her body and the community as a whole. She pledges to take care of herself and those around her, and in doing so, she becomes empowered and is more likely to feel worthy of good health.

When giving My Promise of Three to a FSW, I ask that she keep the paper with her at all times for a constant reminder (three months, three women, three condoms). An example of the promise paper is found below.



"My promise of Three"

I have a personal calling, as unique as my fingerprint, to love myself and to help others with me.

I must have the perseverance and above all, the confidence and belief in myself.

I am a phenomenal woman, but above all, I am a human.

I promise myself in three:

I Promise to take a HIV test in any accessible facility every three months.

I Promise to counsel three women about HIV and distribute three HIV booklets to three women in my industry and guide them towards HIV test points.

I Promise to carry three condoms with me at all times, one for myself, one for my client, and one in case a condom tears.

I promise to keep my three promises wherever I am, wherever the journey of life may lead me and to pass my message on..

I hereby sign my personal treaty...

Reflections on my Day of Compassion

"All I ever wanted was to reach out and touch another human being not just with my hands but with my heart."

–Tahereh Mafi

This quote summarizes exactly how I felt during the Day of Compassion. My role as a human being is more fundamental than my role as a doctor, and I believe that by being compassionate toward these women—regardless of their reasons for doing what they were doing—I was fulfilling my duty as a fellow human being.

I loved the Day of Compassion, but I loved the person I was on that day even more. She was non-judgmental, sympathetic, and empowering to women who needed it. The psychological benefits of behaving compassionately were many, and to me, a sense of self-relief was by far the most rewarding benefit. I have spent many sleepless nights in hospital settings helping to ease people's physical pain, but for the first time, I felt that I was helping something deeper than a superficial wound: I was helping someone spiritually, psychologically, and mentally.

As discussed in one of the course lectures, there is indeed an "empathy deficit," and my Day of Compassion led me to realize it and begin to address it. I strongly believe that empathy and compassion can transform human relationships, strengthen bonds, and ultimately revolutionize human relationships and global social issues.

My colleagues and work supervisors responded very positively to the "Promise of Three" idea, and my family was also very supportive. Based on this feedback, I hope to scale up my Day of Compassion project for wider adoption as an HIV/AIDS intervention strategy and perhaps even as a way to create an empathetic flowering toward this vulnerable minority group of women. To encourage others to be compassionate, I have also begun asking other women to join this project as volunteers and become a team working toward a bigger goal.

One message I will leave you with is this: Empathy is indeed a *magic bullet*, and I believe that outrospection is the *trigger*.

References

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