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MIND your BODY Survivor

A road accident changed a woman's life forever. She lost her memory, ability to speak and capacity to perform basic functions like swallowing. **WONG MEI LING** reports how her family's love sustained her on her road to recovery

On the phone, her voice is a whisper and her fear comes through even though you don't see her.

She grows breathless and trembles when she hears an unfamiliar voice on the phone.

Ruth (not her real name), 56, is so afraid strangers will try to contact her after reading this story that she asked not to be named.

Twelve years ago, Ruth had a motorcycle accident. She was riding pillion with her husband when a car hit them. She sustained serious head injuries and went into a coma which wiped out her memory.

Before it happened, she was an executive in the logistics industry and her career was on the rise. She was cheerful, active and loved to play netball and go jogging.

However, when Ruth awoke from her coma that same day, she was a completely different person. Suddenly a victim of amnesia, she could recognise neither her husband nor her only child. She had forgotten how to speak and was terrified of strangers.

For seven days, she was bedridden and could not do basic things like swallow or hold a spoon.

She had trouble balancing herself because she had lost nerve control on the right side of her body. She was terrified of moving vehicles and loud, sudden noises. She still is.

Ruth could not even bring herself to speak at length to Mind Your Body but she has let us reproduce her thoughts from a written testimony to her church group.

By 2002, she had regained sufficient memory and motor skills to be able to type out her feelings on a computer. She wrote: "A child's screams, the sirens from a police car or ambulance can cause me to go into fits and seizures..."

Role reversals

For the first few months after the accident, her son Eddie, then 20 and serving the last few months of National Service, would go to her bed every morning and repeat the same words to help her remember who he was. He'd say: "Good morning Mummy. I am Eddie, your son."

He reversed roles with his mother, teaching her how to eat, hold cutlery and drink through a straw – things she once taught him as a child.

For more than six years after the accident, she went from one specialist to another – including a neurologist, psychiatrist and acupuncturist – as she struggled to build a normal life. She was on medication for her constant body pain.

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Ruth had to learn how to speak all over again by watching the news and TV documentaries, scanning a dictionary with pictures, listening to English tapes and reading.

Her son and husband read children's bedtime stories to her every night.

Ruth also joined a support group, now called the Singapore Brain and Spine Injury Foundation, where she met other patients with head injuries. She was so moved by the challenges they faced that she would encourage them at their meetings.

However, even as she tried to piece her life together again, tragedy struck. Eddie died in a road accident in the United States while on his first overseas IT job assignment in July 2001. He was 25. Ruth sank into even deeper depression.

"I thought I was a bad mum because I didn't know anything," she said. In her written testimony, she revealed that feelings of disappointment, incompetence, unworthiness, sorrow and loss all flowed like tributaries into a river of a very deep depression when the tragedy happened.

What kept her going

The unwavering support of her husband and friends, as well as her religion, has kept her going. Two of her friends always accompany her when she goes out.

"At least one person needs to hold her hand and you need to go real slow if you're driving," said her close friend Margaret Phang, 55.

Her husband John (not his real name), 58, remains her stalwart. In the early stages of her recovery, he would return from work in the middle of the day to bathe and feed her. He still calls home during the day to check on her.

"It has been and still is a painful and tedious journey but she has her faith," John said.

When her doctor said her recovery had reached a plateau, Ruth said: "I was not convinced...I have not given up yet and every day I remind myself to be patient and count my blessings."

Her doctors had said that her amnesia is irreversible and her mobility will be permanently affected due to the nerve damage that also affects her sight. However, Ruth is now able to walk unaided and does household chores, cooking only with a microwave oven as fire scares her.

Her resilience and hunger to learn has been an inspiration to her friends and family who say they draw strength from watching her overcome her physical and emotional hardship.

"She's very intelligent and very determined. When she sets her mind to do something, she will pursue it to the end," said Ms Phang.

Today, Ruth continues to suffer constant pain and still struggles with her phobia of strangers and the loss of her son but her positive outlook and cheerful nature quickly take over when she warms up to you.

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Head trauma can cause function loss and personality changes

A severe injury to the head can throw victims into a coma if the neuronal discharge throughout the brain is severely disrupted.

"It's like a massive power failure in a metropolis as a result of a natural disaster," said Professor Ivan Ng, senior consultant and head of the department of neurosurgery at the National Neuroscience Institute and the Singapore General Hospital.

Neurons are the cells that send and receive signals between the brain and nervous system. Without them, the body cannot function and the person remains unconscious.

As the swelling in the brain caused by the impact of the accident starts to go down, the neurons begin to regain their function and the patient wakes from the coma.

When Ruth regained her consciousness, she could not remember anything. She was also unable to recognise her husband and son.

Prof Ng said that this happens when the memory centres in the brain are damaged.

"In more extensive damage, the memory cells where long term memory is stored is destroyed leading to loss of long term memory," he added.

Ruth probably also suffered severe damage to the left hemisphere of the brain, which controls how she used language. She lost her ability to speak and had to relearn the different languages and dialects she used to know.

According to speech therapist Deirdre Tay from the department of speech therapy at the Singapore General Hospital, damage to different parts of the brain leads to different forms of language impairment.

Some may still have the ability to understand by hearing but not reading and others may have more difficulty speaking than writing.

Speech therapists use different approaches to help patients relearn names, grammar and form sentences.

"This helps the brain to reorganise and make new connections for the impaired language function," Ms Tay said, adding that sometimes patients learn to use another part of their brain that they don't typically use for language.

When she began speaking again, Ruth's friends imagined that she did so with an American accent. She watched CNN a lot and they thought she was

imitating newsreaders' accents. However Ms Tay gave another reason for this.

"Because of muscle weakness in the face, lips and tongue, patients have difficulty articulating their words, which may change their accent and make them sound a bit foreign," she said.

In addition to losing memory and speech, Ruth changed from being a friendly, sociable person to one who is afraid of strangers. This was due to the damage to the limbic system in the brain, leading to various personality changes, said Prof Ng. The limbic system supports the function of emotion, behaviour and long-term memory.

There are other factors. Psychologist Daniel Koh who conducts trauma counselling at Insights-tse, a private clinic, said a person may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after a bad accident. This includes a sense of helplessness, confusion, decreased self-esteem and excessive worrying, which may lead to anxiety or depression.

All this affects the person's interaction with other people, which could lead to further withdrawal and self-distancing. The desire to avoid places which remind them of the accident also compounds the reclusion.

Emotional support from family and friends goes a long way in helping the patient recover from fear as well as memory loss. Gentle encouragement, motivation and just being there can help boost the person's willpower to recover. However, he cautioned against being overly protective, which can make the patient too dependent.

"This will only add stress and put pressure on the patient, which may impede the recovery process, and even worsen the condition," he said.

Support groups such as the Singapore Brain and Spine Injury Foundation also bring together patients with head injuries and their family members to share their experiences at least once every two months.

Run by volunteer nurses, doctors and head injury survivors, the foundation conducts seminars and talks by psychologists and occupational therapists on how to manage their condition.

Wong Mei Ling

To contact the Singapore Brain and Spine Injury Foundation, call Ms Lee Kah Keow on 6357-7545 or log on to www.sbsif.org.sg