

## Change is Possible even in Small Doses



I look deeply into her eyes, searching, hoping to find some semblance of light and connection. But all I see is a distant, hardened gaze. I hear her talk about the effects that loss and displacement have had on her. I see the way her trauma and desperation have crept into her body and mind. Anne is in the throes of a manic episode, and I wonder how I will help her connect to this cold, rejecting world again, after she has surrendered it for the safer one in her mind. While she looks fine, physically, inside she carries many wounds. I have trained for these moments, but it never matches the turmoil that comes with deciding that I need to take control of another's agency and make choices for her, for the time being. I look at Anne and hope I am doing the right thing. I hope she will meet a kind, helpful hospital system to provide the support she needs. All too often, the stigma of mental health subjects those who are most vulnerable to a harsh hand of punishment, instead of a gentle embrace of love. Am I taking Anne to be punished or loved? Will I be part of the problem or the solution?

I am in the middle of my second month working for MSF, and I am starting to realize how difficult working in humanitarian settings can be. The truth is, I feel so alone and lost. I exist in a world where I have never had to worry about where my next meal will come from, whether my home is safe, or if I will be able to be anything I want to be. But I work in a world where nothing comes for free, and I see the struggle, desperation, and pain in the faces of people I support. Their lives are encumbered with hardship and marginalization, such that even getting a meal is not guaranteed, never mind a safe home or reliable work. I don't know how to exist in a world where this happens at the same time as my privilege. I straddle a life of access and inequality. I feel defeated as I struggle to hang on to the people I have helped, I am consumed by the suffering I haven't been able to end. I grow angry, resentful, and despondent. What is

the point of all of this? It feels insurmountable at times. There are moments when I feel I don't know how to do this work, but, at the same time, I also don't know how *not* to do it.

But just when I feel the most hopeless, I see a breakthrough, and this reignites my determination to be part of the solution. One month ago, following months of manic cycling, I saw Anne successfully complete her counselling process with us at MSF after being taken into a home that cares for vulnerable individuals. She has started to sew and look after herself again, and when I look into her eyes, I can see life. The life of someone who has been desperate, but also the life of someone who is starting over and learning to find meaning again. Watching the life return to her body and mind reminds me that what I do matters, even if just for one person. That change is possible, even if in small doses. While I cannot change the system alone, I can still help some. And these some become the wheels, which turn other wheels, that in time can hopefully turn and change the system.

Note: A pseudonym has been used to protect the identity of the MSF beneficiary described in this piece.

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