

Impact Story

Holding onto hope for them until they're ready to hold it themselves

There are points in time when patients need us to hold onto hope for them until they are ready.

I learned this while working on a forensic unit in a mental health hospital. When patients are admitted, they are often at their most ill point in their journeys.

I was working with a patient who shared this experience. He was experiencing intense symptoms related to his illness and, as such, was reluctant to interact with staff. I was his primary nurse and worked with him daily during his time on our unit.

For months after his admission to our unit, I visited his room each day, introducing myself as his nurse and trying to get to know him better. I was often met with unkind words and disinterest in my attempts to motivate him to engage with me or participate in activities. In a world where nurses are faced with large patient assignments and competing priorities, it would have been easy to assume he was someone who didn't want my help and carry on with my other assignments.

But I went into nursing to help and I knew I couldn't give up on him. I went to his room every single day to try, and I chose every day not to give up on him. One day, roughly six months into his admission, with the same attempt, this person rolled over and looked me in the eye. I had introduced myself to him the same way I had hundreds of days before and asked if he wanted to go for a walk.

"Fine, I will come on the walk," he said.

I was shocked but held so much hope in my heart for him. This was a step. A step that could so easily be seen as just that, but it was a step that no mathematical equation could have predicted. A step that filled my heart with even more hope than I was holding before — and one that I will never forget.

Recovery isn't predictable, and it doesn't ever happen on our timeline. We don't know when someone will decide to take that step, but I do know that I was hopeful he would. Moving forward as I began alongside him on his journey to recovery, I was blessed when he shed some light on things for me.

He told me that my not giving up on him made it more difficult for him to give up on himself. He considered that although he felt worthless, my coming to see him each day shed a possibility that maybe I saw something in him that he could not see. Maybe he was worth it. Maybe he could find his way with a little help from those who believe in him. He described it in a way that has affected my practice to this day.

He said I held onto hope for him until he was ready to hold it himself. If you visualize it as a balloon of hope, he is now holding his own balloon, but recovery is not a one-way street. There will be times when he may need others to take back hold of his balloon, and that's OK.

However, the hope that we hold will be a driver in knowing that he will again take it back when he is ready.

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