

Mehri's Story: Restoration

Background:

Mehri is a middle-aged Mandarin-speaking woman who twice immigrated to Canada. Originally from Hong Kong, Mehri first came to Canada in 1992 with her husband and two small children. Two years later they were back in Hong Kong. It was during this return to Hong Kong lasting four years that Mehri's family situation changed bringing her much pain.

Problems Surface

Prior to this time Mehri describes herself as being happy. *"I felt very good having a family. I had goals and a lot of motivation. And my husband was my first love."* But while in Hong Kong Mehri's husband traveled to Europe with some male and female friends. Mehri felt that he came back a changed man. *"My husband is a simple man. I was his first love so he felt that our life was very flat, lacking excitement."* It wasn't long before Mehri learned that her husband had a mistress (a recent *"common social phenomenon"* in China according to Mehri) and wanted a separation.

Although not entirely unexpected given her husband's recent transformation, this news was nevertheless startling. *"When I felt grief, I cried. He hurt me by various ways during this period. We had never argued in all the years together. And he [previously] said that he wouldn't find as nice a wife as I was...[now] the sense of grief seemed to split me in two."*

Mehri's husband's response was to bring Mehri back to Canada in 1998. After helping her settle he returned to Hong Kong. *"At that time I felt he was involved in a contradiction—he wouldn't let me go and didn't want me to live together with another man, but meanwhile he wanted to live together with that woman."* But being introverted and concerned about her husband's reputation, Mehri internalized her pain. *"Because I loved him so much, I never told anyone that my husband had some problems."* Mehri's husband rarely communicated with her during this time. The few attempts he did make brought her *"more pain than if he'd ignored me completely."*

Alone, without her family and in a new country, Mehri was nonetheless determined to carry on with life. She was well educated and soon found a senior position in her field of expertise. Although she did well in her work performance, cultural differences in the workplace proved challenging. To begin, Mehri lacked communication skills to interact with her co-workers. She worked hard and fast not realizing the impact this had on other workers. She was sexually harassed and describes how she was unable to accept the sexual *"joking"* of her co-workers

because of her cultural background. The combined family and work stress began to take its toll.

"During that period my sleep was very poor but I had a regular routine. I went to bed at nine o'clock and woke up at six o'clock in the morning to do physical exercises....in retrospect, this regular routine was very helpful. I couldn't tolerate any irritation. If irritated I would keep crying for a few hours."

The Situation Worsens

Although Mehri tried to conceal her emotions on one occasion she lost control of her feelings. It happened while visiting with a married couple who were her friends. Mehri did not cry in front of them but they saw enough of Mehri's pain to raise their concerns. *"They said that I was 'not quite right'; I dared not tell them about my circumstances because we were so well acquainted that I was concerned that they would tell others. But I kept crying for three hours when I was back home."*

That night Mehri cried herself to sleep. In the days that followed Mehri describes herself as having a muddled mind, even forgetting her birthday. Her friends at church began to talk among themselves (but not directly to Mehri) about her strangeness. She sometimes began to reveal her story to them but would abruptly stop. A mental health counselor even offered Mehri her business card. But Mehri failed to realize her mental health problem. Besides she had heard that counselling was much too expensive to consider.

Mehri's situation became worse with the arrival of her two children. Her husband returned briefly from Hong Kong to reunite the children aged five and nine with their mother. Being a single parent was difficult in her condition. But the hardest part was admitting to herself that her marriage was over when her husband returned to Hong Kong. *"When he was leaving I felt that the end of the world was coming, and that this was the last time I saw him."*

Mehri describes how determined she was to keep going; how she continued to go to work and take care of her children. This despite knowing that *"the affliction in my heart was grievous."* To ease the pain, Mehri allowed another man to enter her life. *"He had a different motive when approaching me, but I took his association with me as love. My whole soul was led by him so that I obeyed all his words. I lost my judgment completely."*

Mehri had two children with this man. He required Mehri to stay home to look after the new children. Upon hearing about the first child, Mehri's first husband

demanded a divorce. He took back his children from Mehri. Mehri also transferred all her property rights and financial savings to her first husband.

Reflecting back on this period Mehri recognizes how her new relationship was a turning point in her life. Severed from her first family and controlled by her new partner, Mehri was in despair. *"I lost what was most crucial to a healthy person—the ability to make good judgments. I was living like a puppet...Now I realize that at the time my mental health was totally out of control."* Yet Mehri also acknowledges God helping her during this difficult. *"Although I had lost control of my own life, God could control it and protect me. I didn't commit suicide because I have no right to do so."*

Journey of Awakening to Problems Begins

Up until this time Mehri spent little time with her friends. It wasn't that she had no friends. She belonged to a church and considered many members her friends. But she made no effort to spend social time with them. And she certainly didn't share her struggles with them. *"Before my life was completely closed and no one was involved in it."*

In 2003, during her pregnancy with the second child of her new relationship, Mehri's life slowly began to change. It began with Mehri inviting her Bible study friends from church to meet at her house. Her diligent study of the Bible proved emotionally helpful and her social connections gradually grew. Following her child birth, these friends helped her in practical ways, such as cooking meals for her or doing her shopping. Mehri appreciated this support from her friends, and slowly began to reveal some of her pain to them. Her friends tried to offer their advice but also questioned her morality in living in a common-law relationship. Although well intended, their attempts of emotional support were often received as being less than helpful, even hurtful. *"What I needed was guidance not judgment."* Mehri's closest church friend agrees with this assessment: *"So her friends were eager to help her but failed to hit the key points because they couldn't perceive the deep reasons for her mental health problems."*

What did help Mehri was a discussion she had with one good friend. This friend asked Mehri if living with her new partner was her choice or if she was pressured into the relationship. He pointed out that Mehri's sense of obligation to the man only made sense if it was a voluntary and mutual relationship. *"Later I promised my friend to have no more physical contact with that man unless he married me. After saying that I felt like a curse had been lifted."* Mehri communicated this decision to her partner. *"He left and never came back again."*

Thereafter Mehri's friendships with others grew. One friend had experienced marriage problems and benefited from a women's discussion group at a local

organization for abused women. Mehri accepted her invitation to come to this organization. Staff there helped Mehri to apply for a daycare subsidy. Mehri found a job at Tim Horton's but the low income forced her to seek accommodations with others. This living arrangement caused life to be stressful and difficult for Mehri.

Barriers to Seeking Help

Mehri's determination carried her on. Later her psychiatrist reflected on Mehri's coping strategy during this time. *"She has great willpower and doesn't like to ask for help even though she has troubles...[managing her mental health problems] mainly depended on her own endurance."* Her disclosures to her friends were therefore minimal as Mehri struggled to trust others about revealing her pain. *"She couldn't be open to others"* her friend later reflected, *"she was worried that she'd be hurt by others...but I could sense her deep pain."*

This lack of trust was compounded by the stigma and shame associated with mental illness in her cultural background. Mehri's friend explains that seeking help from mental health professionals is considered only for the *"psychotic"*.

"In [my home country] he will be isolated and he will feel forlorn. And he will be treated as abnormal...normally you would be considered as having something wrong with your mind if you visit a mental health doctor...that meant that the person was out of control and needed to be put in a mental hospital and monitored."

There were other barriers that prevented Mehri in seeking help as well. Mehri speaks of her financial limitations in paying for services, even the transportation to get to them. She also acknowledged that her English skills made it difficult for her to speak about the issues deep within her heart. Finally was Mehri's lack of awareness of existing mental health services. *"I wasn't knowledgeable about Canada so that I had no idea where to seek such mental health services. However I dared not use it even if I knew where it was."* Given all these reasons, it's not surprising that at the time Mehri didn't *"believe someone could really help me."*

Involvement with Mental Health Services

A break through came via a staff person from the woman's organization that Mehri had visited. The staff person told Mehri she had mental health problems. *"She told me that I had serious stress. That was the first time when I heard of mental health; before that I thought that only psychopaths and crazy persons had mental health problems so quiet people like me wouldn't develop mental illness."*

Mehri phoned a psychiatrist that spoke her home language. She was told that she needed a referral from a family doctor. Her family doctor was very concerned about

Mehri's mental health status. He offered her medication and suggested that she visit an English-speaking psychiatrist. Mehri refused the medication (*"I hoped to control my mental health problem on my own"*). Mehri also insisted on being referred to a psychiatrist that spoke her home language.

At the end of 2005 Mehri began visiting a Mandarin-speaking psychiatrist. The sessions were very difficult at first with Mehri finally speaking of her deepest pains. *"I cried and cried out all the wrongs so loudly that all the hospital could hear my cry"*. Mehri noted how the psychiatrist quietly listened to her and encouraged her to speak. Slowly began the process of re-building her self worth.

"She told me that I was a very perfect youth and I was valuable. Then I became determined to regain my confidence that I had lost completely because my ex-husband had verbally abused me telling me that I was ugly, incompetent and worthless."

Through these counselling sessions, Mehri came to realize that the source of her pain even reached back to her childhood. She recounted how she was born into the Cultural Revolution and how her *"rich landlord"* family held the lowest social status. This meant being bullied by others without recourse, resulting in a personality that felt helpless when wronged (*"So no one in the world could help me"*). Mehri also confided the hidden secret of child abuse by the hands of her father. In the words of her psychiatrist:

"This experience was deeply hidden in her memory and this is a reason why she is inclined to blame herself and dares not speak out when wronged. She once told her mother...but it appeared that her mother didn't trust her. She dared not tell others or her family would be broken apart. Since then she felt she couldn't trust anyone and dared not tell others when wronged."

Satisfactory Results

Within less than a year of regular counselling Mehri's case was closed. By then Mehri and her psychiatrist agreed that she had sufficiently *"cleaned out the mental trash in her heart"*. She had also regained her self-respect and freedom from being helpless in the face of attack. Her tears had turned into tears of happiness. Although Mehri recognizes that her past may still come back to afflict her, she now has the tools to constructively deal with them and not indulge in self-contempt or self-pity. *"[Mental health problems] are yesterday's story. Now I can live a normal life."*

Mehri claims that the psychiatrist was key to her recovery (The psychiatrist is more humble claiming that Mehri was already *"half recovered"* given her internal

determination and the support of her church friends). Mehri speaks of being unable to open up and trust her friends with her deep issues.

“There’s a big difference between professional people and ordinary people. I acquired lots from her [psychiatrist]. She enlightened me step by step on how to cope with emotions. For example, she taught me how to control my emotions when I’m irritated instead of being controlled and how to deal with stress. All this is great help for my whole life.”

This transformational change was not lost on Mehri’s friend: *“She saw a psychiatrist for a long time and she changed a lot. She became very open and looked joyful. Before then when she talked you could feel her pain. But now you can feel her joy in her heart.”*

Suggestions for Improved Supports

Mehri, her friend and her psychiatrist all agree that the most important way to improve support for members of the Chinese community in Canada is to stress mental health promotion. People need to know that mental health struggles can happen to anyone and that they have a way out. People need to know that they can reach out for help when facing insurmountable difficulties, even if this goes against the notions of independence and self-reliance common in Chinese upbringing. In the words of Mehri’s psychiatrist: *“If [Mehri] could have gotten mental health support earlier, she wouldn’t have had so much painful experience in her later life.”*

Yet Mehri is thankful for the support she did receive and for the restoration that happened in her life. She now sees herself as an example to others:

“I feel that the whole procedure I experience is life raining gold in which lots of impurity is eliminated. I feel myself to be valuable. I have been a kind of encouraging example around my friends, many of whom are single parents. They think that if I as a single mother can subsist with two children, they can make it for sure. My experience is also a support to others.”