

For the Love of Sisi: Peer Support and Friendship in Navigating Health Adversity

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ABSTRACT

Health adversity, whether due to chronic illness, disability, or severe medical conditions, often leads to emotional, social, and psychological challenges. While much research has focused on clinical care, growing attention is paid to peer support and friendship as crucial non-clinical resources. The experience of Sisi, a person living through health adversity, offers an illustrative case of how love and social connection can play a transformative role in coping and resilience, even if it is for a short while. This paper explores the importance of peer support and friendship in enhancing empowerment, maintaining personal identity, and encouraging meaning-making during health-related adversity. It seeks to contribute knowledge on how social relationships function as sources of emotional comfort and as mechanisms that enable individuals to reframe their experience and maintain a strong sense of self in times of illness. The narratives show that peer support and friendship are essential facilitators of psychological empowerment, assisting individuals in feeling more in control and competent even in the face of adversity. Relationships with peers protect identity by affirming personal narratives beyond the illness. Furthermore, they act as informal support systems that augment medical interventions, frequently improving quality of life and psychological resilience. Peer connection can assist individuals in viewing illness not merely as a medical experience but as a collective human experience characterized by connection and meaning. The insights underscore the necessity for more comprehensive, person-centered strategies in health care that acknowledge love, friendship, and social connection as vital elements of recovery and resilience.

Keywords: Health adversity; Peer support; Empowerment; Identity; Meaning-making.

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1. Introduction

Experiencing significant health adversity can completely change a person's life, often bringing on physical, emotional, and social challenges that extend far beyond medical symptoms (Boehmer et al., 2023). This narrative draws from resilience theory to understand a friend's ability to adapt and thrive despite health adversity. The theory originated from the work of Norman Garmezy, Emmy Werner, Michael Rutter and Ann Masten. They define resilience as the ability and strength to adapt and thrive in adversity (Southwick et al., 2014; van Breda, 2018). Protective and promotive factors are some of the elements that sustain resilience (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; Gasa, 2013). Therefore, peer support and genuine friendship become critical lifelines, offering practical help, emotional comfort, and a shared understanding, fostering resilience and hope (Dennis et al., 2020; Litchfield et al., 2018). In addition, peer support fosters meaning-making, empowers, and preserves personal identity. In this narrative, meaning-making refers to a situation where individuals cope with health adversity, find purpose, and maintain a meaningful well-being. Empowerment refers to the process where individuals gain control over their health adversity. This empowerment enables individuals to preserve their identities. Identity preservation refers to maintaining one's sense of self despite health adversities (WHO, 2009; Reitzes & Mutran, 2006; Park, 2022). The story of Sisi highlights how peer support and friendship serve not merely as social niceties but as vital forces that help individuals navigate the complexities of terminal illness.

Recent research highlights that individuals with health conditions often find unique value in peer connections (Heisler, 2019). These connections can lessen feelings of isolation, empower individuals with knowledge, and assist them in reclaiming agency over their narratives (Perry et al., 2021). Friendships formed in the context of health adversity are vital because they offer hope and companionship through the uncertainty of medical journeys (Docherty et al., 2022).

Moreover, narratives of friendship and peer support demonstrate that human connection can act as a buffer against the psychological and social strains of chronic illness. Despite adversity, shared laughter, mutual encouragement, and emotional solidarity remind individuals that they are more than their diagnoses, reinforcing identity, purpose, and quality of life (Boehmer et al., 2023; Perry et al., 2021). The narratives indicate how love and friendship exemplify the transformative power of peer support in helping people endure, adapt, and even thrive amid significant health challenges.

2. A sudden turn of events

It was in 2017 when Sisi first shared the feeling of numbness in one of her hands. We witnessed her condition progressing. She would update us on her illness in many casual meetings where a group of colleagues used to relax, dance and enjoy some meals after strenuous academic duties. She was comfortable sharing this experience with us because we had become more than just colleagues to each other. Our relationship had an element of trust as we spent time socially and shared social and academic experiences. Some scientists mentioned trust as one of the elements of friendship (Black et al., 2024; Doyle, 2002; Holt-Lunstad, 2017). As we reflected on our trusting experiences with Sisi, we realized that had we succumbed to the principles of neoliberalism (Busch, 2023; Demirtaş, 2024), which promote individualism, this kind of trust would not have been developed, and she would have suffered alone privately. She left early in one of our casual meetings because she was flying out of the country that evening for one of her academic projects. When she came back a few months later, both hands were numb, and the condition was escalating. We could not believe what we were witnessing, but something huge was happening to this hard-working young woman we loved. By then, there was still hope as she had not confirmed the fatality of her condition to us.

At some point, Sisi finally broke the news that her doctors had confirmed that she suffered from motor neurone disease (MND), that it was incurable, progressive, and terminal. We were all shocked. As colleagues and friends, we did not know what to say except to be there for her. Her illness progressed to a state where he could not walk and was wheelchair-bound. However, as she was still active in coming to work, we often chatted with her at her office. She would show her remarkable strength and become the one comforting us and cracking some jokes as usual. She continued her professional duties; she did not want to stay and wait for the inevitable. As an academic, she continued to teach her students via online tools, supervise her master's and doctoral (M&D) students, write and publish articles, secure research funding, and attend academic conferences.

3. The birth of the support initiative: For the love of Sisi

In 2020, COVID-19 struck and disrupted everything. Colleagues and friends were separated, which caused much stress because everything was shut down. Everyone was crushed by loneliness; the only thing we could think of was those who were sick, as they were isolated and had nothing to keep themselves busy. One of those was Sisi. So, we decided to devise a plan to be there for her.

In June 2020, a group of Sisi's colleagues and friends came together to start an initiative to support her. An online meeting was organized where we discussed our support strategy. It was agreed that this initiative would be called 'For the love of Sisi'. Everyone agreed that we would organize online prayer meetings, send her messages of comfort, hold online chats as a group, and contribute financially every month as a gesture that we were there with her. There was no prescription for financial contribution; it was from the heart. Although the University was paying her salary and had appointed a personal assistant, the medical expenses she required cost her more than what her medical aid could cover. Besides, one personal assistant the University appointed was insufficient because she needed support throughout the day and night. Therefore, she needed to appoint additional caregivers to take care of her day and night. That made her friends and colleagues think of supporting her financially as well. The financial contribution was nothing compared to the emotional and spiritual support that peers and friends offered her.

As the visibility of the support group began, Sisi became stronger and spoke positively during our engagements with her. At the end of each online chat, she would thank us and indicate how her family appreciates the kind of support given to her. Most people in her family and village were amazed by this gesture, as we did this of our own accord. Nothing was compelling us to do this except love, friendship, and collegiality. We would send her well wishes through videos and messages on her birthdays. This support not only benefited her but also healed us, giving us a sense of purpose and hope. As the years went by, some group members faced other challenges and could not contribute financially but knowing that they were with us in spirit, encouraged us to continue with the good course.

In January 2022, a delegation of five friends visited her hometown, an eight-hour drive from our work campus. Little did we know it was the last time we would see her alive. As if she knew that her time was drawing nearer, she sent us a song that we still cherish. The song's title is 'Wena Nkosi uyazi', meaning 'Oh Lord, You know'. We continued with our usual support as we did not know it was a goodbye. On 6 July 2022, we received the devastating news that Sisi had passed on. We were aware of her condition, but it was hard to accept that she was gone.

4. Perspectives

Four perspectives are formulated as playing an important role in health adversity: empowerment, identity preservation, meaning-making and emotional comfort.

Empowerment

The peer support empowered Sisi to use her agency to continue working and generated several publications while bedridden. She was devoted to her postgraduate students despite her condition. She was constantly communicating with them. She used to forward us emails and WhatsApp messages that she exchanged with her students. From 2017 to 2021, she graduated six master's and four doctoral students. In 2021 alone, she graduated two doctoral students and one master's student, which is very rare for a supervisor to have three postgraduate students complete in a year. Some of her students graduated in subsequent years as they were about to complete their studies when she passed on.

We believe that this impressive outcome was partly motivated by the support she received from her peers, in addition to her resilience amid the health adversity. She had control over her health adversity, which enabled her to persevere in her work for the sake of her students and her identity. Most importantly, however, the testimony to the above narrative is illustrated by the following tribute from one of her students (Dr Stefani Chabwera) who graduated after her passing.

"Dr (Sisi) was cordial and very professional. She made me feel that I had great potential and always gave me positive remarks about my studies. The passing of my supervisor left me in a dark space, which urged me to write a poem to honour and express my gratitude to her." The poem titled: *Couldn't you wait?* Part of the poem expresses the following:

*The shrinking wick had sunk...
But couldn't you just wait for me
As testimony of your true love?
I watched in agony
As the trembling wick
Sank deeper into the melting wax
That continued to flow
Enveloping the undesirable blanket of darkness
As you couldn't wait for me anymore*

From this tribute, one can deduce that she continued to persistently support her students despite her most adverse level of sickness.

Identity preservation

Sisi had this strength that nobody could explain; she refused to be written off as long as her body, soul and mind were still connected. She attended academic conferences in person and virtually and expressed her enjoyment of being part of the conferences. In 2019, she was already in a wheelchair, and that is where her tenacity was shown. She attended a conference in Victoria Falls, outside our country, where she served as an organizing committee member. She was always part of this committee, and she could have excused herself from it, but she insisted that she wanted to continue serving. She enjoyed the conference because peers and friends ensured that she was always comfortable. We shared all the good memories on our flight back home. The same year, she was invited as a motivational speaker during the Young Academics Programme. In the feedback at the end of the program, several participants mentioned her talk as one of the highlights. She applied and secured research funding for her research project. The reviewers of her application remarked that she was a diligent and meticulous candidate. She was also bestowed with the 'Courage in Adversity Award' by the institutional Women's Forum in 2019. Her courage, will, perseverance, and strength were recognized.

This reflection suggests that she maintained her willingness to be the best academic, and the support that she received strengthened her to preserve her sense of self despite the health adversity. The peers and friends did not rule her out because of her condition.

Meaning-making

There were so many messages and voice notes that Sisi shared with us, which suggested that she finally understood and found meaning in her situation. Among those messages was the following appreciation note:

Hello friends, family and colleagues.

Before we part to focus on holidays with our families, I thought I should share this with you. A friend of mine in Christ sent me a song that touched me so profoundly. For some reason, it made me understand my situation clearly. All along, I have been asking questions with no answers, and many people also had questions but no answers. I know for sure that most of you would trade your possessions for my health if you could. For that, I am forever grateful to all of you for your love, prayers and financial support. I know that God is with me, as the song says. In that song, I got my answer, and I have peace. Stay protected and enjoy your festive season. I love and appreciate all of you.

Despite the pains and suffering she had been through during this process, she finally had to make sense of the situation. She maintained her purpose and understanding of what it means to be an academic. The appreciation note indicates that she dedicated her coping ability to peers, friends, and family.

Emotional comfort

We also identified emotional comfort as one of the outcomes of our interaction with her, which empowered her in meaning-making to preserve her identity. We drew this from the extracts that various peers and friends sent to her. Some of her friends used words such as admiration, inspiration, trust, strength, resilience, positivity, and motivation, suggesting that they were also emotionally inspired by her power while supporting her in many respects.

For example:

- *My darling Sisi, you are forever in my heart I greatly admire your strength; you are my true inspiration. In you, I have learned a sense of trust that cannot be broken, a depth of love sometimes unspoken. Praying for you always.... Velisiwe*
- *Your strength and resilience inspire me. May God grant you more days to smile and motivate others. Peace and love. Nomanesi*
- *You are an inspirational woman of vigour; you have embraced the challenges with a positive mind. I pray to God that you continue to be safe and showcase His good will through you. Bunki*
- *Sisi, I admire your resilience against all odds. Keep hanging in there. Soul Shava (RIP)*

Others were encouraging her to stay strong, assuring her of their support. For example:

Stay strong, Sisi. Keep well and know that I give you my full support. Love you always. Rebotile

Mkhaya, I think of you all the time. Be strong. Looking forward to visiting you soon when I am home. Sibusiso

There were messages of hope that she was not alone because God, her friends and peers were with her. They were meant to motivate her to know that her mentorship, selflessness, love, and wisdom were admired. Some of the messages were in her vernacular to show how close the friends were to her. For example:

- *You are a wonderful soul. I always remember you in my prayers. "Do not be afraid—I am with you! I am your God—let nothing terrify you! I will make you strong and help you; I will protect you and save you" (Isaiah 41:10). Mishack*
- *You are dearly loved, and every time I think about you, I see the love of God and his grace. I do not doubt God's grace; you are a living testimony. If we were to increase the pages of the Bible about what God has done in the 21st century, I would include your name and God's grace. Meahabo*
- *Sisi, do not fear, says the Lord, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Vimbi*
- *Dadewethu, Mashobane, seloku sihlalele ethembeni lokuthi uMdali wezinsuku onguPhezukonke enze isimanga akupholise ngoba unguMdali wethu. Mntungwa, Mbulazi. Khabonina*
- *Be strong, God is in control. Abraham*
- *May the Holy Spirit give you the wisdom & power to do the daily tasks, may you feel loved, have hope, & know that better days are coming. Monkie*
- *Siyambonga Ophezulu, for all the pleasure of allowing us to have you and chat to you. Trust in him to keep you safe and healthy. Strength and Love to you, Sontuli. Loyiso*
- *Sisi, you might be far away, but just know you are always in my thoughts and prayers. May the Lord give you strength and heal you. Love you. Thembi*

When considered collectively, her story demonstrates that peer support and friendship are not peripheral but central to navigating health adversity. They serve as relational resources that offer comfort, empower individuals, preserve identity, and facilitate meaning-making. This implies that academia and healthcare systems or institutions should recognize and nurture these social bonds as integral to holistic care and well-being for individuals facing health adversity. In addition, these institutions should fund peer-led programs and create policies that protect physical and virtual spaces for social connection and support. Health care institutions should train professionals to value patients' social networks. Further research on how peer support fosters resilience and identity in times of health adversity should be conducted.

5. Conclusion

The above narratives reflect how support from peers and friends can boost the morale of sick colleagues so that they can be able to work and function as willing and expected. Therefore, these perspectives can be considered to advance policies regarding institutional or peer-led practices to support those with health adversity. It is important to recognize the necessity of friendship and peer care as vital dimensions of health support systems. Sadly, however, when death has decided, it does not change its path. Despite resilience, courage, empowerment, identity preservation, meaning-making and emotional support, it stole her.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest. Nothing to disclose.

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