

A dose of confidence can help

By Ruth Ostrow

In normal life we take for granted that we can tend to ourselves

'BOB' was a patient at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney. He was recovering from a life-saving surgical procedure and doctors were monitoring his progress day and night to give him the best chance of recovery. But something was decreasing his odds.

He became extremely depressed. The reason was that he had been put on medication to help his post-operative healing. However, the drug had a side effect. It prompted hair to grow all over his body.

This was not normal hair -- as in the fine film we're all used to -- but heavy, dark tufts. His nose and ears were affected. His arms and chest were covered in what looked like fur. His eyebrows had grown straight across the top of his brow. If he was able to dismiss his own distress, he certainly couldn't dismiss the reaction of friends and family who had to work hard to mask their alarm.

Enter Marie Gai and her team of beauty therapists. Marie, who runs the salon at the hospital, was called to see Bob by a staff social worker. She brought out the tweezers and body wax, and restored Bob to the smooth-skinned man he was before surgery.

Although she couldn't follow Bob's progress due to hospital confidentiality, she says that by the time she left there had been a significant change in Bob's mood, a happiness and energy not there before, and an excitement about receiving visitors.

"It was as if his dignity had been restored," she says. "He no longer felt so helpless, so powerless."

Meanwhile, down the hall, Marie stopped in to see a patient who had just had confirmation that she had a brain tumour and would need immediate and risky surgery. The woman wanted to go home and live it up in her final hours. But forbidden from doing so by her doctor, she had become depressed and forlorn. She was overjoyed to discover that her family had arranged a day of total pampering, including facial, massage and general spoiling. When Marie left, the woman said: "You're an angel. I feel so much better. I feel ready to face the surgeon."

Last week was the 25th anniversary of Marie and her team working at St Vincent's, and I thought it was worth mentioning these stories to reinforce how important positive thinking is in the healing process. Doctors and therapists have long acknowledged the role of an optimistic attitude in recovery. And we all know how important our looks, appearance and dignity are to feeling good.

Often patients feel awful about themselves during illness because their hair is dirty and stringy, their skin is pale and they become unkempt. Loved ones look shocked at the signs of deterioration and it becomes painful for all concerned. Marie says it is often the little things that make all the difference -- a bit of blush on the cheeks or washing someone's hair for them. "There was a woman I visited who'd had a stroke," she says. "She was paralysed and wasn't able to lift her

right hand, which meant she couldn't pluck the few long hairs on her chin and upper lip. I went in and after five minutes she looked and felt much better, telling me I was heaven-sent.

"In normal life we take for granted that we can tend to ourselves, colour the regrowth at the roots of our hair, shave, look tidy. When sick or in hospital, we often look like we've been hit by a bus, which can create feelings of worthlessness and upset or other psychological issues [that] can be detrimental to our overall health."

Self-esteem aids us in times of crisis. Recently I went to the nursing home to accompany my mother-in-law to the funeral of her husband. In her grief she'd let her hair go grey and flat. We booked her into a hairdresser, who washed and teased her hair and applied a little lipstick. It created a very different energy. Not that there wasn't sorrow but there was also a renewed sense of self-respect, which meant she faced the visitors from her past with pride.

Marie says talking to her clients is also part of the healing process. "I listen to patients who share their fears and sadnesses," she says. Touch also makes people feel loved and is very important in healing the body.

"Just like children, we need to be caressed and nurtured, especially when we are sick," she says. "I often treat cancer patients. No one wants to touch them because they're so ill. It's amazing what effect it has on them if you lay the warmth of your hand on their shoulder or do lovely things to their skin."

Marie says the 25th anniversary is a reminder of the importance of keeping our bodies -- and those of the people we love -- nurtured, groomed and well-loved during times of illness. After all, the body is "the temple of the soul".

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