

Faced with constant harassment at work, while trying to cope with caring alone for her three children after the death of her husband, Ayesha's physical and mental health deteriorates until she reaches out for help and counselling at a womens' health centre.

When Ayesha came to Women's Health in Women's Hands for an appointment with the Mental Health Counsellor, she was extremely depressed and withdrawn. She told the Counsellor that only drugs could help her forget about her problems and get her through the days. Ayesha was a thirty six year old widow with three children. She and her husband had immigrated to Canada from Pakistan in 1982. When her youngest child was three, her husband had died leaving Ayesha the sole support for her children. She had no close relatives in Canada and was socially isolated. "I am all alone here; I try my best but it seems that my best is just not good enough."

Although Ayesha had a good job as a secretary for the Board of Education, she was worried that she would be fired for excessive sick leave. "I just can't force myself to go into work. Everybody is talking about me and looking at me as if I were a big trouble maker. My own eight year old daughter is in Grade Two at the school I work in and she turns the other way when I see her in the hall. She doesn't want anyone to know that I am her mother. I am so ashamed."

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As Ayesha grew more comfortable with the Counsellor she began to open up about her problems at work. Ayesha revealed that for the past three years she had been suffering from verbal abuse by her co-worker. This woman repeatedly told Ayesha that she was incompetent, backward and poorly trained for work in a Canadian office. The co-worker made fun of her accent and told Ayesha that 'we don't do things like that over here - if you don't like it, why don't you go back home.' This was very hurtful to Ayesha - she was a Canadian citizen; her children were all born in Canada; she was home.

For a long time, Ayesha worked harder and harder to prove that she was as competent as anyone else. She was a well educated woman with a Bachelor of Arts Degree from the University of Karachi. For several months she ignored this torment but finally, she began to crack. Going into work became agony for her because she never knew when her harasser might strike. The harder she worked, the more antagonistic her co-worker became. "Finally it seemed like my body just rebelled. I began to suffer from aches and pains all over. I slept poorly at night and couldn't concentrate the next day. My memory began to slip and I started making mistakes at work. My co-worker delighted in these mistakes and was quick to pounce on them and point them out as evidence of my incompetence. I began to doubt my own skills and believe that I wasn't capable of doing my job."

Ayesha grew terrified of drawing attention to herself. When she told her family physician about her symptoms, he assumed that she was suffering from depression due to her husband's death and prescribed tranquillizers. This only exacerbated Ayesha's problems. She grew less and less able to cope with the demands of her job and her family. She began to retreat into a grey world where nothing mattered anymore. She couldn't seem to find the energy to get up and go to work and she began taking ever more frequent sick leave. Ayesha had not been able to name racism as the cause of her oppression. She kept trying to understand what it was about her that so irritated her co-worker. She was ashamed to report these difficulties to either her supervisor or to her union because, she believed that,

Racism is wrong

somehow, she must be the cause of them.

In desperation she finally went to her union for help. They arranged meetings between her and her colleague. At these meetings her colleague denied any wrong doing. In Ayesha's distressed state, she was unable to advocate for herself. The union steward saw this conflict as a minor issue between two women who were unable to get along. Ayesha was advised to "kiss and make up". By the time Ayesha came to Women's Health in Women's Hands, her job was indeed in serious jeopardy and, because she had never mentioned her difficulties to her supervisor, there was no documentation in the Personnel files to attest to the racial harassment she was suffering. Ayesha's case clearly demonstrates that racism is a determinant of health. The mental anguish she was suffering had been transformed into physical illness and Ayesha was very close to the breaking point.

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The Counsellor became aware that no amount of therapy could help Ayesha unless the root cause of her stress and depression was dealt with. The Counsellor conferred with the Community Health Promoter and referred Ayesha for Self-Advocacy assistance. It was obvious that intervention by a third party was essential for Ayesha's survival. The Health Promoter immediately called the school administration to begin the process of resolution. At last, an investigation into Ayesha's case began. Unfortunately, the investigation initiated by the school was carried out by a white male who believed the story told by Ayesha's white colleague. They both claimed that Ayesha had fabricated the whole story because she was a malingerer trying to get on Long Term Disability.

The Community Health Promoter, in collaboration with Ayesha's Union steward began to press for further investigation. With this support, Ayesha was able to begin speaking up for herself and finally, to tell the Administration what had been going on. Another woman of colour came forward and revealed that she too had been harassed. Ayesha's daughter revealed that the office manager had asked her why her mummy was ill all the time. This is what had caused the daughter such embarrassment and shame. Eventually, Ayesha's co-worker was reprimanded and transferred to a different school. Ayesha was finally able to begin her rehabilitation in an atmosphere free from racial intolerance. "I still have a hard time believing how quickly things began to change when I got the support I needed from the community health centre. For a long time, I didn't believe anyone would ever listen to me. I thought I was in a hopeless situation and that I would end up without a job. "

Although Ayesha was on the road to recovery, her mental and physical health was still problematic. She began seeing the physician at Women's Health in Women's Hands. As Ayesha began to confront the racism she was experiencing, her self-esteem began to improve. The removal of the harasser considerably alleviated the day to day stress Ayesha was suffering and, with support from the physician and the counsellor she was able to stop taking the tranquilizers. She began to feel much more alert and in control. Ayesha also began attending yoga classes at the Centre. This provided her with a mechanism for reducing tension without resorting to tranquilizers. Ayesha was able to make connections with the other women in the group and began to develop her own support network. Nutritional Counselling also assisted in Ayesha's recovery as she learned of the direct connections between stress and diet.

"I was afraid for so long. I didn't think anyone would ever believe me and I blamed myself for my problems. Now I have learned that I have rights and that I can fight for those rights. Racism is wrong. I am beginning to believe that I am an intelligent and capable woman and that I can deal with my own issues. And my children are so happy to have their mummy back!"