

# The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

## When You Need to, Please Go Ahead and Borrow My Belief, I Have Plenty

By: Roger Ramsukh

There I was lying broken – physically for sure ... but also emotionally broken, and perhaps most importantly of all – spiritually broken. And as I lay there in the hospital with all my heretofore very probable plans for my life suddenly ripped away from me with seemingly no chance to recapture them, I had the last shred of my dignity, and my tenuous self-control dashed like a wave crashing into rocks delivered to me by my surgeon ... “You will probably never run again.” I bawled like a four-year-old child.

Now understand this, I was not a runner – at least not in the way you probably imagine when someone says they’re a runner. I don’t do marathons, the Ironman, the 100-yard dash or anything like that (at least not any more). In fact, the only time I run is when I’m being chased, but I do take pleasure in being ABLE to run. That is to say, I enjoy being able to command my body to do something with a mere thought, and have it react instantly. Alas, these things are only truly appreciated when you suddenly CAN’T do them.

So there I was not able to even get up from the bed and not able to do a damned thing about it. Why is it that doctors give you the worst possible prognosis at the time when you are the most vulnerable?

At a time when your entire spirit is shattered, you can be susceptible to the most ludicrous, callous, and PESSIMISTIC of views. Seeping in to fill that vacuum where once hopes, dreams, confidence, optimism, and belief in yourself dwelt, can come the opinion of someone in a position of authority who tells you that you will never walk, or lift your arm over your head, or drive, or breathe without an apparatus or ... run – well one can make the mistake of believing them and accepting it as the de facto truth.

This is not about doctor-bashing or about the deficiencies in the healthcare system (I’ll save that for another day!). Rather, this is about feeling for a while what a person with a disability may be going through, the mental aspects of their condition, and the importance of your belief in them to give them hope until they believe in themselves.

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Until that day as I lay almost immobile on the hospital bed, I had never truly FELT what a person with a physical disability may have gone through even though I'd worked with people with both intellectual and physical disabilities for years. Oh sure I knew their stories. I understood their struggles to do certain seemingly mundane things like climb a flight of stairs, and indeed had even problem solved ways to compensate to help them lead as normal a life as possible but, until that day, it wasn't in my heart like it was in my head. It had not occurred to me that a person with a disability may perhaps look at certain things with longing, especially if it had previously been available to them ... perhaps *especially* if it had been available to them, and now they yearn silently for that thing even as they put on a brave face to those around them.

I thought about some of the struggles with which I'd helped people, and I thought about all the ways I had problem solved behavioural challenges, the challenges of accessibility, the access to options and choice, and the quiet dignity of enabling someone to just say, "Step off. I got it!" While I'd helped with these things from a purely 'identify the problem, explore options, implement a solution, and evaluate' perspective, I started thinking about things from a slightly different perspective. I had never truly addressed the mental/spiritual/emotional perspective of my work. Until I had it happen to me. In a small way (and I do mean a really small way compared to what people with profound and permanent disabilities suffer), I had a personal understanding of what may be going on in those times when their less-than-positive-self reigns supreme, and yearning, doubt, uncertainty of their future, and the sadness that the comparison with others may bring takes over.

How then, knowing what I now knew, and even more importantly, FEEELING what I now felt, do I help someone with perspective? Well, it became part of my repertoire, part of my rules of conduct, part of the-way-I-do-things to speak with people I support from this perspective and, if they needed it, to vent, knowing that they were safe to do so not just because it was my job, but also because hopefully they felt that I understood.

Thankfully, I had the good fortune to be around positive people, and those that challenge current and perhaps self-limiting mindsets. I had fostered peers that challenged current and self-limiting mindsets, and who would not let people wallow in negativity and useless 'if onlys.' What I found was being around people with a certain mindset infected my mindset; if I wanted to think better thoughts, I needed to be around people that thought the way I wanted to think (even if I didn't think so currently).

I began coaching people with whom I worked on what I did to get through my struggles and believed that perhaps it would resonate with them and help them in their own life. I realized part of my role was to lend some of my belief to the people with whom I work until they developed some belief in themselves. It all starts with my belief ....

### **Do you honestly believe the person can get/do better?**

This is a tricky thing. If you've had experience with a certain population of people, or with a certain level of physical or mental functioning, it is easy to fall back on your experience and say, 'Well I've worked with people similar to this person before, and they were never able to ...' (ride a bike, drive a car, work with tools, cook a meal without burning it, or getting burned, or ...) While I honestly believe you are coming from a place of caring, tempered with a healthy dose of reality when you say that, I also honestly believe, paradoxically, that when the dream is big enough, the facts don't matter. If you've worked with people to help them pursue a 'far away' goal, I'd be willing to bet you've experienced someone achieving something that you never would have thought they could.

Or you've heard of someone doing something seemingly inconceivable. Or you've heard in the media about a person achieving something that seems to be a small miracle.

Take the story of Morris Goodman dubbed 'The Miracle Man' because, after surviving a crash in a small airplane, he had a broken neck at C1 and C2, crushed spinal cord, and every major muscle in his body was so destroyed he was not even able to swallow independently. Doctors said he'd never survive. Well not only did he survive, he walked out of the hospital by himself after a very long recovery with a lot of faith, determination, and a refusal to accept the opinions of others who would choose to limit his life.

This is an extreme example but, sometimes, the extreme is needed to make the smaller, vaguer point. You do not need extreme miracles to harbour a belief in the person with whom you work that they can achieve something in their life or improve a current state in their life. If a person you work with wants to achieve something, your first response should be, "Great! Let's see how we can help you make this happen!" Right from the start, your enthusiasm (more than anything) can convey to the person a *belief* that they may not truly have. If you've ever encouraged a person to do something after you've heard them wish for it wistfully, and seen their eyes 'light up' then you know exactly what I'm writing about.

More than anything else, harbour a belief in the ability of people to overcome their circumstances because that's really the only thing that ever has! Wait ... what? What did he just write? Yes, the **ONLY** thing that has **EVER** caused a person to change a situation they were in ... I don't care if it is taking a step after a catastrophic car accident, or landing on the moon ... it was all achieved first with a belief that something could be done. Oh I concede that some things started out with the thought, 'I don't know **HOW** we are going to do it,' or 'I'm just going to do this part but I have no idea how to do the other parts' but, without the thought to even begin, without the belief that **SOMETHING** can be done, none of the rest would follow. Follow?

### **Be positive – let them feel your belief**

This is kind of an extension of the first point, but I make it separate for a reason: it is a subtle but crucial part of honestly believing the person can make an improvement. Your positive attitude is so very necessary to helping someone in your care develop a belief in themselves. The person with merely an interest is forever at the mercy of a person with belief, and that belief is created by positive intention. Pessimism creates nothing. Pessimism stunts growth, kills desire, slows a movement. Pessimism seeks to prevent action, moves no one to **DO** anything; it despises action and it despises a challenge to the status quo. A pessimistic thought is a low-energy thought vibrationally and leads to stagnation, indolence, indigence and ineptitude. Pessimists are lazy. (Obviously I'm not a fan).

It is through an optimistic stance, a mental attitude of, "I can," "I will," "It **IS** possible," "Let's start" ... only then does improvement begin. It is optimism that creates, not stagnates, that calls to action, not immobilizes with apathy, that enables discussion, not advocates for acquiescence, that seeks a way, not denies a path, and it is optimism that a person under your care feels first from you. If you are asked for your thoughts on whether a person can do something, or if you think it's a good idea for them to try something, the single best thing to do initially is get excited that this person is trying, striving, desiring to improve something currently in their life that they don't like. By giving that first burst of energy to the person, you create ... possibilities.

Something I say in most of the trainings I do is that, as a direct support worker regardless of the population with whom you are working, your job starts where their skill set ends and their desire persists.

Why? Quite simply, it is because you don't know what they can do and, in truth, they may not know what they can do until they are encouraged at exactly the right time. That's what a good coach or mentor does – they see more in the person than they see in themselves, and this attitude of, 'You can do it' may be the only thing that gets a person through the next hurdle. When the person feels you are pulling for them, it is not uncommon for the person to try for you as much as they are trying for themselves.

I once worked with a child in a wheelchair with Muscular Dystrophy. He was fearful of getting out of the wheelchair because he believed he would fall and hurt himself, and indeed he had done so on a couple of occasions. The last time he walked and fell, he cracked his head on the edge of a marble step in his home. After that experience, he spent a few weeks in a wheelchair until his head healed, but then he was encouraged to get up and start walking. He didn't want to and resisted all his parent's efforts. You can understand that an unused muscle atrophies and becomes almost useless. So it was with his legs. They shrank from disuse until he actually could not walk any more. What's worse, the attitude that this boy had of not being able to do anything *infected* everything else he did until his arms become so weak that he could not lift them without help, and he wanted everyone else to do things for him. This was the state he was in when I met him in a school where I was working with some other kids.

I noticed him one day and spoke to him, getting a feel for how he thought. I obtained permission to bring him down to the class in which I was working once a day so that I could start to *disinfect* his thinking. One day I took Liquid Paper (the white liquid used to cover mistakes on paper written with a pen), and on the pedals of his wheelchair where his feet rested and where he could easily read them, I painted the words 'I can' on the left pedal, and 'I will' on the right one. I then sat facing him at his eye level and looked him in the eyes. I spoke to him of his dreams, and his desires. I got him to picture and describe to me what an 18-year-old version of him was doing.

He described many things about what he wanted to do, and none of them included him sitting in a wheelchair. "From now on you will say, 'I can' – 'I will' both to yourself, and out loud eight times a day at least. You will start to do things for yourself, and I will only help you when you absolutely need it, and you've tried very hard first." That's how it began with us. I analyzed how he did a task, modified his technique where needed, and often left him struggling to do something for several attempts before I'd help him. I made him come to see me at recess, I gave up part of my lunch break, and I saw him onto the bus in the afternoon even though he wasn't in the classroom in which I worked. He gave up all the time. Yet I cajoled, I used my stern voice, I limited negative self-talk but most importantly: I encouraged with boundless enthusiasm, and I refused to accept his self-imposed limits.

When he finally was able to do up the button on his pants by himself for the first time after going to the washroom (believe it or not this was the first thing we worked on!), I cheered and high-fived him! I told the teacher. I told other teachers. I told the principal. When his parents came in one day to meet the person who had painted on their son's wheelchair (without asking I might add), I told them. Each time this little boy beamed. That was a great moment. What beat it was when he was trying to lift his arm high enough to turn off the light in the washroom one day. We had practiced and practiced ways to achieve this but, thus far, success eluded him. As I turned to speak to another student this one day, I heard him in the washroom say, "I can ... I will." Ah, young grasshopper.

(For those of you too young to know or unfamiliar with North American television, there was a TV show in the 70s called ‘Kung Fu,’ and it told the story of a man of Asian-American ancestry who often reflected on the teachings of his Kung Fu master by showing flashbacks of him as a young boy learning a lesson, and his master calling him the playful name ‘Grasshopper.’)

### **Focus on the strengths not the weaknesses**

When I say this to parents that I train in my classes, I inevitably get some sort of backlash from at least one parent in the group. I stand by my statement. All too often we, as a society, take a beautiful human being with hope in their heart, desire to do, an inherent set of attributes, talents, genetic predispositions, and innate proclivities, and we dash it all to hell by criticizing, demeaning, ignoring, and not even recognizing those things at which the person excels. Worse, we may even condemn that of which they are proud because it is not something we value. How then do we expect a person to truly achieve, overcome, conquer their fear, or have a good sense of self-worth when they are judged by their weaknesses? Is it any wonder so many kids today have anxiety issues? So much time is spent working on things they dislike, while the things that are done well are dismissed or ignored.

The child grows up thinking of themselves as unworthy, ‘less than,’ or inadequate ... yet they are not these things at all! Einstein gave us the theory of relativity as most know, but he also gave us a treasure trove of great quotes, and one of my favourites is, “But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” Choose instead to recognize those attributes a person already has and help them enhance those. The person under your care seeks many things from you, and they may be different at different times in their life. Regardless of what it is they want, most of them can be addressed by having a belief in them, and an appreciation of what they can contribute. Recognize what they are good at and, from that level of appreciation, launch your collective plans to do what it is they seek ... The will to do comes from the belief that you CAN do.

You do not know the story a person you support carries in their mind, in their heart. Look to yourself for a second. Think about all of your personal history, and perhaps the pain you carry because of an experience or a relationship. Your self-limiting beliefs (we all have them to some degree) are a result of these experiences and relationships reaching back from the past and affecting your present. Until this is recognized, only then can you repair this to realize your full future. Unfortunately, we do not know the personal stories of those in our care even if we are able to read their personal history from their personal files. It does not explain HOW their thoughts reach forward into their present and bring doubt into a scarcely-able-to-articulate goal. What you can do is remind them of what they have accomplished, how far they have come to this point, the reassurance that you (and others) will be there to cushion them when they fall, and cheer when they get back up. By reminding them of their previous successes (their strengths), you build their belief in themselves and reinforce your belief in them too. Thinking about their strengths creates strong thinking.

### **Be prepared (for inevitable obstacles)**

*Adversity hath slain her thousand, but prosperity her ten thousand.*

*Thomas Brooks*

Part of the theme of helping a person believe in themselves is to be prepared for failure.



Any worthy goal will probably not be something that is achieved on the first try. Prepare the person for this. Prepare yourself for this. Not to keep sounding like something you read on a fortune cookie, but ‘a calm sea does not a good sailor make!’ It is so easy to support someone when they are positive – but things can go south really quickly when doubt and negative self-talk spring up due to failure. What do you do then? First, allow some wallowing in self pity if you deem appropriate to the individual. We all need to have a good cry or a pity-party once in a while. After that point, however, give them a check-up from the neck up. Reset their mind on the goal – not the obstacle. Paint the picture of how it could be – not what it temporarily is. If the dream is big enough, the facts don’t count. Ask, “Do you want this?” “How much do you want this?” “If you want to fight for your goals, I’ll fight with you but this moment, this momentary setback, this is a test. Do you step up and proclaim to everyone that this will not break you?!”

Next, have some stories of people who have failed repeatedly only to overcome in the end. We do not teach this concept enough. Thomas Edison took more than 1000 tries to invent the light bulb ... yet he famously said, “I am not discouraged by my failures because each one brings me closer to my goal.” We do not live fully if we harbour the thought that anything that doesn’t come easily wasn’t meant for us to achieve – we cut ourselves off from the very spirit of living that helped humans excel on this planet. Then analyze with the person why it didn’t work. (Despite what Edison said it was NOT a failure – it was a set-back. The only time it is a failure is when you give up entirely, and Edison knew that better than most). Be sure you are not providing all the answers, you want the person to recognize why it didn’t work. Was it technique? Was it the conditions? Was it the wrong approach? Then resolve to change the technique, the conditions, the approach for the next trial. Then encourage, encourage, encourage! THIS is where the person will lean heavily on you. If you’ve prepared as suggested in the first two points, you will be ready: the words of comfort and encouragement will be conveyed because your words will carry the weight of your belief and conviction about who you are, what you believe, and what you are about.

“Know me now, in this moment for who I am and what I believe! I want for you what you want for you. I give you my belief, the strength of my convictions and the force of my Will – try again and know that I do not walk in front of you or behind you: I walk beside you and look with you where you want to go.”

Do I talk like this with people I work with? You bet I do.

### **The importance of hope**

Our time draws short. The journey I have brought you on is coming to a close. I work for a moment, an awakening. I work for a realization. The realization that, through me and my beliefs, amazing things can happen. The realization that I can have an impact on someone’s life that far exceeds the present moment, their present circumstances, and all the realities of their present existence. I work for the realization that when I give my own self, when I use all the gifts that I was born with, and all the skills I have acquired, when I put myself in the mindset of, “I wonder what else I can do?” or “What would you do if you knew you couldn’t fail?” then I am truly living. Is there any better feeling than knowing that people need the things you have to offer and that, through you, they have the chance to live not just exist? Think then, how awesome it would be for the person with whom you work to start saying to themselves, “I wonder what else I could do?” When you are able to convey this type of possibility thinking to a person who previously did not think like this, then (in my humble opinion) you have truly done your job because you’re creating a person who does not need you anymore.

Isn't this the implicit, if unspoken goal, of our work? To create conditions, and impart a way of thinking to someone so that they can live without you – or more to the point, so that they can live as independently as possible? This for me is hope – and its importance cannot be overstated.

### **The end of my story and the start of yours**

I spent five days in the hospital after my accident. On the morning of the third day, I had my surgery and, on the fourth morning, the doctor told me I'd never run again. After having a good cry about this, I fell back on the teachings I'd been exposed to by people whom I admired, and who filled me with longing and hope. I resolved that fourth day that *I would not let someone else's opinion become my reality*. Perhaps I would run again – perhaps not ... BUT I was going to be the one to decide that – not some doctor who does not know how my leg feels, or how I think. Especially how I think. When this same surgeon walked in on the fifth day, and he was about to walk out after having checked on his work on my knee, he asked, "Any questions?" I said, "No – but I do have one comment. With all due respect doc, you might be the surgeon and know your work, but you don't know me, and I don't care what you say; I will run again." For the first time in our brief association together, he truly looked at me – not as a case but as a person. "Good for you," he said with a half-smile as he walked out.

I did run again. Six months of rehabilitation and a second surgery later, I was ready to start testing myself. Today I don't run quite as fast as I used to – but I still run pretty fast. What carried me through all this was encouragement, belief, and a refusal to accept my present circumstances. Will you be that person for others when they cannot be that person for themselves? It is not an easy position to be in, and it may require quite a bit of work on yourself before you can help others with their story, but no matter where you are – you can impart some degree of belief to someone you support with the gifts you already possess. Use them and help someone else run.

But I still only run when I am chased.

### **About the author:**

R. Roger Ramsukh is an international speaker, author of the book, [The Fearless Parent – 20 Ways to Inspire Success, Respect and Gratitude](#), and a Behaviour Therapist at Vita Community Living Services that has been supporting people with intellectual and physical disabilities, people with Acquired Brain Injury, and kids who do not fit into the traditional model of school for over 20 years. He finds his greatest joy communicating with others, either in word or in print, or when cooking for others in his home.

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