



## A LANDMINE SURVIVORS VIEWPOINT

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Dear All,

I am writing this after the brief discussion that I heard on Monday afternoon at the meeting. The discussion involved the priority placed on mobility as part of a disabled persons rehabilitation. I have given this some thought and decided to write down some views of my own.

Like many in HI-B, I have had many life experiences; some good, some not so good and some quite awful. Probably my worst experience occurred in South Lebanon on 20<sup>th</sup> July 2002. At the very end of an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) task, I had an accident with an Israeli No4 Anti Personnel mine. This resulted in the below knee amputation of my left leg and serious fragmentation wounds to my right.

It would be impossible to compare my accident and consequent injuries with that of other disabled persons. After all, I live in a so called affluent and civilised western society and not in a country suffering from abject poverty. My situation cannot even be compared with that of the majority of other landmine survivors; unlike most of them, I knew the risks involved in going into a mined area, after all, it was my job! I was also able to receive fairly quick and excellent medical treatment and despite a difficult evacuation was soon in a hospital.

However, I do believe that I, and my family, probably shared the same emotions and went through the same psychological upheaval. I'm fairly certain that in the moments after the detonation I shared the same disbelief and pain. Maybe, after that kind of experience, I can offer a view on the issue of the needs of a landmine survivor.

It is easy to write well defined lists placing needs in order. I do not remember all the needs that were listed, but recall that at the top of the list was Acceptance, then Mobility was somewhere in the middle and Loneliness at the bottom. I experienced these needs, but they would be put in a different priority order on a daily, and sometimes hourly, basis. All the needs rotate depending on emotions and pain.

Acceptance can be important when people look at you with pity or even worse, disgust. And yes, even in 'civilised' Britain people would look at me as if I didn't have a right to be out in a wheelchair. That I should be pushed into a dark room out of sight. But there are two sides to acceptance; needing to be accepted by society is one of them. The other side, which at times can be far worse, is self acceptance; accepting what has happened and that it's not going to get any better by sitting here and wishing it had not happened.

For me the best method of self acceptance was to meet other amputees who had progressed from physiotherapy, and, more importantly, to meet other landmine survivors (getting easier to find them in the UK these days!!). Survivor to survivor support is extremely important, it can also help with the 'all alone' feeling.

Loneliness was at the bottom of the list but very often it pops its ugly head right to the top. Even when I had family and friends around me, I could still be lonely. The worst kind of loneliness can be self imposed through mixed up emotions. I recall a time a few weeks after the event when I had never felt so alone in my life even though I was with friends and family. What did they know? They all still had both legs and weren't in constant pain; they didn't have the same nightmare night after night. Eventually I got over it, but it meant screaming, shouting and kicking out; letting everyone know what it was really like and not just saying 'yes, I'm fine thanks'. Survivors need to be encouraged to show their real emotions and not just 'bottle' it all up.

Mobility is probably more important than anything else for any survivor that was reasonably healthy and active before their accident. A couple of days after my accident, I remember lying in my hospital bed feeling very despondent and very depressed. My girlfriend asked me what was wrong, was I in a lot of pain? I said "No, not really, I just want to be 6 feet tall again". At that time I had no idea that '**Standing Tall**' was a HI logo. It may be two simple little words and it may just be another logo to some people. For me it is representative of the most important goals that had to be achieved; '**Standing Tall**' means more than getting up and walking again. Yes, it's about being self mobile, but it's also about being accepted by yourself as well as others. It's about being able to feel useful again, the regaining of your pride and confidence. It's an excellent logo. Mobility is important, even when your emotions tell you that you have other priorities. As soon as you can strap something on that gets a survivor upright and moving, do it!

Some other things that help me. I constantly tell myself that I am **NOT** disabled (except where free parking is concerned!!). I am less able than some, but more able than others. I do not have one leg, I have two. It's just that half of one is manmade. I am no longer a landmine victim. I was at the moment that the accident happened. As soon as I was stabilised in hospital, I was a survivor. There is something tragic about being a victim, but something quite noble about being a survivor.

They say that time is a great healer, well it is. After something that is so traumatic, even the doctors need to use time as an assistant healer. But the healing continues after the scars close. For me January 1<sup>st</sup> 2004 was a landmark day; I no longer had to say "I had an accident last year" because it became the year before.

I think my final note would be; remember, you are there to fix the problem, the survivor is the one who has to live with it. Hope this is useful, if not then please remember to re-cycle!!

Regards

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