



WHEN THINGS HAPPEN

Why, why, why? Have you ever asked yourself that? Have you been in situations with too many whys and not enough answers to go around?

I find myself asking this question almost every day. In one of those typical days when life throws a spanner into my plans, the situation just seems to get from lousy to bad and then, to worse!

It was a busy Saturday. The days before were hectic and I didn't realize I was setting myself up. It wasn't as if there were no warning signs. There were plenty but if only I was paying attention.

Resting hours were short that week and I had slept late on Friday night. I was up early on Saturday to make the 45-minute drive down south to my hometown. The family house needed cleaning plus there were some work errands to run. Small things started going wrong during the day and worked their way into my internal "irritation system." It was as if there was an emotional vein running through my body slowly being clogged up by these toxic irritants, maybe just like how "unhealthy fats" could be clogging our arteries.

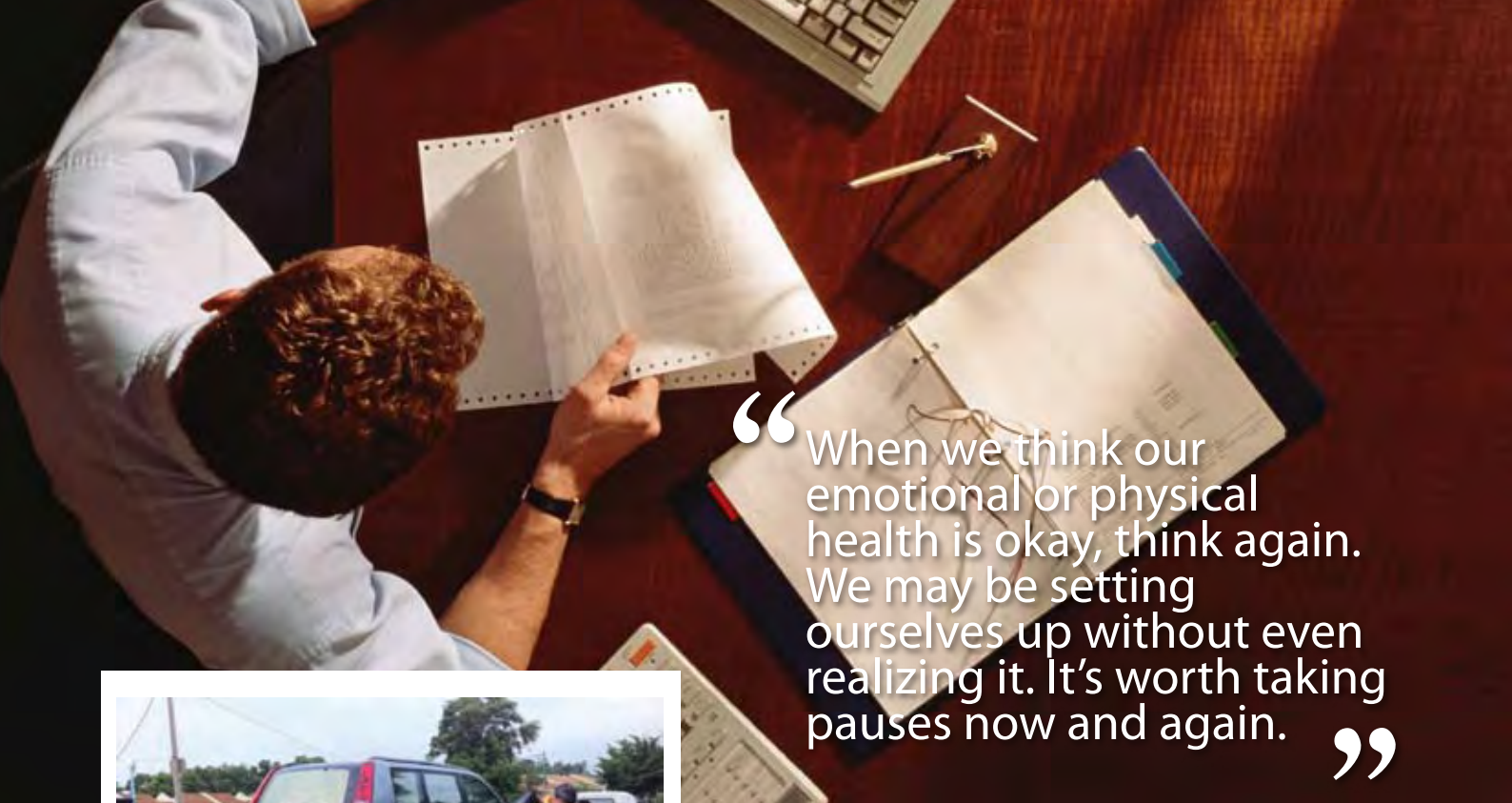
By evening, I was physically tired from spring-cleaning. I was also running late for a client meeting. I drove out in a rush with my mind firing away different thoughts and ideas – what else needs to be done, where will we go for dinner, what's the best solution for my client, who am I supposed to meet on Sunday. About 5 minutes later while driving midway up a slope, my trusty 4-wheeler just stalled! There were no warning indicators. My car engine just shut down. Almost like a heart attack or a stroke, it came without any warning. It was as if my car and my emotional vein were so clogged up that their in-built systems designed to protect me from more harm had to shut down before any permanent damage was done.

I could only steer my car and even then, it was such an enormous effort to try not to hit another vehicle. My car had lost all power and I was not in control anymore. Why was this happening? Why now? I was already so late for my appointment. And there were still so many things to do. Many questions and doubts crowded my thoughts. How would my client feel? Why did the engine shut down? It had never happened before. (Neither have I had a heart attack or stroke or an emotional shutdown before too! I thought things were fine. I was just a little tired, so I thought.)

My mouth was feeling parched, my heart was beating so hard and fast that I could literally feel the pounding on my wrist and chest. I breathed deeply. I knew then I needed to take a "pause" from my feeling brain and activate my thinking brain. So my consequential thinking kicked in... Okay, what should I do? What can I do now? Prioritize, select the tasks and do them. All of us have a choice, maybe not about all the things that had happened, but we do have a choice as to how we should react to each of these situations.

I contacted the car company's Help Desk and was told my vehicle needed to be towed to the workshop. Then came a slew of questions about my insurance policy, what it covered and what it didn't. I had to keep reminding myself to reframe my thoughts – "The Help Desk is trying to help me and they have a job to do. Don't make it difficult for them. I have to help them so they can help me."

Next, I contacted my nephew to pick me up as I would probably need to return to the city instead of spending the weekend at my family house.



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Then, I contacted my client and apologized to the sweet and patient Aunty that I wouldn't be able to see her that weekend. She was so gracious and understanding.

Later, I informed my partner and close friend and she – despite having a party to attend – offered to give us a lift when our vehicle arrived at the workshop later that night.

As my vehicle was hoisted up the tow truck, it was quite a sight. I had never expected to see my car to be on a tow truck. It had always been someone else's car, not mine, since I send my car for regular inspections and maintenance almost by routine. When we think our emotional or physical health is okay, think again. We may be setting ourselves up without even realizing it. It's worth taking pauses now and again. Go get a physical if it's time for one. Don't procrastinate. Ask your staff how you are doing. Ask your customers. Ask your loved ones. Ask your friends. The work will always be there... even when we get out of a hospital. Emotional check-ups are just as crucial as physical examinations. Where we can, we should avoid getting into situations that leave us with limited reaction choices.

Sitting in the tow truck was quite an experience although it was my second time. I could feel the engine's heat under my seat cushion, the smell of diesel, the perspiration from hard work that had rolled down in the vehicle compartment, and the steady rumbling of the tow truck's engine. My senses were on alert as these were unfamiliar sights, smells and sounds. As we started our journey to the workshop – with my trusted 4-wheeler securely fastened on the truck – I could literally feel my heartbeat slowing down to a steady pace as we made progress on the expressway. My senses were familiarizing with my surroundings but it was also as if “hope” had re-appeared. With that “hope”, a thought flashed across my mind: “It's going to be alright.”

Sometimes, things do turn out better than expected. Yes, there were many inconveniences, tasks not done, plans changed but... it could have been worse! I wasn't harmed, I didn't lose any of my loved ones, my trusted 4-wheeler is good again, my client understood, and I enjoyed a good conversation with my friend who gave me a lift home from the workshop – we also had some 'Hokkien' noodles and banana pancakes for supper together. Things didn't turn out that bad after all.



What do we do when things go wrong at work or at home? Do we ask more whys than we can possibly get answers? How do we react? Do we believe things happen for a reason?

I remember watching a great movie called “Sliding Doors” starring Gwyneth Paltrow. What if she had missed the train? What if she got on the train? Would her life be better? Would our lives be better without holding on to many of these little and trivial toxic irritants? Do we recognize the symptoms when we are setting ourselves up for an outburst or breakdown?

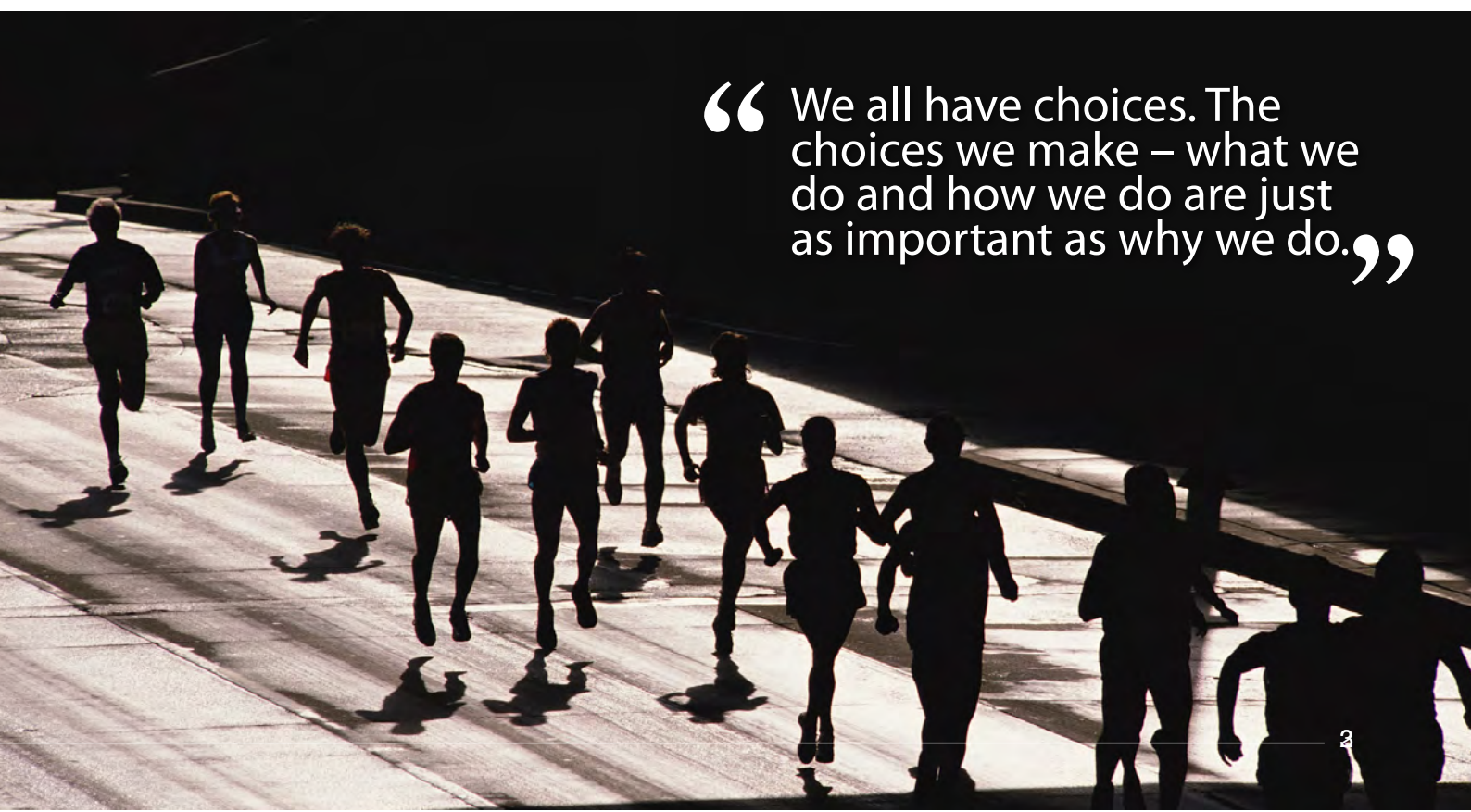
Life is fragile. It’s too brief to hold on to some of these emotional burdens. When our leadership role comes to an end, when our relationship with a customer or friend comes to a close, when a chapter of our lives approaches the end... we need to pause, reflect and ask: Is this the beginning of an end? Or is it the end of a beginning? Was it worth it? Is there “hope” and can we do something so that there are no regrets? It’s never too late.

In the end, most of these things won’t matter anymore. When we look back, we wonder why it mattered in the first place. We all have choices. The choices we make – what we do and how we do are just as important as why we do.

Know Yourself is about increasing self-awareness, being aware of our reactions and their reasons.
Choose Yourself is about being more intentional, how we react to situations and those around us.
Give Yourself is about connecting with a deep sense of purpose, aligning intentions with our actions.

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