

LIVING POSITIVELY

Thank God for the Nokia in my life!

That mobile phone we usually find so irritating and intrusive could be the only link to the world, and to hope, a sick and lonely person has

I hardly ever switch off my phone. In fact, some of my friends are of the opinion that I've become a slave to it because even when I'm out of the country, I call regularly just to find out how things are going. I am also notorious for calling people if they so much as 'flash' me, even when the phone numbers are strange. In my line of work, decisions have to be made promptly because they can be literally a matter of life and death.

While I have always made a point of returning calls, I only recently realised that a little thing such as this, which many of us take for granted, can be used to measure the depth of friendship. And it was all thanks to Janet's story, which gave a whole new meaning to the phrase "just a phone call away".

Janet shared her experience at this month's therapy session. She used to work for one of the hotels in town and had heard about HIV before, but never took it seriously... until she got sick and was hospitalised with tuberculosis.

At first, relatives and friends flocked to her bedside in the hospital, helping out whenever they could. After a while, I guess human nature got the best of them. They all got tired and, one after the other, stopped coming to visits until eventually she lost contact with all her friends and relatives. No one wanted to answer when she called.

"Only one of my sisters remained by my side," she narrated.

Janet moved us when she said her phone never rings, and she doesn't remember the last time someone extended a kind hand to her, or even got close enough to give her a hug. She was surprised when one of my colleagues reached out and enveloped her in a bear hug.

A big deal

There were those among us who didn't think it was such a big deal, yet there are times when little things like this mean the world to people living with HIV.

"It reached a point where I wasn't even getting those 'call back' text messages - not even from wrong numbers, which, when I was well, I always found irritating! I hated the messages, but now I crave them," she said.

To her, the phone represents a source of life and friendship. If it doesn't light up with calls or messages, it tells her something about her relationships. And especially now, when she needs friends more than ever before, a 'dead' phone gives her the creeps as she realises that she doesn't, after all, have people she can call friends, much less acquaintances.

The other person who has stuck by her is her seven-year-old son who, to help cheer her up, plays her phone's ring tone and then switches it off and tells her she has a missed call.

At the end of her talk, I realised just how much we take for granted the simple things in life. Sometimes we get so busy trying to make ends meet that we forget to lay foundations for friendships and sister or brotherhood. We forget to call that friend just to find out how they are doing; we put off calling a sister, brother or parent just to tell them we care.

With time, when we're down and the rush is gone, we realise just how important that 'flashing' or actual phone call was, that even the irritating 'call back' message is a blessing. We all took down Janet's number and promised to call and text her frequently because we were determined to ensure the bond in the support group stays strong.

Real friends

There's no better time to discover our real friends than during times of distress. Some people believe that throwing money at a problem will make it go away. HIV has taught me that money can't buy some of the things that are important to a person who is living with HIV. And something like a text message can help our loved ones know that we still cherish them.

"It's not for nothing that I keep my line open day and night," I thought to myself after Janet had narrated her experience.

There have been times when I've been called in the dead of the night by colleagues because a client's condition has taken a turn for the worse or, in worst-case scenarios, passed away.

I try to put myself in my colleagues' shoes. Having to spend the night with a corpse, especially if you are HIV-positive yourself and the deceased has succumbed to HIV-related complications, can be a very traumatising experience.

While my phone bill usually stresses me out at the end of the month, Janet's story made me realise that God has blessed me with a Nokia for a reason.

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