

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

BY DR JAMES DOBSON

DATES WITH DAD

I'm sure you've heard the old story about the father who said that giving his daughter to the man she loved was like giving a beautiful hand-made violin to a gorilla. I think all dads feel that way about their little girls, and maybe for some very good reasons. Sometimes, it seems that courtesy and respect have been replaced by hostility toward women. Pornographic material, for example, typically depicts women in degrading and dehumanising poses. And a favourite theme of R&B music is the abuse and disrespect of women. Now, predictably, this attitude is even evident at times in the young men who date our daughters.

There's an approach to this problem that I like: a father in northern Virginia has allowed his seven-year-old daughter to start dating. But here's the catch: he's always the date. Every couple of months, he takes her out to eat or to a movie that she wants to see. And during the course of that evening, he treats her as a gentleman should. That way, when she's old enough to start dating other guys, she'll know what to expect from them. I think dads should also model courtesy for their boys, by treating their mothers with respect every day in the home. This attitude won't go unnoticed by their children.

The bottom line is that there's a right and wrong way for a man and woman to relate to each other and the key ingredient is respect. Let's teach our best to our boys and girls.

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Once a stranger to his family, this man now spreads hope

Home tutor chronicles his story in his book *Recovered Grace: Schizophrenia*



WHEN private home tutor Harris Ng first appeared on national television two years ago to tell his story as a recovered schizophrenic, he wondered how his students – and their parents – would react to finding out that their teacher had a 16-year history of mental disorders.

Within days, the parents of two of his 15 students cancelled his services – proof that not all of society was ready to welcome back recovered mental patients.

But Mr Ng, now 58, chooses to see things differently.

“Two out of 15 is acceptable. My wife and I assessed things, and decided that it would not affect my career adversely,” he tells TODAY.

Two Fridays ago, the show was aired again. Another parent called, saying that her daughter was “doing well in school” and would prefer to enrol in a proper tuition centre.

He finds it too coincidental.

“With exams just around the corner, it's odd to switch tuition teachers suddenly. But it's okay, I still have 10 students to look after.”

Dealing with the social stigma has just been one aspect of his life-long battle with mental illness. Still, his brave act of going public has had its upside too.

“I've had so many encouraging SMSes and e-mail. I've helped many other people out there,” he says.

'Why you so stupid? Don't tell them'

During the hour-long interview, Mr Ng appears perfectly normal. To keep his condition stabilised, he has to take an injection once every six weeks for the rest of his life. He is determined to spread the message that mental illnesses are treatable, so long as the person takes his medication and attends scheduled medical appointments.

Mr Ng was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in 1972, when he was 25 years old and just months away from earning his degree at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada.

He found it difficult to concentrate on his schoolwork, missing project deadlines.

After returning to Singapore, he endured mental relapses and was sent to mental hospitals five times.

The good news is that since 1989, he has not suffered another episode. In medical terms, a person is considered recovered if



LEE U-WEN

WHAT IS SCHIZOPHRENIA?

A chronic and severe mental illness. Symptoms include hearing internal voices, hallucinations and talking nonsensically. About one in 100 people have schizophrenia, while three in 100 suffer from psychosis (most commonly, schizophrenia and manic-depressive psychosis) at some point in life.

3 COMMON MYTHS

Myth 1: Schizophrenics have split personalities.

Fact: People with schizophrenia have only ONE personality. Schizophrenia is a split from reality, not in personality.

Myth 2: People with schizophrenia are violent

Fact: They are no more likely to be violent than any other person. There is, however, an increased risk of self-harm motivated by fear, delusional thinking, or the decision to “no longer cope” with the illness.

Myth 3: People with schizophrenia have a below-average IQ.

Fact: Not true. It is not a characteristic of the illness.

he has no relapses for five years.

Mr Ng doesn't know why he was stricken with the illness, as there is no history of it in his family. He admits the painful memories – such as that of trying to hold down a regular job – will never go away.

He once sent out 40 job applications in which he openly declared he had schizophrenia. He never got a single phone call.

“My mum would say why I was so stupid, why should I tell them? So, for subsequent applications, I didn't. I managed to find jobs soon after,” he recalls.

“The difficulty afterwards was how to answer my bosses when they asked me why my eye movements and speech were so slow. They always wondered whether I was well.”

His predicament was clear: If he told the truth, he would lose his job almost immediately. In all, he went through more than 10 jobs – from a clerk to a technical assistant – before he decided to become a full-time private home tutor in 1996.

The stranger in my family

His “darkest moment”, Mr Ng says, was when he was thrown into a police lock-up for a night. It was during the mid-1980s.

“I went to distribute religious pamphlets in front of a school. The school asked me to stop, but I insisted on doing so. I don't know why I did that, I was so confused.”

The police were called and he was promptly taken to the station. He confessed to crying buckets as he slept on a wooden board in his cell.

His family only knew about his predicament the next morning when he was sent to Woodbridge Hospital.

During another hospital stay, the doctors and nurses had to tie him to the bed with bandages when he struggled wildly and refused injections and medication.

“My mother wasn't supposed to see me, but she peeped through the window, and when she saw me, she cried,” he says.

He became “a stranger” to the family.

His sister, who was in Canada with him when he first developed the symptoms, refuses to talk about the episode to this day.

“I've tried asking her so that she can help me remember what I went through, but she doesn't want to say anything.”

Now, he and his wife Violet want to volunteer their services with the newly-formed Silver Ribbon (Singapore), a non-profit organisation set up to combat the stigma of mental illness.

He's also just written a book, *Recovered Grace: Schizophrenia*, chronicling his journey.

He says, “Not many recovered people like me come forward, for fear of letting their employers find out about their past or some other reason. But I'm here to help people understand that, even with schizophrenia, a normal life is definitely possible.”

– AS TOLD TO LEE U-WEN

Yesterday was World Mental Health Day. For more information on mental health issues or Silver Ribbon (Singapore), contact its founder Ms Porsche Poh at 9646 0247.

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