

First Aid for the Mind

When it comes to mental health, early intervention is crucial. That's what recently launched nonprofit Silver Ribbon Singapore seeks to provide, as ADELINE ANG finds out.

Porsche Poh, an administrator with the Institute of Mental Health's Early Psychosis Intervention programme, knows all too well the harm that can occur when mental health problems are not addressed in a timely manner. In the course of her work, she often encounters patients who could have been more easily treated and in some cases, completely cured, if only they had come forward for help sooner. Instead, the delay in their treatment sometimes means that their recovery is that much longer and more expensive for them. In some tragic cases, the patients' illness may have developed to such a stage that it has become chronic and difficult (if not impossible) to recover from.

With this in mind, Poh founded Silver Ribbon Singapore (SRS), inspired by a campaign by the same name which was started in the US some years ago. The campaign was launched in Singapore on 4 February 2006, with the objective of promoting a positive attitude towards mental health among the community.

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The reasons for people's reluctance to seek treatment are diverse, but many of them stem from one basic issue: stigma.

Says Dr Lim Cheng Hwa, president of SRS, "In Asian society, the attitude is that we suffer in silence. We don't talk about our problems. We don't come forward. Then the problems escalate. They suffer in isolation – and their families don't bring them for counselling. It is an issue of



face, and they feel inhibited to talk about it."

We have lift off: President S R Nathan officiated at the launch of Silver Ribbon Singapore in February this year.

But why should the average man on the street care about mental health issues? Most would dismiss it as something that only "crazy people" have to worry about. But Dr Lim explains, "Sometimes, things can start from a simple problem. It can escalate – for example, spouse beating might start off as anger. But your emotion overcomes your mental control, and you are unable to control your actions. That's where mental illness comes in."

The same goes for addictions. "Gambling, drugs, pornography, all these can eventually destroy a person's life when they develop into addictions." Especially in developed countries, stress can cause these addictions to surface. "In a complex society like ours, we don't have physical and mental space, so stress will build up." Over time, that stress may well manifest itself in some form of mental illness.

SRS' hope is that the mental effects of stress will be viewed by society much like its physical effects, such as high blood pressure and heart disease, are. "The public should treat it the same way. We are trying to educate people," says Dr Lim. To this

end, SRS has produced brochures on mental health and conducts talks to raise public awareness of mental health issues.

SRS volunteers provide what they define as 'mental health first aid'. According to its website, "First Aid is the help given to an injured person before medical treatment can be obtained. Mental Health First Aid is the initial help given to someone experiencing a mental health problem before professional help is sought."

It may be that a person is feeling burdened and just needs someone to talk to, a listening ear for their problems, without feeling stigmatised. Many problems can be nipped in the bud at this stage, or if more professional help is needed, the volunteers are able to refer the person to trained counsellors or mental health professionals. Early intervention can be very helpful to a person who has just started to experience mental health issues.

"Sometimes people are suffering from temporary depression, because of the death of a loved one or from a failed relationship. If they have somebody to talk to, they can recover," says Dr Lim. SRS' goal is to address the issue as early as possible, and thereby start people on the road to recovery at the earliest possible stage.

He adds, "Recovery needs acceptance, and recovered patients need to assimilate back into society. They need society's support. We must treat them as they are – normal people." ☆

For more information about Silver Ribbon Singapore, visit www.silverribbonsingapore.com.