

S'poreans fear mental patients, study finds

Many believe such people are violent and the public should be protected from them

By CHANG AI-LIEN
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MORE than one in three people here believes that the mentally ill are dangerous, and half the population thinks that the public should be protected from them.

But the truth is most mentally ill people are not violent, and those undergoing treatment are no more likely to be violent than anyone else.

A seminal study on public attitudes towards mentally ill people here uncovered these fallacies, and also found that one in two people would keep such an illness a secret.

The result of suffering in silence:

Those with serious illnesses such as schizophrenia or depression do not seek the help they need, said Associate Professor Chong Siow Ann, senior consultant psychiatrist at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), who helmed the study.

"Mental illness is like other physical illnesses, which can afflict anyone," Prof Chong told The Straits Times. "There are effective treatments...but like cancer or diabetes, these are ailments which will not go away on their own. The earlier one seeks treatment, the better the results."

The study, the first of its kind here, was based on a nationwide survey done on 2,632 people aged 15 to 69. The results were published in the *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* journal.

Its authors - from the IMH, the National University of Singapore and the National Healthcare Group - warned of the dangers of negative perceptions towards mental illness.

"It prevents people with mental illness from fully living, studying or working in the community. It is a barrier to proper care and...contributes to the sense of hopelessness, isolation and low self-esteem for the sufferers," they wrote.

Agreeing, Mr Harris Ng, 60, a recovered schizophrenia patient and author, said the problem is perhaps most evident when looking for a job.

Many mental patients are unable to get a job once they declare their illness, or are employed at lower salaries, he said. The view that the mentally ill are violent is outdated, given better treatment now, he added.

"With better medication and early psychosis intervention, the symptoms are detected and treated earlier, and mentally ill patients do not go into the stage of crisis," Mr Ng said at an event to launch a neighbourhood wellness centre yesterday.

Voicing the feelings of many, Madam Yeo Lee Yin, 60, a housewife who was at the event, said: "If it is a light problem, then I am not afraid. But if they have a serious illness, then I am."

Prof Chong stressed the need for public education to help remove the stigma associated with such an illness.

"A large part of the fear and shame associated with mental illness stems from ignorance," explained the lead author of the paper, who is also IMH's vice-chairman, medical board (research).

"Mental health professionals should work with the media to ensure accurate and fair coverage, and to avoid stereotyping and sensationalising of mental health related issues."

Mental illnesses, such as depression, anxiety, addiction or dementia, is a growing problem plaguing developed countries.

With one in six people here suffering from some form of mental illness, and with the figure likely to grow, the Health Ministry is pumping \$88 million into fighting it over the next five years.

Some of the efforts to tackle it will include early detection, reducing stigma, enhanced research and training more mental health professionals.

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Myths and facts about mental illness

- » **Myth:** Getting over disorders such as depression and anxiety is a matter of willpower.
- » **Fact:** Psychiatric disorders are legitimate medical illnesses, just like heart disease or cancer. Most experts agree such disorders have physical causes, and the symptoms are caused by chemical changes in the brain.
- » **Myth:** Mentally ill people are dangerous.
- » **Fact:** Most mental patients are not violent. In fact, those undergoing treatment are no more likely to be violent than anyone else. However, other conditions such as alcoholism, drug abuse and having been a victim of child abuse increase the risk of violence.
- » **Myth:** Mental illness should be hidden as it cannot be treated.
- » **Fact:** Even serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia can be treated with professional help and medicine. As with many illnesses, the earlier it is spotted and treated, the better the chances of recovery.
- » **Myth:** Children do not get mental illnesses.
- » **Fact:** Mental problems affect one in eight children aged six to 12 here. They affect one in four adults. And among those aged 60 and above, 5.6 per cent are hit by dementia.
- » **Myth:** Medications to treat mental illnesses are addictive.
- » **Fact:** While some sleeping pills can be addictive, anti-depressants and anti-psychotics to treat say, schizophrenia or manic depression, are not, and they help restore normal functioning.
- » **Myth:** Only mentally ill people see psychiatrists.
- » **Fact:** Sometimes, people just need professional help to solve their problems.

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