

Lighting a way out of mental illness

Advocate kindles hope for those trapped in 'frozen state of fear'

By APRIL CHONG

SHE tried hanging herself and slashing her wrists, and had even been locked up in an isolation cell in a psychiatric ward.

But Madam Gayathri Ramprasad, 46, is not only past all that, but has recast herself as an international advocate for mental health: She runs her own mental health consultancy in the United States and a non-profit organisation to promote mental health awareness and build communities of recovery.

In town for the Asia-Pacific Psychiatric Rehabilitation Conference, at the In-

stitute of Mental Health last week, she shared her experiences at a talk and urged mental health care-givers to help "light a candle" in the lives of their patients.

A strong believer in patients taking charge of their own afflictions, she also urged patients to light their own candle rather than curse the darkness.

After all, she knows a thing or two about that.

Born in Bangalore into a tight-knit family, she was barely 18 when she was seized by anxiety attacks and depression, which her family read as possession by evil spirits.

Over the next decade, she went through failed suicide attempts, numerous hospital visits and electric-shock treatments. Life was about being "in a frozen state of fear", she said.

She lit that metaphorical candle while in a lock-up, promising herself that she would "emerge a harbinger of



Once subject to depression and panic attacks, Madam Ramprasad now works on raising awareness of mental illness. ST PHOTO: DESMOND LIM

hope" by helping other people in her shoes.

In the following years, she took "one very painful step at a time" to recover and fit back into the community. She also earned an MBA along the way, after which she began her crusade to reach the mentally ill and dispel the stigma surrounding mental illness.

In 2005, she opened her own mental health consultancy in Oregon, in the US, where she has lived since her 20s; the following year, she set up the non-profit ASHA International, which promotes mental health awareness and builds communities of recovery.

ASHA International (which stands for A Source of Hope for All touched by mental illness) has since reached out to

25,000 lives worldwide in the last two years through talks, workshops and community programmes for patients, health-care providers and the public.

Madam Ramprasad also brought to her native India the Silver Ribbon movement, which raises public awareness of the need to support people with mental illness and disabilities.

She admits that she still gets bouts of depression, which she keeps in check with meditation, regular physical exercise, sufficient sleep and writing in her journal. She also credits the support given her by her engineer husband and two daughters.

"I've learnt how to ride the bicycle but it does not mean I'll never fall off!" she said, laughing.

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Build healthy minds

HERE are some tips from the Institute of Mental Health:

Parents should:

- Be good role models.
- Maintain interest in their children's lives.
- Build up their children's problem-solving skills instead of doing everything for them.

Adults should:

- Act with integrity and keep promises.
- Listen actively and learn to give and take.
- Talk issues through.

The elderly should:

- Eat well and exercise.
- Keep active and be involved with others.

Dispelling the stigma

THE Silver Ribbon movement has a chapter here too. The non-profit agency aims to fight the stigma tied to mental illness through public education and counselling.

It raises funds through donations and the sale of the Silver Ribbon pin, the symbol against the stigma attached to mental illness.

In a survey of members of the public in June, more than three-quarters of the 174 respondents said discrimination against the mentally ill takes the form of dimmed career and marriage prospects.

Dr Lee Cheng, the vice-president of Silver Ribbon Singapore, has

called for the banishment of this stigma and the idea that mental patients are dangerous.

The Institute of Mental Health (IMH) has seen a sixfold jump - to 5,000 in-patients - in its rehabilitation programmes between 2003 and last year.

Heightened awareness is a reason for the increase, said Dr Chua Hong Choon, IMH's chief of general psychiatry.

Dr Lee added that an ageing population with the associated problems of depression and dementia, as well as rising stress levels, are other possible reasons for the rise in the number of patients.