



By Denise Liu and Sze Wei Ping

WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY

ESTABLISHED
In 1992 by the
World Federation of

Mental Health, the World Mental Health Day is a global effort to raise awareness about mental health issues and to focus attention on specific aspects of mental health. The World Mental Health Day is commemorated on the 10th of October, across over 100 countries.

In Singapore, the World Mental Health Day 2008 was launched on the 5th of October, at Hougang Mall. The event was jointly organized by Silver Ribbon Singapore and Hougang Mall. Targeting heartlanders and members of the community, this year's World Mental Health Day aimed to raise awareness about mental health issues and educate the public about mental illness. These aims were achieved through a series of talks by psychologists and health professionals, exhibition booths set up by mental health associations and hospitals, and a week-long exhibition at the Cheng San Community Library. In addition, other event highlights included the Silver Ribbon Walk, a Children's art competition with the theme "Happy Days" and demonstrations by the tenants of Hougang Mall.

The day commenced with the Silver Ribbon Walk, with Mr. Teo Chee Hean, Minister of Defence, as the guest of honour. With both the starting and finishing points at Hougang mall, the 4.5km community walk made its turn point at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), at Buangkok Green Medical Drive. The walk was extremely well-received, drawing a large crowd of attendees from the community and beyond.

In her opening speech, the Vice-President of Silver Ribbon Singapore, Dr. Lee Ching, highlighted the fact that over 16.6% of Singaporeans suffer from mental illness, exemplifying the need for greater community awareness about mental health issues. Dr. Lee also emphasized the benefits of early diagnosis of mental illnesses and the need for timely intervention. The main aims of this year's World Mental Health Day were in line with its theme of "making mental health a priority". These aims include: Increasing public awareness about mental health, promoting public policy related to mental health, increasing mental health services, and reducing the stigma for individuals afflicted with mental illnesses.

In the opening address, Ms. Ellen Lee, Member of Parliament for Sembawang GRC, noted that the World Mental Health Day was a valuable occasion for interested individuals, departments and organizations to collaborate and focus on various aspects of mental health care. Ms. Lee noted that, according to the World Health Organization, mental health problems are set to increase by 2020. In Singapore, increasing stress from the competitive global environment underscores the need for greater emphasis on mental health. Ms. Lee also pointed out the necessity of focusing on senior citizens, remarking that both physical and mental well-being of the elderly should be taken into consideration.

Ms. Lee characterised mental health as "one's attitudes and approach to life", and noted that mental health can be affected by psychological, environmental, genetic and physiological factors. She remarked that mental illness can impair one's ability to perform routine tasks, foster relationships and cope with anger and stress. According to Ms. Lee, being mentally healthy equates to being able to take more satisfaction from life and positively influencing the lives of those around us. Hence, addressing mental health issues can make living in Singapore more harmonious and satisfying.

A series of talks by psychologists and health professionals followed the opening addresses (see adjoining article on Page 6 for a synopsis of these talks). Mr. Stephen Yau, a Chinese physician from Eu Yan Sang, also shared tips on how to manage stress using traditional Chinese medicine. Eu Yan Sang also offered free glucose tests for members of the audience during the talk.

The afternoon sessions included performances and demonstrations by the tenants of Hougang mall. The goal of these demonstrations was to promote positive living amongst the community. The yoga demonstration by Citispa, in particular, drew a crowd of eager participants who received a free yoga mat for their involvement.

This year's World Mental Health Day certainly accomplished its goals by adopting a holistic approach, involving members of the community and mental health professionals.



SILVER RIBBON SINGAPORE

Silver Ribbon Singapore (SRS) was launched on 4 February, 2006, by President S. R. Nathan, with the vision to promote positive mental health. SRS aims to combat mental health stigma, encourage early treatment and facilitate integration of people with mental illness within the society through by promoting mental health literacy.

Besides being the main organizer for the World Mental Health Day, SRS also collaborates with other mental health associations and schools on projects with the objective of reducing stigma and encouraging early intervention for individuals suffering from mental illnesses. SRS also runs the Tze Heng Wellness studio, which offers complementary counseling services and houses an employment resource centre and training centre for individuals who have recovered from mental illness. SRS's Executive Director, Ms. Porsche Poh, also runs the Mental Health First Aid Course, a mental health literacy course designed to improve the public's mental health awareness and impart basic skills to help individuals with mental health problems and deal with individuals in mental health crisis situations.

For more information about Silver Ribbon Singapore, please go to the following website: www.silverribbonsingapore.com.

AN INTERVIEW WITH PORSCHE POH, FOUNDER/ EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF SILVER RIBBON (SINGAPORE)

What is the aim of the World Mental Health Day?

The aim of the World Mental Health Day is to raise awareness of mental health issues and existing stigma against individuals with mental illnesses. The aim was achieved this year with the involvement of 2 Ministers, 7 Members of Parliament, 39 organisations and 2000 participants.

How were the events and talks selected?

Silver Ribbon Singapore always explores reaching out to the community through innovative means. This time, we wanted to have this event at a different setting – a shopping mall. We wanted to highlight that everyone has a role to play whether he/she is a consumer, caregiver, mental health professional, Member of Parliament or a tenant of a shopping mall.

Is the World Mental Health Day an annual event?

Silver Ribbon Singapore has been commemorating the World Mental Health Day annually since its launch, in collaboration with other organizations.

What led Silver Ribbon Singapore to organize this event?

The aims of the World Mental Health Day are in line with our vision, that is, to promote positive mental health.



Below are the synopses of some talks presented during World Mental Health Day 2008.

1 The first seminar "School bullying" dealt with mental health issues related to bullying. It kicked off with a series of local animations that describe the taunting and challenges young students face in the schoolyard. Ms Feng Jiewen, a counselor from the Student Service Hub of Singapore's Children Society, gave a lucid account of the various forms of bullying common in schools.

Bullying is defined as a repeated behavior that intends to cause physical damage and emotional hurt. There are four types of bullying – physical bullying, verbal bullying, relational bullying, and cyber bullying.

To help students handle a bully, Ms Feng introduced the Hi-5 approach. The five steps are as follow: (1) ignore the bully, (2) walk away, (3) tell the bully in a friendly manner to go away, (4) tell the bully a firm manner to leave you alone, and finally if all else fail, (5) report the situation to an adult.

Lastly, she provided some telephone helplines children can dial. Tinkle Friend (1800-274-47-88) is a toll-free line dedicated to young students. It is available every Monday to Friday, 0930-1130 and 1430-1700, except on public holidays. For parents, there is the National Family Service Centre hotline (1800-838-0700) if consultation is needed.

The young students in the audience responded particularly well to Ms Feng's colorful presentation. When she used the smearing of another person's book as an example of property damage, a young girl in the audience nodded her head vigorously.

2 The next speaker was Dr Swapna Verma, Chief of the Early Psychosis Intervention Program. Her talk titled, "When it is more than stress", discusses psychosis and the effects of stress.

Stress refers to the daily pressures people face in ordinary life. They can be self-induced, family-related, or caused by the environment. Different age groups experience different types of stress. Adolescents, for instance, are stressed over puberty-related issues like bodily changes and peer pressure. Young adults get worried over parenting and work. Finally for the older people, loneliness, failing health and the death of loved ones are possible stressors. Abnormal behaviors occur if people cannot cope with the stressors at any point in their lives. In fact, between the ages of ten to thirty, mental illness is the leading source of illness.

There are three important conditions of stress, namely anxiety disorder, depression and psychosis. Anxiety disorder is present if worrying is not just a part of a person's life, but it is his/her way of life. Symptoms include poor concentration, insomnia, and sexual dysfunction. Depression is the condition of feeling incredibly sad over a period of at least two weeks. Depressed people often lose interest in life, feel worthless, and do not sleep well. The last condition psychosis occurs when the person loses the ability to distinguish what is real or unreal. Common symptoms include hallucination, delusion, and disorganized speech patterns. The first two conditions deal with the mental state. The last condition, psychosis, is a disorder of the brain not the mind. To highlight, Dr Verma showed the fMRI scans displaying the difference in the brain structures between a psychotic patient and a normal individual.

Dr Verma concluded her talk by recommending a combination of medication and psychotherapy to treat these conditions. But she stressed that the treatment should be individualized to be effective.



3 Former MCYS Senior Psychologist and current Doctorate student Ms Quah Saw Han then took the stage. Her talk was about the parenting of teenagers and how to help them cope with stress. She pointed out that there are common struggles parents face when their children are teens. Some examples include the granting of autonomy, how to discipline and talk to a rebellious adolescent.

The main task of a parent is to help youngsters negotiate the real world. To do so, quality time should be spent with the teenage child. Parents should find out the activities that interest their child. Ms Quah provided some useful tips like using the Straits Times "Life!" section as a source for locating what the current teenage fad is. If the singer, Wong Lee Hom, is popular amongst youths, it will perhaps be a good idea for parents to get tickets for his concert and watch it with their children. A teenage child might find it easier to communicate with a "hip" parent than an "old-fashioned" one.

Ms Quah ended her talk by going through some key points important to building a successful parent-child relationship. First, a positive relationship characterized by warmth, kindness, and consistency is essential. Secondly, a parent should be genuinely interested in their children's activities. This leads to effective monitoring. Firm rules negotiated with the child, will also expect less flack when calmly enforced. Thirdly, parents should encourage their children to express themselves and think independently. This will help the teenager foster a healthy sense of self. Lastly, she admitted that parenting an adolescent is a bumpy ride. Parents should not be discouraged by setbacks, as "perhaps the only thing more difficult than being a teenager is parenting one". The audience reacted warmly towards Ms Quah's informative talk. Several families who were shopping around the mall strolled in their tracks and listened.

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4 Dr Roger Ho added to Dr Verma's talk by focusing on a single condition, depression. Dr Ho is a psychiatrist in NUH. In his presentation, "Facing depression head-on", he discussed the multiple sources of depression and drew a distinction between major and minor depression. He advised the public not to react negatively to depressed patients, but that they should view them in a non-judgmental way. Depression should be treated by healthcare professionals using medication, cognitive behavioral therapy or electroconvulsive therapy. To avoid depression, people should stay active and maintain their health. Social groups, like churches, can provide good sources of social support.

5 The World Mental Health series of talk was rounded off by Dr Asghar Sijedian, an academic lecturer from REC College. His talk, "Marrying Work and Family Life" outlined some pointers useful for balancing work and life. The balance can be struck at two levels, the individual and organizational. At the individual level, a person should learn coping skills and exercise effective time management. At the macro level, organizations can assist their workers by providing on-site child care services, emergency elderly care, and healthcare subsidies. Following these guidelines, a healthy equilibrium between work and family can be upheld.