

Mental health initiative should target young people



Young patients at the Institute of Mental Health. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

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The initiative by mental health advocacy organisation Silver Ribbon (Singapore) to train Community Wellness Ambassadors to identify and help people with mental health issues will bring hope to many who may have been suffering silently ("[Looking out for those needing help with their mental health](#)"; Wednesday).

Teenagers and young adults are one particular group of people we should target.

Studies have found that adolescence is the peak time of emergence for several types of mental illnesses, including anxiety disorders, bipolar disorders, depression, eating disorders, psychosis and substance abuse.

As much as 50 per cent of the mental illnesses people experience are said to emerge by age 14, and 75 per cent start by age 24. It is

estimated that 10 per cent to 15 per cent of adolescents may suffer from depression, which affects a disproportionate number of girls.

As the adolescent brain is still developing, behavioural interventions in some mental disorders, such as obsessive-compulsive disorders, can be highly effective and prevent a lifetime of disability.

Parents and teachers should be alert to any changes in their children's behaviour, and err on the side of caution in seeking help.

As teenagers tend to confide more in their friends, peers are an especially important source of help, especially in de-stigmatising mental illness.

Mental illness is prevalent and nobody is immune. I know of an undergraduate who recently obtained a leave-of-absence from university to recuperate from depression.

She had been exhibiting signs of mental instability for some time, but her friends were at a loss as to how to help.

Schools, including tertiary institutions, should equip their students with basic knowledge of mental hygiene and avenues from which to seek help, if necessary.

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