

More Singaporeans keen to learn about mental health and seek help

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A scene from The Necessary Stage's play Acting Mad. (Photo: Facebook/The Necessary Stage)

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SINGAPORE: Singaporeans are becoming more open to learning about and seeking help for mental health, experts said.

However, misconceptions surrounding the topic remain prevalent, they said.

They pointed to the role of the media, government bodies, and advocacy groups in raising interest and awareness of mental health among Singaporeans, especially the youth. This has moved the needle on people seeking help.

“With this increased awareness, there's also more willingness to come forward to seek treatment. That's the trend we've seen in our hospital – the youth today are more willing to seek mental health help, and their parents as well,” said Dr Lim Choon Guan from the Institute of Mental Health (IMH).

Dr Lim, a senior consultant and deputy chief at IMH's department of developmental psychiatry, added that he has been getting an increasing number of queries from students keen on working on mental health-related topics for their A-level projects.



It's not just the teenagers who are interested in the topic.

A graded elective on mental health he taught at Nanyang Technological University was oversubscribed every semester, Dr Lim said.

He noted that residency enrolment for psychiatry as a specialist training for IMH's junior doctors has also been overwhelming.

NOT ENOUGH AVENUES FOR LEARNING

Despite the growing interest in the topic, people may not know where to seek information, Silver Ribbon's executive director Porsche Poh told CNA.

“A lot of people are keen to learn more. It's just that there aren't enough platforms for them to share,” said Ms Poh.

Discussions about mental health on social media can be a double-edged sword, Ms Poh noted. While the platforms help with raising awareness, there is also mental health shaming, she said. She recalled the time she saw someone joking about a mental health issue.

“I appealed to the person, saying ‘you wouldn't do that if let's say this person is your loved one’ and the person just ignored me and said that I'm being sensitive,” she said.

“(There’s) still a long way to go for our community to be more kind and more sensitive towards persons with mental health issues.”

Stigma remains a concern - a CNA survey found that 66 per cent of respondents in Singapore were concerned about the stigma surrounding mental health.

Ms Poh’s organisation, which advocates mental health, has got creative in sending its message across and starting conversations.

The charity organisation has partnered with theatre group The Necessary Stage for a few years in plays such as Off Centre and Acting Mad, which have been described as “taking an honest and unflinching look at mental illness and the stigma surrounding it”.

During those plays, Silver Ribbon volunteers stand by as mental health responders for audience members who might be affected by the themes.

“There’s a need to customise our events according to different target audiences to get their attention, and to provide a platform for everybody to discuss about mental health, so that they know where to seek help and where to refer their loved ones to,” Ms Poh said.

MISCONCEPTIONS, STIGMA SURROUNDING MENTAL HEALTH

Although things are improving on the awareness front, misconceptions remain, the experts said.

Such misconceptions need to be addressed, as they might deter some from seeking help, said Dr Lim.

“It’s quite common to hear young patients or parents ask if being diagnosed with a mental illness means they have to take medications, and if these medications will be lifelong,” said Dr Lim.

“Very often, treatment doesn’t necessarily involve medication. There are effective psychological therapies for many conditions as well. And even if a person is started on medication, it is not common for them to require the medication lifelong.”

Dr Lim added that sensational portrayals of persons with mental illness in the media could mislead the public to see them as dangerous or violent, when such cases are “few and far between”.

“In fact, most individuals with mental illnesses are actually not aggressive, violent or dangerous,” said Dr Lim. “So many of them yearn to lead a normal, regular life like each and every one of us. And if given proper treatment, a chance to, they can.”

However, with more information readily available and misconceptions easing, the situation is improving.

Dr Lim gave an example of parents who were more likely to be hesitant to get their child a medical certificate from IMH in the past, as they were afraid that their child would be shunned.

“Some parents were previously hesitant about letting the schools know about their child seeking help as they were worried that these students may be isolated by their friends or teachers,” he said. “But today, schools can offer so much more support. You find parents being very much more willing to share information.”