

Volunteers crucial to raise mental health awareness amid Covid-19 pandemic



Madam Kong Ching Mei, Dr T. Chandroo and Mr Mohamed Zailani Mohamed Said are among the volunteers recognised by Silver Ribbon Singapore at its inaugural long-service award event on Saturday. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MADAM KONG CHING MEI, SILVER RIBBON SINGAPORE.

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SINGAPORE - With mental health issues brought to the fore as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, not only are more volunteers needed to spread the word on this issue, but everyone also has a role to play in looking out for neighbours and loved ones, said Parliamentary Secretary for Culture, Community and Youth Eric Chua on Saturday (Nov 13).

"The past year and a half have amplified how crucial mental well-being is to our overall health... Stressors are felt by people from all walks of life and across age groups," he said at mental health advocacy organisation Silver Ribbon Singapore's inaugural long-service award event on Saturday.

The virtual ceremony recognised 15 volunteers who have spent five to 15 years combating the stigma shadowing mental illness and have been encouraging people in the community to seek help early

The 15-year-old organisation - run by seven staff - is heavily reliant on its 622 volunteers, comprising businessmen, lawyers, individuals with mental health issues and caregivers.

"Silver Ribbon Singapore has limited manpower and resources. We therefore depend heavily on dedicated and highly motivated volunteers to join us to combat mental health stigma and to encourage afflicted persons to seek help early," said Ms Ellen Lee, the organisation's president.

One of the award recipients is Mr Mohamed Zailani Mohamed Said, 60, who has been volunteering with the charity for five years. He was first approached to be an emcee for a Silver Ribbon event a few years ago. He is a well-known grassroots leader at Geylang Serai Community Club (CC), and Silver Ribbon had a branch at the CC back then.

Since then, he has been hosting various events for the charity and also organised his own talks and sharing sessions at the CC to raise mental health awareness.

"Whenever we talk about mental health, people will always relate it to IMH (Institute of Mental Health), which is wrong. That's why I'm trying to erase that mindset people have about mental health," said Mr Zailani, who works as a building officer for the Singapore Symphony Orchestra.

His own knowledge of mental illness has improved from hosting Silver Ribbon events, he said, and he shares it with people around him.

"For those with mental health issues, we should be their friend. I will tell them there is always a solution to any problem," he added.

Silver Ribbon's roles include educating the public about the warning signs of common mental disorders and the consequences of delayed treatment. This is done through outreach events and personal counselling sessions.

Over the past 15 years, the organisation has benefited more than 860,000 individuals, said Mr Chua, who is also Parliamentary Secretary for Social and Family Development.

On a national level, the Covid-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce was set up last year to coordinate Singapore's response to mental health needs arising from the pandemic.

In August, the task force offered three recommendations to address the mental health landscape here. These included building an online portal for resources and developing a national strategy for mental health and well-being.

Another volunteer who was recognised at the award ceremony is Madam Kong Ching Mei, 71. She is the sole caregiver of her daughter and sister, who have mental health issues, and her husband, who is recovering from cancer.

Despite her heavy caregiving duties, she has been volunteering with Silver Ribbon for five years, checking on seniors who live alone in rental flats and encouraging her friends to seek help if she notices signs of depression.

"I insisted on taking my friend to a doctor because I neglected to take my daughter to one while her symptoms were still mild. The doctor said my friend was on the verge of developing depression. I was so relieved I could help someone," said Madam Kong.

Her daughter, 44, was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 2013.

The 15 volunteers honoured on Saturday included board members of Silver Ribbon Singapore. One of them is Dr T. Chandroo, chairman and chief executive of Modern Montessori International Group.

Dr Chandroo, who joined the board 10 years ago and is currently its vice-president, has been helping to guide the organisation's direction and policies.

"The first and foremost objective of Silver Ribbon is to help people. Unfortunately, as humans, we are filled with more negative thoughts than positive ones. At the end of the day, we want to help people out of this tunnel and see a very bright light," said Dr Chandroo, 67.