

Seeking Therapy in Asia

Mental health is an issue that isn't openly discussed as it's still seen as taboo in Asian societies. However we can't run away from the realities of mental health problems that are clearly on the rise.

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A study conducted by the Institute of Mental Health in Singapore in 2014, called *The Mind Matters: A Study of Mental Health Literacy*, showed that 88 per cent of those surveyed believed that seeking help from a psychiatrist would be beneficial to someone with mental illness. Yet, the ‘taint’ of mental illness is so strong in this part of the world that most individuals avoid seeking help. There is a prevailing sense of collectivism in many Asian societies; the idea that the harmony and strength of the group is more important than any one person. This notion remains unchallenged despite the fact that many of our social and cultural structures are falling apart to make way for rapid economic development and an increasingly competitive—and individualistic—way of life, especially in high-stress countries like Singapore, Hong Kong, and

South Korea.

In many ways, it is this very clash—and the lack of emotional support and resources for these diverging worldviews—that has led to this rise. South Korea currently has the second-highest rate of suicide in the world, according to the World Health Organization. Meanwhile, *Singapore Mental Health Study* in 2011 revealed that the country was the ‘OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) capital of the world’; 1 in 33 people suffer from the condition. This is higher than the rate in the United States (2.3 per cent) or Europe (1.1 per cent).

These alarming rates have galvanised countries into action; The Strategies to Prevent Suicide (STOPS) in Asia, initiated by Suicide Prevention International is working across the region to better understand the epidemic while working and developing projects that will help prevent

suicide. A key part of this? Letting people know that it’s okay to seek professional help.

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**FIRST THINGS FIRST:
UNDERSTANDING THE STIGMA**

In Asian societies, familial and social harmony is key—“Saving face—the ability to preserve the public appearance of the patient and family for the sake of community propriety—is extremely important to most Asian groups,” says Elizabeth Kramer in her study on cultural factors that influence the mental health of East Asians. To talk openly about personal and emotional issues is to bring shame and dishonour to one’s family, and disrupts this peaceful coexistence.

Priya Alika Elias echoed this sentiment in her insightful article



on the silence of mental health in the South Asian community, "The concept of izzat, or honour, is paramount to those raised in traditional South Asian families... To admit to mental health issues would be to threaten the izzat of one's family...As a consequence, we live performatively. We maintain izzat at the expense of individual health."

Stoicism in the face of adversity is borne out of this sense of duty to family and community. In a way, it is not the mental issue that is stigmatised but the inability to overcome one's issues without bringing attention to one's self. In the same study by the Institute of Mental Health in Singapore, many respondents believed that the issue was a "sign of personal weakness", and that mental health issues could be resolved "if they wanted to".

As a result, many choose to suffer in silence.

SEEKING HELP

Dr Yeo Pei Li, a licensed and registered counsellor at Rekindle Centre for Systemic Therapy, believes that the stigma runs so deep that most patients don't seek help until they are at what she terms 'level 3'. Prior to her stint at Rekindle, Dr Yeo worked at a public hospital where patients would fail to show up for appointments or be reluctant to participate fully in sessions.

It's different in private

practice. "Patients who are willing to commit the time and money—therapy can easily run into the thousands for long-term sessions—are often those

who have made a conscious decision to get better." In her daily work, Dr Yeo encounters couple and intergenerational family conflicts and believes

WINNING WAYS TO MENTAL WELLBEING

Introduce these 5 simple strategies into your life and you will feel the benefits.



CONNECT

TALK & LISTEN,
BE THERE,
FEEL CONNECTED



GIVE

YOUR TIME,
YOUR WORDS,
YOUR PRESENCE



TAKE NOTICE

REMEMBER THE
SIMPLE THINGS THAT
GIVE YOU JOY



KEEP LEARNING

EMBRACE NEW
EXPERIENCES, SEE
OPPORTUNITIES,
SURPRISE YOURSELF



BE ACTIVE

DO WHAT YOU CAN,
ENJOY WHAT YOU DO,
MOVE YOUR MOOD

Source: Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand

that the younger generation is growing more open to seeking therapy and counselling. When she first started out as a student, there was only one struggling private practice in Kuala Lumpur as well as a number of NGOs like the Befrienders who did not charge patients. Rekindle is now one among a growing number of private centres, a fact which reflects the value that the industry now has.

Sping Lim, a practising psychologist at Flourish KL who works with individuals, families and caregivers to manage health-related challenges through behaviour change and psychological coping concurs. "Generally, people find my profession 'cool'. Let's face it, psychologist is not a common profession in Malaysia so people find it interesting and are curious about it."

Dr Yeo also notes that some people surprisingly respond well to therapy because "I don't give them medicine." One of the bigger stigmas is towards drugs as a form of treatment, and therapy is seen as a more 'natural' alternative.

HOW DO WE NORMALISE SEEKING THERAPY?

Dr Yeo encourages people to treat their brains as just another organ. "If you have diabetes, you will take medicine for life. If your brain is sick, why are you so resistant?" She's happy to note that some Western countries are beginning

to recognise counselling and therapy as legitimate forms of mental health treatment alongside medication for insurance purposes, and hopes to see the same locally.

Many individuals also receive treatment when they seek help at hospitals and clinics for accompanying physical symptoms; some may receive correct diagnoses of depression, anxiety, and so on but the first, and often only treatment is drugs. Dr Yeo firmly believes that drugs are an important part of the road to recovery, but that it should be supplemented with therapy for long-term growth as a natural course of action.

Both Dr Yeo and Lim agree that mental health professionals play a role in bringing awareness to therapy, and do so through talks, workshops, and social media. "When we understand better about something, we are less defensive and more open to it. Slowly, it becomes normal," notes Lim.

THE BENEFITS OF THERAPY

"Psychiatry works on a medical model—I am a doctor, and you need to listen to me. As counsellors, we are in partnership with the client. I am not an expert, just a facilitator," says Dr Yeo.

Studies have shown that talking helps. A 2007 brain imaging study by psychologists at the University of California revealed that

"verbalising our feelings makes our sadness, anger and pain less intense." Lead researcher Matthew D. Lieberman notes that "in the same way you hit the brake when you're driving when you see a yellow light, when you put feelings into words, you seem to be hitting the brakes on your emotional responses."

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It's not just about the bad feelings. Talking with a professional helps you make sense of your emotions, and see how they are affecting you in your everyday life. Dr Yeo has patients who come in week after week for long-term sustainable treatment, but she also has a fair share of "massage" type clients who come in whenever they're feeling distressed to vent.

Lieberman notes that this kind of therapy may be beneficial in the long term, as it helps strengthen the brain region that processes emotions.

USING THERAPY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Therapy can be expensive, and is not a ready option for everyone. Some teaching centres

like Rekindle offer cheaper sessions with interns doing their masters as an alternative.

Lim is a firm proponent of introducing therapy into everyday life. "Yes. Bring therapy out of the therapy room! The concept of therapy is not only about two persons sitting in a private room and addressing the challenges. Therapy involves training many other self-management skills, for example deep breathing skills to relieve anxiety or stress, which is a skill that is very useful in our daily life. For example, when you get frustrated and stressed out in the traffic jam, you could do some deep breathing to soothe yourself down rather than letting emotion takes over you. Imagine if we could bring these skills out of the therapy room and equip everyone with these skills, mental health will certainly be improved!"

One or two session can help individuals become "unstuck", allowing them to use the skills they've learned to be mindful of themselves and their emotions. If finance is an issue, individuals can seek help from NGOs such as the Befrienders. Dr Yeo also encourages people to read self-help books to learn more about therapeutic skills that can be applied in everyday life.

The important lesson here? Not dealing with emotions doesn't make the issue go away; in many cases it can make things worse. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Dr Yeo notes, "If they come in earlier, chances are better." ■

MIND YOUR HEAD

Mental health apps can be effective in making therapy more accessible, efficient, and portable. Here are some apps recommended by Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

MINDSHIFT

Targeted to help adolescents, teens, and young adults gain insight into and basic skills to manage their symptoms of anxiety disorders, including social anxiety, specific phobias, and panic attacks. It's also useful for managing worry, performance anxiety, test anxiety, and perfectionism. The skills taught may be applied to individuals with physical, emotional, cognitive, or behavioural manifestations of anxiety, providing users with more helpful, balanced ways of thinking about feared situations.



T2 MOOD TRACKER



Helps individuals track their emotional states and how they change over time for personal insight and accurate reporting to a mental health professional. The skills taught may be applied to individuals with depression, anxiety, stress, trauma-related feelings, any other self-identified emotional states, as well as Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), chronic pain; customizable for sleep and other issues.

LIVE OCD FREE

Designed for CBT treatment of OCD with different sections for children and adults. It includes standard and user-designed exposures, ERP (exposure response prevention) exercises; a cognitive toolkit, and ERP reminder, and an ERP guide with custom and standard ERPs. Duration of ERP exercises is determined by time but not by decrease in anxiety levels.



In the Shrink's Office

Anyone can develop a mental health problem. Seeking treatment or getting help can help you live a fulfilled life and strengthen yourself for the future.



Did you know that it was reported by the Malaysian Digest in 2015 that suicide was the second cause of death among youths? Statistics have also shown that mental illnesses among Malaysian adults have increased to 29 per cent in 2015 and it was only 11 per cent nine years prior. Understanding the importance therapy plays in these situations, *Calibre* got into the minds of 3 different mental health professionals to address the common misconceptions in hopes to help remove the stigma that revolves around counselling and psychology, and psychiatric help.



Dr Anasuya Jegathesan

Senior Lecturer & Academic
Head of the Masters in
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University and Licensed Counsellor



Only crazy people need therapy

It's imperative to realise that counselling is for normal people in abnormal situations. Everyone has their own set of problems. Having a supportive non-judgmental listener, who will support you in unravelling a tangled situation will help you improve your well-being. You're ultimately responsible for your mental health and happiness so be proactive. Build a solid foundation of philosophy, relationships and interests to support you in times of stress and confusion.

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Improving mental health is extremely difficult

Guilt and jealousy are two emotions that really jeopardise mental health. Guilt means you are carrying a burden of responsibility for something you have no hope for changing, and jealousy is where we negatively compare ourselves to others. When we surrender the responsibility of the decisions we make in our lives to other people or events, we can easily lose direction. Being responsible actually helps our mental health—but being responsible means that you have the power and the ability to change a situation. Self-discovery, travelling, and doing new things, these activities do improve mental health. Make sure to have a complex network of support—not just one group of friends or one interest. Having numerous supports, activities, and interests give us a complex personality with much more resources that we can tap into during times of pain.

It's fine to worry

To strengthen mental health, have a healthy outlook in life. Take control of your thinking and actions without letting emotions overwhelm us. Meditation, exercise, spending time with loved ones, friends, and even pets can contribute to mental health improvement. The best thing to do is to stop wasting your time worrying. If you have planned to the best of your ability and done all you can—worrying is NOT going to help make things better; it's a total waste of mental space and can lead to all kinds of problems.



Dr Johnben Loy, PhD

Clinical Director of
Rekindle Centre for
Systemic Therapy and President
of the Association for Marriage &
Family Therapy Malaysia (AMFTM)



Therapy sessions are just like how they are depicted in movies

Depends on which movie. Movies tend to portray something dramatic. While there are dramatic moments in therapy, much of it is about helping people to come to the realisation of what and how to change their lives from worse to better. Sometimes, it can feel a little dull to someone observing the session who may not know much about what I am doing—sort of like watching a game of chess being played when you don't know much about how to play chess. Relationship therapy sessions can be more engaging as there is more interaction happening between clients and the therapist.

Mental Health Professionals aren't really listening to you and they are mostly frauds

Therapists must listen well, sometimes even hearing things that clients might be alluding to but not really aware of. The therapist must have the ability to ask the right questions to draw out the insights from the clients themselves. It is important that therapists are

able to resonate well with a client's personality and background, and are also knowledgeable of their client's presenting issues. I encourage Malaysians to be intelligent consumers of mental health services. Ask the providers about their background, their education, their training, their practice modality, what the differences are between modalities, etc. Feel free to go for a second or a third opinion if necessary. Be cautious when you are asked to pay for future psychological services up front, especially the promise of a package of treatments. An ethical provider will allow clients to stop therapy at any time. Be a wise and critical consumer of any provider that packages other forms of treatment (e.g. alternative nutritional supplements) to go with psychological services.

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Mental health isn't as important as physical health

There is no health without mental health. Mental health is absolutely essential. Moreover, mental health and physical health are connected. It does not make sense to ignore one for the other. It is like saying, "When I walk, I only need one leg, not the other." You need both your physical and your mental health, and they impact each other.



***Dr Alvin Ng Lai Oon,
DPsych (Murdoch)***

Associate Professor/
Chair, BSc (Hons) in Psychology
Programme at Sunway University



You always leave therapy sessions feeling good about yourself

A common misconception about clinical psychologists is that we are counsellors who people can come talk to about problems and then go home feeling good. We are more technicians than counsellors. We conduct psychological assessments and investigations, and then write diagnostic reports as our main business. What we do as therapists (either clinical psychologist, counselling psychologist, or a counsellor) is to help you understand your problem better so that you can take the necessary steps to learn skills to manage them in order to be as functional as possible in life, regardless of whether or not you are happy when you leave our session. Our purpose is to help empower you. Your happiness is up to you.

Psychologist and other mental health professionals can read your mind

We are not magicians and neither can we perform miraculous treatments to cure people of their illnesses in a very short duration, nor convince stubborn people to change. We are scientist-practitioners who use evidence-based methods in applied psychology to assess, diagnose, treat and prevent mental health issues i.e. learning, behavioural, cognitive and emotional problems. Disorders take time to develop, and so they take time to heal. We take time to assess individuals in relation to their families, work, and functioning by doing a lot of detective work before assisting them to identify possible strategies to work on for a better quality of life. These include learning new skills, processing emotions, changing behaviours, and modifying thought patterns. In doing these it may seem like we are able to read your mind—we still can't but in knowing you better, we're better able to make accurate guesses.

Therapy sessions are just as good as a talk with a friend

Unlike a regular chat over coffee with someone you know, mental health professionals can help the individual learn about themselves in relation to their

problems in a more systematic way that is backed up by research evidence. This can be therapeutic in itself as it may give some good insights as to what can be done to improve quality of life. Other plus points or benefits include (but are not limited to) being acknowledged and validated by another person without judgment, having an ally in making a change and to process thoughts and feelings with, and learning new skills to make positive and functional changes that are objectively measure to show you evidence of progress. 🇸🇬

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MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS IN A NUTSHELL

Dr Alvin Ng explains how we can tell them apart.

1 Counsellor

Non-medical professional with non-diagnosing approach. Predominantly does counselling focusing on normal people facing overwhelming and abnormal situations. Supports clients in redefining their roles in life, unravelling complex situations and self-healing.

psychologists usually work within hospital or psychiatric setting, counselling psychologists work within public/community setting.

3 Marriage and Family Therapist

Carries out counselling in a systemic approach where the family system is being managed rather than an individualistic approach in the previous three professions.

4 Occupational Therapist

A health professional concerned with how both mental and physical health affects involvement in the roles, activities, and processes of everyday living and vice versa. They come up with practical strategies together with clients to ensure smooth and meaningful implementation of healthy lifestyle adjustments.

5 Psychiatrist

A medical specialist who uses the medical model to treat mental health problems. Most often they prescribe medication that reduces symptoms of mental disorders. They can also provide advice on lifestyle changes for mental health improvement. They may do psychotherapy if time and training permit.

2 Clinical/Counselling Psychologist

Non-medical specialist who uses a biopsychosocial approach to treat mental health problems. Predominantly carries out assessments that contribute to diagnosis of mental illnesses and related disabilities. Note: clinical

