



With less stigma attached, peer-to-peer counselling is more palatable for young people seeking help for mental health issues. NUR SYAHIIDAH ZAINAL reports

**F**riends may not always be there and family is sometimes too busy to care. So when you are burdened with mental anguish, finding a way to deal may be just as stressful as dealing with your troubles.

This is becoming less of an issue now as the number of support groups has been rising because of the increased awareness over mental health issues.

More specifically, peer support by youth for youth is growing. Groups of young people here are taking the lead in providing support to those peers who are in need of help but are reluctant to approach professionals due to the stigma that surrounds mental health and illnesses, and those who ask for help for such issues.

One such group is Campus PSY (Peer Support for Youths), which was officially launched in February. It aims to empower youth volunteers, starting with students in tertiary institutions, by teaching them how

to help anyone who may be in distress and are unable to cope with stress from, for example, issues surrounding his academics or personal relationships.

To kick things off, the group has recruited and trained close to 30 youth volunteers to become peer helpers.

Mr Cho Ming Xiu, 30, one of the six people who spearheaded the idea of Campus PSY, saw a need for such counsellors based on his personal experiences with friends who were in distress but were reluctant to approach professionals.

He pointed to the stigma surrounding seeking help as the main reason. He said: "People associate going to mental health professionals with having mental health problems. That stigma really deters, not just young people, but also people in general from seeking treatment."

That same reluctance has also been noticed by the members of the SMU Peer Helpers from Singapore Management University (SMU).

Mr Lin Shao Tong, 24, one of the SMU helpers, said: "There's definitely a negative perception (of approaching professionals). I have friends who struggle with these issues, and many of them don't want to go (seek help), and if they do go, they don't want other people to know."

Formed in 2004, it was the first such group in a tertiary institution. It is currently made up of 50 undergraduates who have been trained to spot signs of distress, such as signs of being overwhelmed, in their schoolmates.

Other schools with peer support programmes include:

■ Raffles Institution, which started a Peer Helper Programme last year. Twenty-nine students were trained in basic counselling skills and mental health issues. The school also has a Mental Health Awareness Week, which first started in 2015, to help its students understand conditions such as depression by delivering information in the form of booklets and booths set up in the canteen.

■ Raffles Girls' School, which started a peer support system last year for student leaders to help juniors look after their classes' well-being. This included teaching them ways to handle cliquish behaviour and when to highlight problems to form teachers.

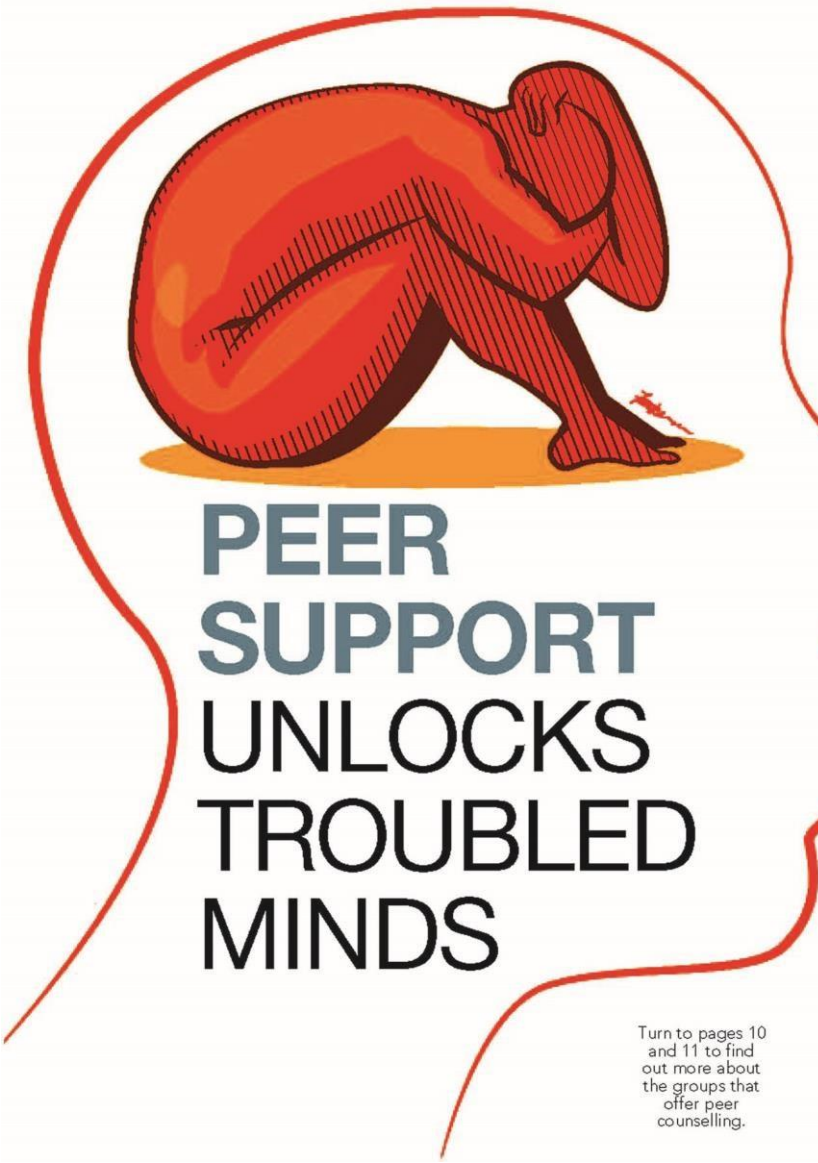
■ Holy Innocents' High School, where every class has care representatives that keep an eye out those who might be emotionally disturbed, anxious or stressed. They also encourage their peers to seek help when needed.

On the national level, the importance of peer support among students was acknowledged earlier this year, when the NurtureSG task force stressed how important strong support networks and building resilience are for young people.

The Ministry of Education and Health Promotion Board, which recognise that parents or teachers may not be the first choice of support for students in distress, are progressively strengthening peer support structures in mainstream schools and institutes of higher learning by providing resources and training.

This includes equipping students with peer-helping skills, strategies and mindsets to look out for friends in distress, and to make timely referrals to adults or professionals for further support.

**This writer understands that feeling of reluctance very well – it took her years before she could pluck up the courage to seek professional help.**



Turn to pages 10 and 11 to find out more about the groups that offer peer counselling.



After its official launch in February, Campus PSY recruited close to 30 ambassadors for an inaugural three-month intensive training programme, which included interactive case discussions and role playing. PHOTO CAMPUS PSY

## COUNSELLORS ON CAMPUS

**T**his new peer support group hopes to put more trained mental health ambassadors on campuses islandwide soon. And they will be fellow young people.

Campus PSY (Peer Support for Youths) aims to equip students from tertiary institutions, starting with universities, with the skills to approach and help their peers who are in distress.

A group of six friends started the group last July, including Mr Cho Ming Xiu, 30, and Ms Sui Hui Ching, 23.

The seasoned volunteers, who help out at institutions such as the Institute for Mental Health, were certain that there was a need for such a support group.

For Mr Cho, who is currently studying social work at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, it was a friend's experience with mental illness that first piqued his curiosity.

During his time at Temasek Junior College, he noticed how a classmate had been constantly absent from school.

When his teacher informed the class that the classmate had withdrawn from school due to severe depression and anxiety, Mr Cho was confused as his friend had been jovial and athletic.

Mr Cho and his other classmates then visited his friend regularly, accompanying him on walks around his house or simply to sit and chat.

He said: "At first, we didn't know how to help

because we didn't know what it was he was going through, so we went to find out what depression and anxiety was."

His friend's condition gradually improved – he eventually enlisted in the army, went back to school after completing his national service and is now well.

He said: "Peer support is really integral to helping anyone, not just young people, with mental health issues to recover and get them back on their feet again."

Ms Sui added: "We believe in peer helping and we do want to help others."

After its official launch in February, Campus PSY recruited close to 30 ambassadors for an inaugural three-month intensive training programme. The group also aims to have a Campus PSY peer helping community within all the tertiary institutions.

During the training period, the ambassadors picked up skills that were essential for peer helpers, through interactive case discussions and role-play scenarios in various modules such as Introduction to Peer Helping and Basic Mental Health Literacy, Resilience, De-escalation skills and Self-Care.

The group's community partners, which included the Community Health Assessment Team, Over The Rainbow, Singapore Association for Mental Health and Samaritans of Singapore, conducted the training.

## EXPERT ADVICE ON DEALING WITH EXAM STRESS

BY GOH YAN HAN

**W**ith the exam season coming up, students all over Singapore are in revision mode.

But don't get overwhelmed by study stress! Two experts who have helped students deal with mental health challenges caused by exam stress told IN how to tackle that bugbear.

Mr Daniel Koh, a psychologist from Insights Mind Centre and Ms Sylvia Ang, a senior counsellor at Singapore's Children's Society shared their advice.

### DO YOU FEEL THIS WAY?

Are you feeling as if everything takes more effort, or you seem to be making more mistakes? Perhaps, when you are stuck on a question, you feel really angry and frustrated?





SMU Peer Helpers can be found at The Cozy Haven, a clubhouse run by the group. There, students can just relax and decompress or chat with trained peer counsellors. PHOTO SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY



On weekend mornings, volunteers with Matchsticks plan and lead Institute of Mental Health patients in various activities that stimulate their minds while entertaining them. PHOTO MATCHSTICKS OF IMH

## SAFE SPACES FOR VENTING

University life comes bundled with numerous stresses – from academic pressure and CCA commitments to relationship issues – which may need your attention all at the same time.

To help students at Singapore Management University (SMU) who are feeling overwhelmed, a group of their fellow undergraduates are trained to look out for signs of distress in their peers.

The SMU Peer Helpers, which works closely with the counsellors at the school's Mrs Wong Kwok Leong Student Wellness Centre, act as the eyes and ears of the professionals, and are the first point of contact for any schoolmates in need of help.

Ms Ada Chung, 44, head of the student wellness centre, said that by reaching out to their schoolmates, peer helpers play a very important role. She added: "They bridge the gap between the school community and the centre."

All of the 50 current helpers have gone through strict training to ensure that they are able to give the appropriate support and care. Even before joining the team, there is a weekly training session, held over six weeks, that covers basic skills for all potential helpers. They must then pass interviews to be selected.

The programme uses role-playing and case discussions, to pass on skills such as crisis management, suicide intervention, the ability to express emotional support and empathy, and how to adopt a non-judgmental attitude.

Finding someone to talk to at SMU is pretty simple: all a student needs to do is to drop by The Cozy Haven, a clubhouse run by the group.

True to its name, it is a space filled with comfortable couches, books, board and video games, where students can just relax, either alone or with friends. The only thing not allowed? Studying.

If they need to chat with someone, there are peer helpers on duty.

Peer helper Lin Shao Tong, 24, who is a sociology and arts and culture management major, said that it is easy "to tell the difference between the people who are here to play FIFA or the people who are here genuinely wanting to talk to someone".

"Students know to come here to talk to us," he added.

Fellow helper Tan Jing Yee, 22, a sociology and public policy and public management major, said that stress is usually the reason people seek her out for a chat.

"Sometimes, I think they just want to rant – it can be about studies, or fallings-out with their project mates or significant others, things like that," she said.

Fellow helper Chew En Chin, 22, an economics and public policy and public management major, added: "I think, most of the time, they just want someone to listen. They usually already know what solutions they have but, sometimes, I think they are just too emotionally burdened."

## WARDS FULL OF GOOD CHEER

They turn up bright and early at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) on Saturday mornings, filling the main lobby with lively chatter and laughter.

These chirpy souls are members of Matchsticks of IMH (Matchsticks), a group that wants to add colour and cheer to the otherwise routine days of the long-term patients staying there.

Currently, Matchsticks has adopted five wards. Every week, armed with games, art supplies and snacks, small groups of volunteers head to their assigned ward. Volunteers usually go to the same ward weekly as the continuity helps them build more meaningful relationships with the patients there.

It clearly works. Patients were quick to spot the familiar faces, and hugs and handshakes were aplenty as the groups entered the wards.

Volunteers plan and lead the patients in various activities which must not only entertain the patients, but also stimulate their minds and cater to their interests.

Ward leader Ayn Chuan, 20, an economics undergraduate from the National University of Singapore, said: "We try to do different activities every week so that it can keep them active."

The group was started three years ago by Mr Jonathan Kuek, 26, a psychology undergraduate at James Cook University, who noticed a lack of volunteers while helping out at IMH.

Getting the group off the ground was not easy. Apart from dividing his time between different wards, he also had to motivate volunteers

to return regularly. "Most of them were not willing to participate or plan things on their own, so that was a big problem," he said.

He credited the current batch of volunteers, including its leaders, for being committed.

"That's when we (the group) started growing, because now we have ward leaders who are really passionate about serving the patients here. More people started wanting to join us then because we have more activities, more diversity, more wards to choose from," he said.

On how they help new volunteers to feel more comfortable, ward leader Kee Yi Ting, 21, a psychology student from the University at Buffalo at SIM Global Education, said: "Some of them are shy and are unsure of what they can do. So we explain the day's activities to them, so that they know ahead of time and can do it together with the patients."

While these weekend mornings are mainly for the benefit of the patients, they are precious to the volunteers, too. No matter how difficult or stressful their week at school or work was, turning up for their weekly "dates" with their "special friends" is a must.

On what motivates her to return weekly, Matchsticks assistant leader Yong Yong Qing, 20, an information systems undergraduate at the Singapore Management University, said: "It's about making an effort to make a difference in someone else's life. It's really not a lot of time, just two hours in the morning, and you can make a difference in so many other people's lives."

Such negativity may lead to a spiralling cycle that sees anxiety, fear of exams, depression, negative thinking, self doubt and anger, said Mr Koh. "This makes it harder to cope with your daily routine as well as self and others' expectations," he led.

One might also experience sudden changes in mood, loss of interest in studying, become easily distressed, and a tendency to isolate oneself as well as an emotional and behavioural issues.

Sometimes, people also develop negative coping behaviours, said Ms Ang.

This includes self-harm, harbouring suicidal thoughts, using drugs to improve memory and focus, as well as over-relying on social media outlets to share about stress, which causes one to check one's phone 7.

### WHAT ARE SOME CAUSES?

Mr Koh emphasised that stress, lack of rest and poor sleep make for the worst combination. Apart from creating physical issues, such as fatigue, they result in decreased mental efficiency, due to poorer concentration, memory, reaction time and processing skills.

Ms Ang added that anxiety or panic attacks may be triggered by fear of underperforming during exams as well as not meeting the expectations of parents and of themselves.

### WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

Having sufficient rest is important, said both experts. Mr Koh said: "Help yourself by having enough rest and breaks so that your brain can recharge for the next tasks. Feeling fresh can help to make learning faster and more accurate."

Ms Ang added that insufficient sleep will cause one to feel irritable and affect one's ability to focus on revision as well as when taking the exam.

As the body and mind are closely linked, a cared for body that feels in top shape will also influence your mental state.

Ms Ang suggested eating more green leafy vegetables that contain high amounts of vitamin B to regulate mood and prevent depression, as well as more fruits that contain vitamin C that can help release stress hormones.

She also stressed the importance of maintaining a balanced overall diet and sufficient hydration – drink at least two litres of water a day.

Exercise can also help as it releases endorphins that makes one feel good, and releases physical tension and stress in the muscles.

Apart from lifestyle habits, it is also important to have manageable goals.

Mr Koh said: "If (your parents and teachers) put pressure on you, discuss it with them and explain how it (the pressure from them) is not helping (you)."

Furthermore, keeping quiet allows problems to accumulate, he added.

He suggested having a realistic study plan and reviewing what needs more time so you can focus on it first. "Know yourself and your ability and avoid comparing with others. Look at your own achievements to reassure yourself," he advised.

Ms Ang said: "Both parents and students need to discuss and agree on their expectations for academic achievement." Realistic goals and expectations for results should be set.

She recommends seeking help with the school counsellor or teacher, and speaking to trusted friends or family if feeling overly stressed.

Source: The Sunday Times @ Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Permission required for reproduction