

# A Path to Hope and Healing



**Depression and social anxiety interrupted her teenage years. Now, Ms Gek Wan Sing is fighting back and helping other youths with mental health challenges.**

Interview KOH YUEN LIN  
Photo ALVIN TEO

**MS GEK WAN SING**

24, CHAT Ambassador

**T**o many of us, sharing a meal with friends is a thing of enjoyment. Yet for others, it can be a nerve-racking event — stressful to the point that it induces nausea. Such was the case for Ms Gek Wan Sing. The 24-year-old recounts the struggles she experienced during her secondary school and polytechnic days with embarrassed giggles and a dose of humour. Yet, her condition was no laughing matter. Struggling with depression and social anxiety, she went through periods when her mental state impacted her life drastically and was self-harming at 14.

## FROM AFFIRMATION-SEEKING TO SELF-HARMING

A high achiever in primary school, Ms Gek's grades began plummeting in Secondary 2. It triggered a vicious circle. Arguments

between her and her disappointed parents ensued, creating greater stress for Ms Gek and causing her grades to dip even lower. "I am someone who relies heavily on external validation," she shares. "I am very affected by setbacks and doubt myself a lot (if I don't get the approval of others)."

This period coincided with puberty, "and the hormonal changes made me very emotional", recalls Ms Gek. It was a downward spiral that she was sucked into so quickly that she never realised what was happening to her. Then, one day, furious after a fight with her parents, she self-harmed. "I wanted a way to vent my anger but didn't want to hurt anybody else, so I just took it out on myself," she says.

Ms Gek managed to get through secondary school without external help. After her final exams, the temporary relief made her think her depression was only a phase. She also found polytechnic culture

more manageable for her. "Even when my grades started to slip again, my parents were more relaxed, having observed what I went through in secondary school," she says. "I felt freer and thought I was doing okay."

Yet, that was when she started showing signs of social anxiety. Her affirmation-seeking nature meant that she felt the pressure to fit in. "The new environment at polytechnic, my new-found freedom and meeting new people gave me a lot of anxiety," she says. "During orientation camp, I constantly felt that people were staring at me — to the point that I couldn't even eat. I also have a phobia of being nauseated, but the anxiety meant that I couldn't hold my food down. I started biting the insides of my mouth to distract myself."

Ms Gek constantly stressed over how others would think of her. "Even texting was

very anxiety-inducing because I couldn't read the recipient's expression," she says. "I would constantly rewrite (my messages) so that I wouldn't offend anybody or give the wrong impression — especially when it came to those I am not very close to."

## THE LOW BEFORE THE CLIMB UPWARDS

While Ms Gek wrestled with social anxieties, an internship in a workplace with a negative culture worsened things. She also happened to be taking acne medication, which — she did not realise at the time — was linked to depressive symptoms, and her mood deteriorated further. "I cried every day," she says. "I felt I wasn't going to survive this. Yet I had to complete my internship as it was tied to my grade point average. I also tried reaching out to some friends, but they had their issues to grapple with and couldn't really help me."

In her darkest days, her mother sent her a web link to CHAT (formerly Community Health Assessment Team) — a youth-focused national mental health assessment and outreach service for individuals aged between 16 and 30. "When I saw the message, I was moved," she says. "I knew my parents love me despite our disputes."

Ms Gek promptly contacted CHAT and was given an appointment for an assessment, followed by referrals to a psychiatrist and counsellor. "Meeting my psychiatrist was the turning point. He was very reassuring, and when I was diagnosed (with depression and social anxiety), I felt like there was finally hope," she says. "I knew now, at least, what I was going through, and the medication helped my mood. Eventually, I was referred to a psychologist, whom I speak with to sort out my thoughts."

Ms Gek now interacts more easily with others, even if she might still struggle in larger groups with unfamiliar faces. The anxiety of eating in front of others has eased too, and she reminds herself not to let her worries control her. "I still rely on external validation, but the medication has helped me overthink a lot less," she says. "I don't doubt myself so much now, and I don't dwell on negative thoughts."

Having benefited from CHAT, Ms Gek now serves as a CHAT Ambassador, sharing her journey with others to support them in their recovery. "CHAT Ambassadors do a lot of outreach to remove the stigma of mental illness," she says. "I recently shared my experience on a podcast, which allowed others in a similar situation to know they are not alone."

She also feels that her generation is more open to discussing mental health

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issues but cautions that stigma remains in the workplace. "For example, hirers might think that people with depression will not be able to work." To this end, she advocates education, highlighting that there are many resources to help people understand mental health conditions.

She also encourages empathy. "For those caring for loved ones with mental health issues, don't invalidate what they tell you," she says. "Be compassionate. Instead of giving them advice, provide a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on. Checking in on your friends when they have gone silent for some time is also a very nice gesture, and you never know how it could impact someone."

To those battling mental health issues, she advises being kind to oneself aside from seeking help. "Sometimes, what helps me most is just allowing myself a break," she says. "Depression can be debilitating and makes you feel like a useless burden. So when I am in that state, I tell myself I am taking a break I deserve. Being able to give myself that is very powerful."

**For more information on CHAT, please visit [www.chat.mentalhealth.sg](http://www.chat.mentalhealth.sg)**

