

JUNE-SEPTEMBER 2023

# IMAGINE

A MAGAZINE ON MENTAL HEALTH

## EMBRACING FORGIVENESS

Finding peace by letting go of anger and resentment

### TAMING THE URGE

Strategies to beat impulse control disorders



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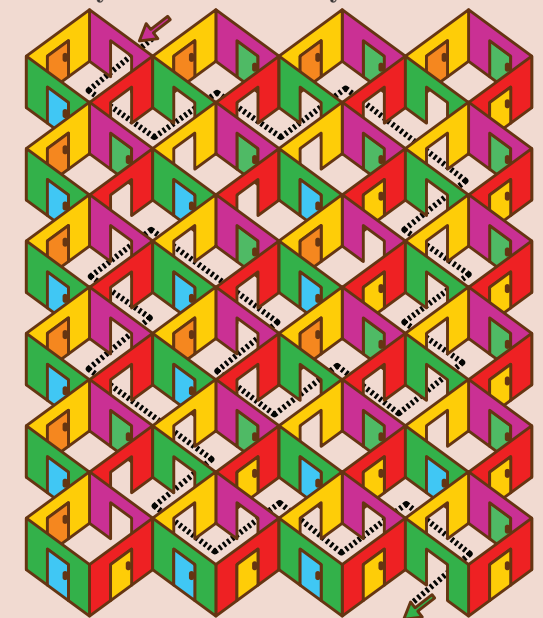
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*"Give yourself the opportunity to let go of the pain of unforgiveness, because you deserve to be free."*

**MS DANICA LIM,**  
Clinical Psychologist,  
Department of Psychology, IMH

Can you leave this labyrinth? SOLUTION ▾



Turn to Live well, page 7, for the puzzle.

## THE CHOICES WE MAKE AND HOW THEY CAN CHANGE LIVES

**T**here are pivotal moments when we discover the power of certain personal choices. These decisions are significant, for they can change our lives, or someone else's.

The act of forgiveness – whether forgiving others or ourselves – is one such choice. Deciding to let go of grudges and anger may not be easy, but it can heal emotional wounds and free us to move forward. In our cover story (pages 8 to 11), we explore what it means to forgive, why there may be barriers to forgiveness, and how shedding resentment can nurture healthier relationships and improve mental well-being.

Just as there is liberation in letting go, there can also be a sense of release when one's struggles are met with empathy from others. This was the case for award-winning host and actress Belinda Lee (page 3). The support she received amidst her personal battle with panic attacks reminds us that showing kindness and compassion to others facing difficulties can make a difference.

Elsewhere in this magazine, we delve into conditions like impulse control and obsessive-compulsive disorders. What might initially seem like quirks or habits can escalate into dysfunctional behaviours, causing upheaval. Find out when impulsivity crosses the line and becomes an issue requiring attention in our condition feature (pages 14 to 16). For Wayne Kee, obsessive-compulsive disorder (pages 12 to 13) disrupted his teenage years, leading to years of worry and stress until he chose to seek help, and face his fears head-on. These narratives underline how early recognition and appropriate treatment can help individuals turn their lives around.

Life's challenges are inevitable, but how we respond to them matters. Our choices can help us discover more resilient and kinder versions of ourselves.

Happy reading.

*the editorial team*



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# The empathy effect

Extend kindness and compassion to those dealing with mental health issues, urges **Belinda Lee**.

Text **KEENAN PEREIRA** // Photo **COURTESY OF BELINDA LEE**

“At the start of my career, hosting live shows was my bread and butter. Hosting is an intense experience, in every sense of the word. It takes its toll on you physically, mentally and emotionally. Despite this, it was something I enjoyed – and continue to enjoy – tremendously.

In the 2000s, I began experiencing sudden and frequent panic attacks. My heart would start beating extremely fast, and I would black out when it was my turn to speak. Unlike stage fright, from which you can will yourself back into action, the blackouts felt like someone was punching my gut and draining life from me. The audience tried their best to rally me, clapping and cheering me on, but it didn't do much good. I wasn't able to do the job I loved, and I could not explain why.

The attacks affected my personal life, too, and would strike at any moment – whether I was happy, sad or even idle. I suffered this way for six years. I often felt devastated, and my self-esteem hit an all-time low.

Today, I can say, “I had a panic attack”, and people are mostly empathetic and understanding. But back then, we did not have that kind of mental health awareness and vocabulary. Some people made unkind remarks

## WHEN PANIC ATTACKS LEAD TO DISORDER

> About 20 per cent of adults have experienced a panic attack, in response to stressful situations, at some point in their lives. However, severe and recurrent panic attacks that cause major life impairment and constant fear of another attack may be a condition known as panic disorder.



**BELINDA LEE**

Award-winning host, author, inspirational speaker and actress managed by Cross Ratio Entertainment

behind my back. Others told me to “just get over it”. Believe me, if it were that easy, I would have beaten this long ago.

## SPHERES OF SUPPORT

Fortunately, things started turning around when I sought help from a psychiatrist in 2011. I could finally put a name to what I was going through. I understood my condition better, and learnt how to manage it.

Through therapy, I learnt the importance of good relationships for mental health. I made it a point to seek out and build nurturing environments – be it in my personal or professional spheres. My husband has been my pillar of strength. When I feel vulnerable and need to talk, he listens with deep compassion. He makes me feel seen, heard and held. Also, the support I received from my family, friends and colleagues have made a real difference in restoring my well-being, and helped me to heal. My self-esteem was gradually rebuilt through their unconditional love.

I still have the occasional panic attack, but I deal with it better now. I'm no longer afraid that it will debilitate me, or prevent me from doing what I love. When an attack occurs, I accept that it's happening, take a deep breath, and allow myself to experience the emotions before slowly releasing them.

“Even if we cannot fully understand what someone who is struggling goes through, we can help by refraining from judgement.”

I have a name for the attacks: Mr P. So, when Mr P pays a visit, I can stop him from taking over my life through this strategy and by turning to my loved ones.

Having a mental health issue is not a label of shame. By sharing my story, I hope to help break stereotypes about mental health struggles. When we speak up about our experiences, we open up conversations with others who may be going through something similar, or improve people's understanding of mental health issues.

If you know someone – be it a family member, friend or colleague – who is struggling, I urge you to show empathy. Even if we cannot fully understand what they are going through, we can help by refraining from judgement, and offering kindness and compassion instead. We might even end up being the catalyst to help them heal.”

# LOVE WELL!



## Moderate exercise, MAJOR cognitive lift

>> Running or doing a high-intensity workout? You might want to try brisk walking or light aerobics instead. Researchers at the University of Ottawa found that moderate exercise boosts brain performance significantly more than vigorous workouts — 50 per cent to be exact.

This discovery suggests that improving brain health does not require extreme physical exertion. The study, published in *Nature*, involved 350,000 participants from Canada, Switzerland and the United States. The researchers looked at the two-way relationship between physical exercise and cognitive function, drawing on data from two large-scale genome-wide association studies.

Other research indicates that exercise boosts the production of a brain-derived neurotrophic factor, or BDNF. This neurochemical helps the brain develop new connections, repair failing brain cells and protect healthy ones, resulting in improved cognition and memory while reducing the risk of neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's.

### MOVE IT TO BOOST YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

> **Yoga:** Meditative yoga improves verbal and visual-spatial memory functions, particularly in individuals aged 55 and above, making it an excellent choice for low-impact exercise.



> **Aerobic exercise:** Cardiovascular-friendly workouts, such as swimming, cycling and running, boost blood flow to the brain. They also improve memory and learning abilities by increasing the size of the hippocampus.

> **Strength training:** The act of lifting weights — focusing on form and performing specific moves — exercises the brain's neural circuits and can prevent hippocampus shrinkage in older people.

### MASTERING THE ART OF CONVERSATION

Some experts liken an excellent conversation to a game of verbal catch or tennis, where the subject of discussion is tossed back and forth between participants. >



Just as you would not constantly hog the ball, skilled conversationalists are attentive when others speak and only interject with their experience when necessary. They are sensitive to the body language and verbal cues of others, so they know to back off when others signal discomfort or boredom. Good conversationalists admit what they do not know, and ask questions to learn while being well-read enough on diverse topics to keep up. Most important, they listen.

#### BECOME A BETTER LISTENER

> **Stay off your phone.** Resist the temptation to check your phone during a conversation. Not only is multi-tasking distracting, it is also impolite.

> **Be in the moment.** When someone is speaking, pay attention to what they are saying rather than formulate your next response.

> **Respect the speaker.** Refrain from interrupting. Politely ask for clarification only after they have finished speaking.

### THE POWER OF DIVERSE FRIENDSHIPS

Friendships have been found to positively impact our health and even longevity, as much as diet or exercise.

According to various research studies, socially connected people tend to have a lower risk of hypertension, sleep better and heal faster.

Recent research points to the need for three to five close friends for optimal life satisfaction. Published in *Adultspan Journal* by Professor Suzanne Degges-White from Northern Illinois University, the study examined the relationship between friendship networks and its influence on life satisfaction.

Analysing 422 women aged 31 to 77, the research found that a wider friendship network and frequent social interaction increased happiness levels and quality of life. "To thrive in an increasingly isolating world, it's helpful to have connections with others that reflect varying degrees of closeness," Prof Degges-White wrote in *Psychology Today*, adding that all of these friendships are important.

Instead of a singular bestie, most of us have a range of friendships that include the following types of friends:

- > **LIFELONG BUDDIES** from childhood, who provide a sense of familiarity and understanding of how you were raised.
- > **FRIENDS OF CONVENIENCE**, including neighbours and fellow hobbyists, share your interests and make life more fun.

> **WORK PALS** understand the joys and frustrations of your job, making them invaluable allies in the office.

> **LIFE-STAGE PEERS**, who are in the same boat as you during major life changes — such as having a baby or entering retirement — offer mutual support and understanding.

> **CLOSE FRIENDS** offer a judgement-free zone through life's ups and downs.





## THE RIPPLE EFFECTS OF MAKING YOUR BED

The small act of making your bed each morning can trigger a cascade of positivity throughout your day. Retired admiral and author William H. McRaven, in his book *Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life... And Maybe the World*, champions this practice. He asserts that starting the day with a minor achievement – like fluffing your pillows and straightening your sheets – primes the mind for productivity and achievement.

If you are already a diligent bed-maker, consider decluttering your surroundings. Research shows that the advantages of maintaining an organised environment are manifold. A clutter-free living and working space not only reduces stress but also enhances focus, productivity and goal-setting skills. Interestingly, other studies have linked tidiness with enhanced impulse control and conscientiousness, underscoring the influence of our surroundings on our behaviour.

### >> TIDY HOUSE, TIDY MIND

**Decluttering might seem daunting, but these strategies can simplify the process.**

> **Plan ahead.** Dedicate specific time slots to the task and stick to them.

> **Sort with intent.** Categorise items based on whether they should be repaired, donated, recycled, kept or discarded.



> **Start small.** If the task feels overwhelming, begin with a smaller area, such as a bathroom or cupboard. The satisfaction from completing these little tasks can fuel your motivation to tackle bigger ones.

## When tiny troubles pile up

Navigating daily hassles, such as traffic jams, emergent bills and personal duties, is a part of life. However, a study published in *Psychology and Aging* suggests these mundane stressors, termed “accumulated adversity”, can significantly affect mental health, particularly in middle-aged people.

Researchers at Arizona State University studied 317 adults aged 50 to 65, assessing their everyday experiences monthly over two years to explore the impact of minor but prolonged stressors. It found that an accumulation of such negative moments over several months impacted depressive symptoms, life satisfaction and social connections in midlife.

“It’s not just what’s happening today or this month, but it’s really things that can happen as far back as three to six months ago that can continue to impact our mental health and well-being,” said Associate Professor Frank Infurna, the study’s lead author.

The study underscores the importance of addressing and managing day-to-day stressors

to support overall mental health in middle-aged individuals.

**Here are some tips for managing life’s challenges and rebounding from difficulties:**

- > **Stay in the present:** Practising mindfulness and meditation can help you stay calm and focused in challenging situations.
- > **Embrace positivity:** Maintaining an optimistic outlook can enhance your resilience and assist in navigating rough waters.
- > **Nurture social connections:** Strong and supportive relationships can provide comfort and stability during times of adversity.
- > **Prioritise self-care:** Regular exercise, a balanced diet and sufficient sleep are essential for physical and mental well-being.



## ONLINE ART TO KEEP THE BLUES AWAY

In today’s digital world, art is more accessible than ever. Unlike their physical counterparts, online galleries are open round-the-clock, so art appreciation – and better well-being – lies at your fingertips. A 2022 study from the University of Vienna, published in the *Frontiers in Psychology* journal, suggests that these virtual experiences have potential benefits.

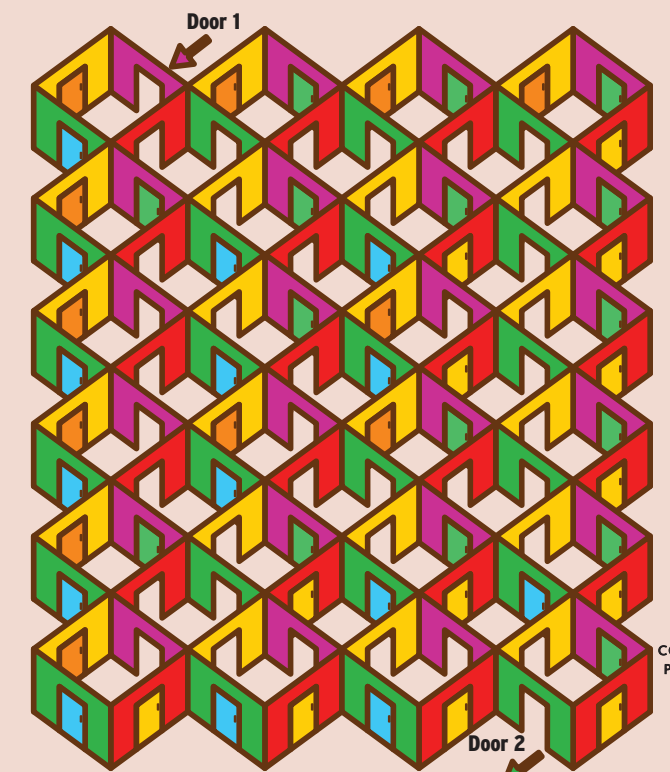


Participants in the study visited online art exhibitions, and their psychological state and well-being were measured before and after the visit. The results revealed that even brief online art viewings, as short as three minutes, can boost positive feelings. Participants reported a reduction in negative mood, anxiety and loneliness, rivalling the effects of nature experiences or visits to physical art galleries.

So, the next time you need an emotional recharge, consider immersing yourself in an art-viewing session online. Whether you marvel at a Monet or ponder over a Picasso, the benefits are just a click away and could be more profound than you think.

## MAZE RUNNER

Can you find your way out of this maze? Enter Door 1 and exit through Door 2. Closed doors are locked.



REFER TO THE CONTENTS PAGE FOR PUZZLE ANSWER

Forgiveness can positively impact mental health by **reducing stress, anxiety and anger**. Here's how to let go of grudges and find peace.

Interview  
 EVELINE GAN in consultation  
 with MS DANICA LIM, Clinical  
 Psychologist, Department of  
 Psychology, IMH

## LEARNING TO FORGIVE YOURSELF

We all make mistakes, but it is sometimes harder to forgive ourselves than others who have hurt us. Practising the 4Rs of self-forgiveness can help us make amends and move forward.

- 1 **Responsibility:** Take responsibility and accept that you have hurt others, while showing compassion to yourself.
- 2 **Remorse:** Express remorse, guilt and regret for your actions. The feelings you are experiencing have their purpose, and can help you make a positive change.
- 3 **Restoration:** Look for ways to make it up to the person you hurt, such as apologising if it is called for. For example, if you broke someone's trust, ask him or her if there is anything you can do to rebuild that trust.
- 4 **Renewal:** Learn and grow from the experience. Ask yourself what steps you can take to prevent the same behaviour in the future. Addressing the underlying issues that led to your actions will help you avoid making the same mistake in the future.

Remember that the other person may not be ready to reconcile even after you make amends. You cannot control their response, but you can do your best to make things right and move on.



**MS DANICA LIM**  
 Clinical Psychologist,  
 Department of Psychology, IMH

“It is important to understand the costs of holding on to unforgiveness, and be aware of how it may be affecting your life.”

# The healing power of letting go

**F**or more than 20 years, retired engineer Matt Tay (not his real name) carried feelings of betrayal, anger and hatred after being saddled with a huge debt when his younger brother's business failed in the 1990s. Mr Tay's brother fled the country, leaving him to pick up the pieces. Creditors threatened to sue Mr Tay, who was a guarantor of his brother's business loan. He was forced to sell his house to pay off the debts of hundreds of thousands of dollars. "My three children were still

very young, and it was very stressful having creditors knock on my door," recalls Mr Tay, now 68.

Although the matter was eventually resolved, the pain haunted Mr Tay for decades. His brother never apologised, making it difficult for him to move on. "There was so much anger in my heart. Who wouldn't be angry? I almost went bankrupt because of him," he shares, adding that his fury weighed him down emotionally and impacted his relationships with other family members.

Mr Tay's experience is not unique. Many people find it difficult

to let go of bitterness, anger or even hatred after being wronged or deeply hurt by someone. While this is understandable, holding on to grudges can be detrimental to one's mental health and relationships.

### WHAT IT MEANS TO FORGIVE

Ms Danica Lim, a clinical psychologist with the Department of Psychology at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), explains that forgiveness is a personal choice with different meanings to different people. "Generally, it involves a deliberate decision and action to let go of feelings and thoughts of

resentment and anger," she says. "Forgiveness is a willingness to move forward positively, while releasing any desire for revenge or retribution."

However, forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation. It is possible to forgive someone, yet not want to have anything to do with them, Ms Lim points out. "Contrary to the popular saying 'forgive and forget', true forgiveness does not necessarily mean forgetting. In some cases, it may not even be possible or desirable to forget if the

hurt inflicted was very significant. Remembering what happened may be necessary to protect yourself from further harm in the future," she explains.

**WHY IT'S HARD TO DO**

Practising forgiveness may be difficult when the pain inflicted is significant, such as in Mr Tay's case, where trust was betrayed. Other barriers to forgiveness include misconceptions about what it entails, such as the mistaken belief that forgiving someone means giving them permission to continue their unacceptable behaviour.

Also, forgiveness may not be the best course of action in some situations. "Where there is ongoing abuse, forgiving (the abuser) would be dangerous," warns Ms Lim. "If the behaviour that caused the harm continues without a genuine commitment to change from the offender, forgiveness will not be healthy." Additionally, forgiveness may not be helpful for those still dealing with the emotional aftermath of the hurt inflicted, and who are not ready to forgive.



**Finding support from a mental health professional or trusted friend, and focusing on the present can be helpful.**

Some people who have been hurt may also feel that it is their "right" to not forgive, says Ms Lim. "Forgiving someone can be scary as it makes us feel vulnerable to the possibility of being hurt again. These misconceptions make forgiveness seem more challenging than it actually is, and leave us stuck in the past."

**HOW FORGIVENESS HEALS**

Although forgiveness is not easy, Ms Lim says that it can reduce stress, anxiety, anger and depression, which leads to better mental health and emotional well-being. "Forgiveness can increase empathy and compassion, improve communication and trust in relationships, as well as enhance our

**"Forgiveness frees our minds of emotional constraints and promotes greater concentration, creativity and innovation."**



self-esteem," she explains. "It frees our minds of emotional constraints and promotes greater concentration, creativity and innovation." Studies have found that practising forgiveness benefits our health by reducing pain and blood pressure, lowering the risk of heart attack, and improving cholesterol levels and sleep.

On the other hand, holding on to pent-up emotions of unforgiveness — such as anger, sadness, confusion and resentment toward another person or a sense of injustice — can be debilitating. It may lead to sleeping difficulties, which can worsen mental health issues. "When we dwell on these feelings or leave them unattended, they can reduce our sense of self-worth, increase stress, anxiety and depression," Ms Lim says. "Unforgiveness can also overshadow our relationships, breaking down our communication and trust."

One study published in the journal *Social Psychological and*

*Personality Science* found that holding a grudge may even impair physical fitness. Study participants who held on to negative feelings performed worse in physically demanding tasks after recalling grudges than those who had forgiven. Holding a grudge can increase rumination, or the act of obsessively thinking about adverse events or feelings. It may impact our physical well-being by decreasing the availability of cognitive resources like glucose that the body uses to cope with physical challenges, such as jumping or climbing a hill.

**MOVING FORWARD**

So, what does it take for a person to move toward forgiveness? The act of forgiving someone should be viewed not as a task, but as a process that takes time and effort, Ms Lim explains. "It is important to understand the costs of holding on to unforgiveness, and be aware of how it may be affecting your life," she says.

Taking self-compassionate breaks from ruminating about the past — through journaling, turning to spirituality or religion, finding support from a mental health professional or trusted friend, and focusing on the present — can be helpful. "Give yourself the opportunity to let go of the pain of unforgiveness, because you deserve to be free," Ms Lim says.

That was the path Mr Tay took when he learnt of his brother's life-threatening, progressive neurological disease several years ago. Although he never received an apology, he decided to "forget about the whole thing". While the brothers did not reconcile, the 20-year chapter of hurt and anger was finally closed on Mr Tay's part. "Keeping all the bad feelings inside is not good," he says. "I had to let them go. It was for my own good."

**DON'T LOOK BACK IN ANGER**

**Like mindfulness, embracing forgiveness requires one to be present and to release negative emotions. It can also improve your mental well-being. Here are some strategies to incorporate forgiveness into your life.**

- **Recognise your emotions.** Identify and acknowledge the anger, hurt and sadness linked to specific events. This will make it easier for you to process what happened.
- **Understand the other person's perspective.** Empathise with the other party but avoid shifting responsibility for hurtful actions. Gaining this insight may offer a new perspective on his or her behaviour.
- **Start with more minor hurts.** Practise forgiveness regularly in everyday situations, such as letting your irritation go when someone cuts the queue or accidentally bumps into you.
- **Adjust your expectations.** Forgiving someone does not guarantee an apology or that your relationship will be restored. Accept that the person may not change even after you have forgiven him or her.
- **Be gentle with yourself.** Cultivate self-compassion before extending it to others. Reminding yourself that you did your best with the resources available will help you find peace and move forward.





MR WAYNE KEE

27, Living with OCD

# Tracing a new path

**Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) disrupted his teens, but Mr Wayne Kee is now back on his feet and looking to shed light on this often misunderstood condition.**

Interview KOH YUEN LIN Photo ALVIN TEO

### Growing up, I often kept to myself.

This was partly because of the bullying I experienced when I started secondary school. I did not feel safe to express myself, so I withdrew from others. I bottled up my feelings and often worried about what people thought of me. Academic stress, especially during streaming in Secondary Three, also didn't help. I found myself becoming overly focused on details. I was hyperaware of everything I was feeling and thinking, and didn't have an outlet for the pressure that was building up within me.

### When I was 15, I began having obsessive thoughts

about a possible neck injury. I had heard a crack in my neck while doing a standing broad jump during a school fitness test. Although my neck was okay, I was worried enough to start limiting my neck movement, turning my entire body instead of just my head to look at something. I knew my behaviour appeared weird, and I started to obsess not only about my neck but also about how others perceived me. Over time, these thoughts started to consume me,

diminishing my ability to study and complete my homework.

### After a panic attack-like episode

when I became very anxious and agitated, my parents took me to a hospital. Scans at the hospital's accident and emergency department showed no abnormalities in my neck, leading the doctors to refer me to a psychiatrist, who diagnosed me with OCD. With little awareness of mental health conditions at that time,

### ▶ Breaking the cycle

Individuals with OCD experience symptoms of "obsession", which are characterised by recurrent, persistent ideas, thoughts, images or impulses. To alleviate the anxiety and find relief from these obsessions, they may develop physical or mental "compulsions", such as repeated handwashing, arranging items in a specific way or mentally performing certain actions. Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) is a cognitive behavioural therapy tailored for OCD. It aims to reduce distress by encouraging the individual to confront triggers without performing these compulsions.



I thought it was a misdiagnosis, and so I did not pursue treatment.

**My condition deteriorated** as my obsessive thoughts and compulsions significantly disrupted my life. By the time I went to polytechnic, I developed a compulsive behaviour of retracing my daily route to "undo" my actions. If I went from point A to B to C, I would reverse my route from point C to B to A at the end of the day. I even reached a stage where I felt compelled to walk backwards while retracing my steps.

**Even then, I knew it was not normal behaviour**, so I would try to do it when no one was around. It kept me at school until 8pm, long after classes had ended, recounting my steps, recalling the routes I had taken and starting over when I made a mistake. I performed these rituals every day out of fear that something bad would happen to me or my family if I did not.

### The turning point came in 2015.

Besides taking medication, I underwent psychotherapy – specifically, Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) – with a psychologist. ERP taught me to face my fears head-on.

### Breaking away from my compulsive actions

through ERP exercises was not easy. I had to perform specific tasks, like walking from my house to the bus stop, that would

trigger my compulsive behaviours. My psychologist would accompany me during the exercises to show that nothing bad happened even if I resisted my compulsive behaviours. Despite this, I stayed worried after the exercises. It took two years of repeated practice for me to reach a functional state and to understand that it was really okay not to perform my compulsive behaviours.

### Growth does not occur without challenges.

As I learnt to better manage my condition, I sought out other goals for myself. Encouraged by my mother, I pushed myself to complete National Service. When I later discovered a certification course to become a peer support specialist, I enrolled to challenge myself to move forward in my recovery journey. After two weeks of theory, and about three months of practicum where I had to apply my skills to help others, I felt inspired to pursue a career in mental healthcare. I later earned my diploma in psychology as a private candidate.

### Now, I actively take part in

Resilience Collective's peer support group, Circles of Resilience. This is a monthly support session for young adults going through mental health challenges (see box story below). It pushes me to learn more about various aspects of mental health.

### Many people do not have a clear understanding of OCD

or what individuals with the condition go through.

**“It is okay to have a mental health condition. Acceptance is the first step in dealing with it, and it is best to seek help early before the condition becomes a big part of your identity.”**

For one, OCD is not a quirk. I try to explain the condition to others when given the opportunity, so that they understand it better.

### For those living with OCD, my message is this:

It is okay to have a mental health condition. Acceptance is the first step in dealing with it, and it is best to seek help early before the condition becomes a big part of your identity.

### Having internalised my thoughts to the point where they consumed me,

I hope young people will express their thoughts and emotions freely. Activities like journaling can help articulate thoughts, but I think a support network is still necessary. There are many support groups and platforms that will welcome you – you do not have to face this alone.

### Resilience Collective

is a mental health charity that provides dedicated peer support for young adults in recovery. It offers a safe space for them to share lived experiences, and promotes recovery through resilience and empowerment. Resilience Collective also organises Circles of Resilience.

These monthly peer support sessions allow young adults to share their experiences by being open and vulnerable in a safe space, and support one another as a community to thrive and lead authentic lives. To find out more, visit [www.resilience.org.sg](http://www.resilience.org.sg).





# When impulsivity crosses the line

Struggles to resist harmful, excessive actions could indicate an impulse control disorder. Learn how to tell it apart from “normal” impulsive behaviour, and how treatment can help.

Interview **EVELINE GAN** in consultation with **DR DAWN LEE**, Consultant, Department of Mood and Anxiety, IMH.

>> **TO MOST PEOPLE**, a supermarket is a place to buy household essentials. For Jane (not her real name), however, it is a place of temptation – one she tries to avoid these days. For 30 years, Jane has grappled with uncontrollable urges to shoplift during periods of stress or frustration. A university graduate from China, she moved to Singapore in the 1990s to pursue her professional career. As an introvert, she found socialising difficult and kept to herself. Coupled with the stress of adapting to a new work and living environment, her personal struggles intensified.

Jane, now 56, recalls the first time she impulsively slipped a \$3 chocolate snack into her bag. “I knew it was wrong to steal, yet I couldn’t control myself. There was a ‘knot’ in my heart, and I couldn’t discuss my feelings with anyone. But when I shoplifted, I felt some emotional release.”

Most of the items Jane stole were inexpensive snacks. Her inability to resist the urge to steal landed her in serious trouble with the law. She was caught red-handed several times and served time for the offences. Jane was eventually diagnosed with an impulse control disorder, when she was referred to the Institute of Mental Health (IMH).



**IMPULSE CONTROL DISORDERS** can significantly disrupt a person’s daily activities, strain social relationships, and lead to legal and financial complications.

## UNCONTROLLED URGES

Impulse control disorders are characterised by excessive, harmful urges and behaviours. These can significantly impair a person’s ability to function in daily activities, damage social relationships, and result in legal and financial repercussions.

There are various types of impulse control disorders. Dr Dawn Lee, Consultant, Department of Mood and Anxiety, IMH, shares that these include kleptomania (in which the person is unable to resist the urge to steal), trichotillomania (an irresistible urge to pull out one’s hair), intermittent explosive disorder (characterised by frequent impulsive anger outbursts or aggression) and pyromania (an uncontrollable urge to start fires).

While the exact cause of impulse control disorders is not known, Dr Lee

outlines some possible risk factors. These include existing mental health conditions like depression and anxiety, a family history of impulse control disorders, substance misuse problems, a background of family conflict and dysfunction, and Tourette’s Syndrome (a nervous system condition that causes people to have sudden, uncontrollable twitches and movements).

## UNRAVELLING THE CONSEQUENCES

We all have moments of impulsivity when we say or do something we later regret. But when does the inability to control one’s urges cross the line?

Symptoms of impulse control disorders differ from the fleeting bouts of impulsivity most people experience due to the intense, repetitive and uncontrollable nature of the impulse

to perform the behaviour, Dr Lee explains. “Often, individuals with the disorder describe an intense build-up of anxiety prior to the act, with a strong feeling of relief after the behaviour is carried out,” she says.

For a behaviour to qualify as an impulse control disorder, it must significantly impair a person’s psychological well-being, social functioning and ability to carry out daily activities, Dr Lee says. She shares an example of a 24-year-old patient with trichotillomania and major depressive disorder, who could not control the urge to pull out her hair when feeling stressed or anxious, such as when her parents quarrelled. This led to severe, visible hair loss on the right side of her scalp and right eyebrow. Her dermatologist eventually referred her to a psychiatrist.



“Impulse control disorders tend to follow a waxing and waning course, and triggers may cause the behaviours to resurface.”

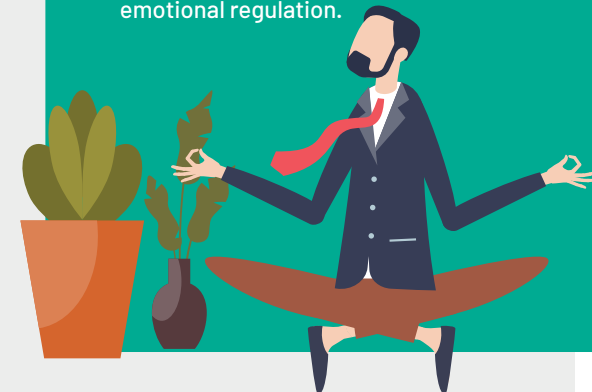
**DR DAWN LEE**, Consultant, Department of Mood and Anxiety, IMH

“The patient shared that she would experience a (build-up of) tension, until the point where it would feel extremely unbearable, and she would give in to the urge to start pulling out her hair,” Dr Lee says. “With each strand she pulled out, she felt her anxiety and tension dissipate, giving her a feeling of relief.” Antidepressant medication and psychological therapy helped reduce the patient’s symptoms. >>

## RESISTING THE URGE

With practice and patience, you can learn to take control of unhealthy impulses. Here are three strategies that can help.

- 1 Habit reversal training** involves consciously identifying and replacing problematic behaviours with more positive actions. For instance, if you feel an urge to pull your hair, you could instead practise breathing exercises until the urge subsides.
- 2 Keeping a journal** can help you understand your urges better, spot behavioural patterns and find potential triggers. Recording your thoughts, feelings and experiences can shed light on your impulses and may serve as a therapeutic outlet.
- 3 Practising mindfulness**, even for just five minutes a day, allows you to focus and be present, reducing stress and enhancing self-awareness. It may take time to master, but research shows noticeable benefits for emotional regulation.



Individuals with impulse control disorders can gain understanding and skills to better manage emotional triggers such as stress, and control their impulses.



### THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

Treating such disorders can be “difficult”, as individuals with impulse control disorders often feel conflicted between giving in to the desire to engage in the behaviour and stopping it, Dr Lee explains. However, there is hope. The symptoms can be controlled if the person recognises the problem, is willing to be treated and works toward managing the behaviour, she adds.

“With firm motivation, patients can successfully reduce behaviours to a level that lessens the impairment, or even stop completely,” Dr Lee says. “However, impulse control disorders tend to follow a waxing and waning course, and triggers — such as emotional difficulties, conflicts, illness or stress — may cause the behaviours to resurface.”

According to Dr Lee, some studies have shown that certain cases of impulse control disorders may respond well to

medication, particularly antidepressants. “Psychotherapy — using cognitive behavioural therapy, for instance — and counselling have also been used to help patients develop the motivation for change, and gain understanding and

“Psychotherapy — using cognitive behavioural therapy, for instance — and counselling have also been used to help patients develop the motivation for change.”

skills to better manage emotional triggers and control the impulses,” she adds. As many individuals with impulse control disorders also struggle with other mental health conditions like depression or anxiety, Dr Lee underlines the importance of addressing any such co-occurring disorders, since they can interfere with treatment outcomes.

Jane’s journey to recovery involves a combination of medication and psychotherapy that has helped her learn to control her impulses. For example, she is particularly drawn to a specific supermarket in central Singapore, but now postpones her outings to the area until after that store closes for the day. “I still have the urge (to shoplift),” she says. “But I now know how to divert my attention to do other things.”

Religion has also offered Jane some peace as she learns to manage her condition. “There is still a lot of stigma attached to mental health disorders,” Jane says. “By sharing my story, I hope to help people understand these issues better.”



# Hope behind bars

For inmates with mental health conditions, Dr Jason Lee’s work offers a chance for rehabilitation.

Interview EVELINE GAN // Photo WILSON PANG

Dr Jason Lee’s profession is not for the faint-hearted. As a forensic psychiatrist at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), he deals with individuals who have run afoul of the law and are suspected of having a psychiatric disorder. He conducts pre-trial assessments and drafts reports on the defendant’s mental status at the time of the alleged offence, thus aiding the courts in reaching a verdict. The 40-year-old Programme Director of the Psychiatric Correctional Unit (PCU), based in the Singapore Prison Service, also diagnoses and treats prison inmates with mental health conditions.

Dr Lee does not let the severity of the crimes committed by some of these inmates get in the way of his work. “It’s understood that we’ll be dealing with offenders or people accused of serious crimes like murder, for example,” he explains. Instead, his main concern is ensuring that they receive proper psychiatric treatment during their incarceration. The treatment programme



forensic psychiatrist • I SERVE

DR JASON LEE

Consultant & Deputy Chief,  
Department of Forensic  
Psychiatry, IMH

within the PCU is designed to mirror those provided at IMH for psychiatric patients in the community. He also ensures that their care continues after their release, if necessary.

### RIISING ABOVE STRESS AND SCRUTINY

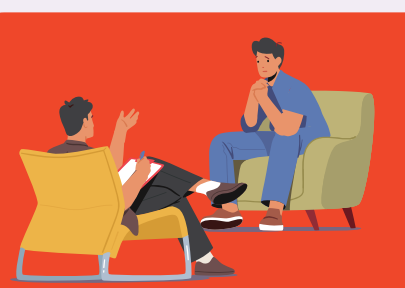
Dr Lee’s journey into this specialised area of psychiatry was a matter of chance. He was posted to IMH’s Department of Forensic Psychiatry as a psychiatric trainee about 10 years ago to gain practical exposure. The experience sparked his interest. Dr Lee recalls, “I realised the work challenged me, particularly the analytical process of dealing with a case.” He later pursued his fellowship training in forensic psychiatry in Canada. Forensic psychiatry, as Dr Lee describes it, is a “self-selecting speciality”. “One would usually either find passion in forensic work, or tend to stay away from it,” he remarks.

So what qualities are necessary to survive — and thrive — in this field? Stamina, a stomach for stress, and the ability to handle scrutiny are key. “Forensic psychiatrists are typically

willing to take risks, and are not afraid to be scrutinised,” Dr Lee says. “We often take on high-profile cases that appear in the media. We recognise the high stakes involved, and accept that we will undergo intense cross-examination by lawyers in court. The ability to uphold objectivity and professionalism is also paramount.”

That said, Dr Lee acknowledges that it is not uncommon for people to harbour certain unconscious biases. Asked how he manages this when providing expert opinions in legal proceedings, he says, “I have to be aware of how such biases could cloud my judgement, and recuse myself from the case if necessary.”

Dr Lee points out that there is also no place for prejudice when managing and treating inmates. “There are evidence-based treatments for mental illnesses, and my aim is to provide my patients with the most appropriate interventions,” he says. “It is also important that we have processes in place to enable them to receive psychiatric follow-up and treatment after their release, so that their mental health issues will not hinder their reintegration into society.”



### DID YOU KNOW?

The Psychiatric Correctional Unit, located within the Changi Prison Complex, has provided care and assistance to inmates since its start in 2011. It is run with support from the Institute of Mental Health, and is the only psychiatric rehabilitation programme in the correctional setting in Singapore.

# Q&A

ASK THE Experts

**Q: I HAVE BEEN TAKING ANTIDEPRESSANTS AS PRESCRIBED FOR A FEW MONTHS, AND HAVE NOTICED A SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT IN MY MOOD.**

*However, I am concerned about the medication's effects on my body. Can I take it only when I feel down, instead of for the long-term?*

**A:** I am heartened to hear that the antidepressants are working well for you. It is crucial to continue taking them as directed by your doctor. This helps to maintain a steady level of medication in your system, which can prevent the return of the symptoms and the relapse of the condition.

The duration of antidepressant treatment varies from person to person, and depends on factors like the history and severity of the condition, and the risk of relapse. It is important that you do not stop taking antidepressants abruptly. Always discuss any changes to your medication regime with your doctor. Together, you can devise a plan to

gradually reduce and eventually stop the medication. This process can take weeks or months, depending on each individual's unique situation. But it offers a smoother transition and minimises any withdrawal symptoms you might experience while coming off the antidepressants.

Like other medications for chronic conditions, such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol, antidepressants are generally safe for long-term use. However, please consult your doctor or pharmacist if you have any concerns or experience side effects.

**DR YING YICK TIM,**  
Senior Pharmacist (Clinical),  
Department of Pharmacy



**Q: I AM A LONG-TIME SMOKER WHO IS CONSIDERING QUITTING.**

*Some friends have turned to vaping as a way to reduce their addiction to cigarettes and ultimately stop smoking. Is this an effective strategy?*

**A:** It is important to note that it is illegal to possess, purchase and use vaporisers in Singapore. Using vaping as a means to quit smoking has not been proven. In fact, many smokers who have tried to stop smoking through vaping find themselves in a so-called "dual-use" scenario where they both vape and smoke. This adds to the harm experienced by the smoker.

Some e-cigarettes contain more nicotine than traditional cigarettes. This means users may inhale higher amounts of addictive nicotine, making

it extremely difficult to quit. They are also exposed to harmful carcinogens like formaldehyde and heavy metals.

If you find it challenging to quit smoking, there are various effective methods that could help you. For instance, combining nicotine replacement therapy or prescribed medications with behavioural strategies can be beneficial. These treatment strategies are often tailored to the individual's needs. Please approach a pharmacist or your primary healthcare provider for help.

**DR LAMBERT LOW,**  
Consultant, National Addictions Management  
Service, and Deputy Chief, Department of  
Addiction Medicine



**HAVE A QUESTION FOR OUR EXPERTS? Write to us at [enquiry@imh.com.sg](mailto:enquiry@imh.com.sg).**

## News

A round-up of news and events centred on mental healthcare.

### IMH CHATBOT NOW GIVES MEDICATION INFO

Looking for information about your medication? The IMH ChatBot, available 24/7 on the IMH website, is your go-to resource. It can now answer simple medication-related queries, thanks to its use of nationally harmonised data on common medicines.

The ChatBot can also guide you on how to request for delivery of your medication, or medication top-up. Experience this service at [www.imh.com.sg](http://www.imh.com.sg).



The IMH ChatBot, Joy, can provide answers to frequently asked questions and address basic medication-related enquiries.

### LANDMARK IMH STUDY ON ILLICIT DRUG USE IN SINGAPORE

The first-ever national survey on the prevalence of illicit drug use, conducted by IMH's Research Division, found that the average age that drug users here started consumption was 15.9 years. The *Health and Lifestyle Survey* also found that about 0.7 per cent of Singapore residents had used an illicit drug at least once in the last 12 months prior to the study. The most frequently consumed drugs were cannabis, ecstasy and methamphetamine, with cannabis being the first drug tried by the majority of respondents. Conducted between April 2021 and July 2022, the survey involved 6,509 Singaporeans and permanent residents aged 15 to 65.



(from left) Guest of Honour, Ms Ng Ling Ling, Adviser to Ang Mo Kio GRC Grassroots Organisations; IMH Board Members, Ms Lillian Lee and Ms Anita Fam; Mr Lee Chow Soon, Chairman, Woodbridge Hospital Charity Fund; Mr Tan Tee How, Chairman, NHG Board; and IMH CEO, Associate Professor Daniel Fung.

### BLOOMING AT 95

IMH hosted an open house on 20 May as part of its 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. Themed "Good Mental Health for All", the event drew some 1,200 people and offered a multitude of experiences, including workshops and talks, sharing of recovery stories, campus tours, and a unique car boot bazaar.

A key highlight was the opening of a new community garden, Mindful Meadows, by Guest of Honour, Ms Ng Ling Ling, Adviser to Ang Mo Kio GRC Grassroots Organisations. A collaboration between IMH and Jalan Kayu constituency, the garden is

envisioned as a common ground where patients and the public can connect over their shared interest in gardening.

Volunteers and patients will work side by side to tend to ornamental plants, sow seeds and harvest produce, such as chillies, cucumbers and tomatoes.

The garden will also host landscaping art activities, such as rock painting and leaf pressing, adding an extra layer of engagement and therapy for participants. As IMH's CEO, Associate Professor Daniel Fung, put it: "Through such initiatives, we hope to bring people together to start conversations about mental health and wellness, reduce stigma, and improve resilience."



Support this initiative as a volunteer at Mindful Meadows. For more information, visit [for.sg/imh-interest2vol](http://for.sg/imh-interest2vol) or scan the QR code above.

## THE SWEET AND SALTY TRUTH behind our cravings

Frequently eating foods high in sugar and fat rewires our brain to want more of them.

**T**he phrase, “A moment on the lips, forever on the hips” reminds us of the immediate pleasure and lasting effects of junk food. Now, recent findings from Germany’s Max Planck Institute for Metabolism Research and Yale University shed light on why we find it hard to resist chocolate bars and potato chips, despite knowing that they aren’t great for our health.

The researchers recruited two sets of volunteers for the study. The first group received a pudding rich in fat and sugar daily for eight weeks, in addition to their standard diet. The second group received a pudding with the same caloric content but lower fat content.

The volunteers’ brain activity was monitored before and throughout the eight-week period. Results showed that the brain’s response to high-fat and high-sugar foods was significantly heightened in the first group compared to the second.

This suggests that regularly consuming even modest amounts of foods high in sugar and fat, such as chocolate and potato chips, can affect our brain chemistry. These foods activate the brain’s dopaminergic system, which is responsible for motivation and reward. Dopamine, the “feel-good” hormone, plays a significant role in our cravings for these foods.

“When fat and sugar signals converge in this area, they likely interact, triggering a reward response,” explains the institute’s Dr Marc Tittgemeyer, who led the study, published in *Cell Metabolism*. “Our measurements of brain activity showed that the brain rewires itself through consuming (foods like chips). It subconsciously learns to prefer rewarding food. Through these changes in the brain, we will subconsciously always prefer the foods that contain a lot of fat and sugar.”

### SMARTER CHOICES

Sugar and fat can be found in everyday foods, even without you knowing it. Fortunately, most common foods and snacks have healthier alternatives. Here’s how to shop smart to lower your fat and sugar intake.

> **Yoghurt:** Even “fat-free” varieties can contain added sugar. Opt for plain yoghurt instead and add in fresh fruit for natural sweetness.

> **Granola bars:** Many pre-packaged versions are laden with sweeteners. Make your own using whole grain oats, dried fruit and honey.

> **Salad dressing:** Planning to enjoy a salad for healthier eating? Don’t undo your efforts with a store-bought dressing packed with sugar and fat. Consider a homemade vinegar and olive oil dressing, adding fresh herbs and spices for flavour.



# RESOURCES AND USEFUL INFO

HELP IS A PHONE CALL AWAY



### Mental Health Helpline

Manned by trained counsellors from IMH for those requiring advice on mental health issues.

Tel: 6389 2222 (24 hours)

### Singapore Association for Mental Health (SAMH) Helpline

Provides information and assistance on mental health matters and psychosocial issues.

Tel: 1800-283 7019 (Monday to Friday; 9am to 6pm)

### Dementia Helpline by Dementia Singapore

Provides information and assistance for a person with dementia.

Tel: 6377 0700 (Monday to Friday; 9am to 6pm and Saturday; 9am to 1pm)

### Dementia InfoLine by Health Promotion Board

For advice and information on dementia-related queries (available in all 4 languages – English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil).

Tel: 1800-223 1123 (Monday to Friday; 8.30am to 5pm and Saturday; 8.30am to 1pm)

### Samaritans of Singapore (SOS)

Provides confidential emotional support for those in crisis, thinking of suicide or affected by suicide.

Tel: 1800-221 4444 (24 hours)

### National Addictions Management Service (NAMS) All Addictions Helpline

Provides a range of services to assist people who are dealing with addiction problems.

Tel: 6732 6837 (Monday to Friday; 8.30am to 6pm)

### National Problem Gambling Helpline

Provides information and help for problem gamblers and their families.

Tel: 1800-666 8668 (8am to 11pm daily)

### Touchline by Touch Youth Services

Renders emotional support and practical advice to youth.

Tel: 1800-377 2252 (Monday to Friday; 9am to 6pm)

### Tinkle Friend Helpline by Singapore Children’s Society

Provides support, advice and

information to primary school children in distress, especially in situations when their parents or main caregivers are unavailable.

Tel: 1800-274 4788 (Monday to Friday; 2.30pm to 5pm)

### Club HEAL

Helps persons with mental health issues to reintegrate back into the community.

Tel: 6899 3463 (Monday to Friday; 9am to 5pm)

### Silver Ribbon

Supports persons with mental health issues and their families.

Tel: 6386 1928 (main line); 6385 3714 (Crisis Resolution Team) (Monday to Friday; 9am to 5pm)

### Caregivers Alliance Limited

Supports caregivers of persons with mental health issues.

Tel: 6460 4400 (main line); 6388 2686 (Caregivers Support Centre)

## IMH SERVICE DIRECTORY

### INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH

Buangkok Green Medical Park  
10 Buangkok View  
Singapore 539747  
General Enquiries 6389 2000 (24-hour hotline)  
Appointment Line 6389 2200 (Monday to Friday; 8am – 6pm)  
Email: imh\_appt@imh.com.sg

### CHILD GUIDANCE CLINIC SUNRISE WING

IMH, Block 3, Basement  
Monday to Thursday 8am to 5.30pm  
Friday 8am to 5pm

### CHILD GUIDANCE CLINIC HEALTH PROMOTION BOARD BUILDING

3 Second Hospital Avenue #03-01  
Singapore 168937

Monday to Thursday 8am to 5.30pm  
Friday 8am to 5pm

### CLINIC B

IMH, Level 1  
Monday to Thursday 8am to 5.30pm  
Friday 8am to 5pm

### SAYANG WELLNESS CENTRE CLINIC (for non-subsidised patients)

IMH, Level 2  
Monday to Thursday 8am to 5.30pm  
Friday 8am to 5pm

### COMMUNITY WELLNESS CLINIC, QUEENSTOWN

580 Stirling Road, Level 4,  
Singapore 148958  
Monday, Tuesday, Thursday  
8am to 5.30pm

Wednesday 8am to 12.30pm  
Friday 8am to 5pm

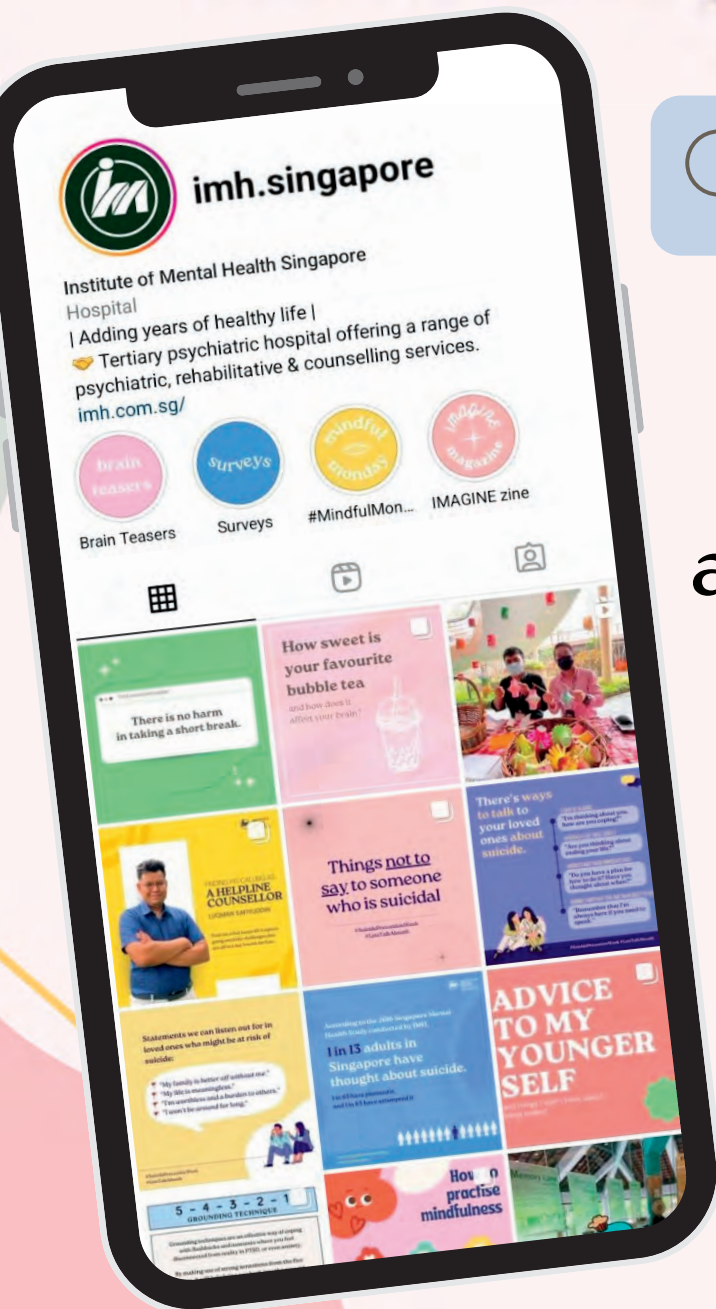
### COMMUNITY WELLNESS CLINIC, GEYLANG

21 Geylang East Central, Level 4  
Singapore 389707  
Monday, Tuesday, Thursday,  
Friday 8am to 5pm  
Wednesday 8am to 12.30pm

### NATIONAL ADDICTIONS MANAGEMENT SERVICE (NAMS) CLINIC

IMH, Block 9 Basement  
Monday to Thursday  
8am to 5.30pm  
Friday 8am to 5pm

# We are on Instagram!



imh.singapore

Follow us for  
mental health  
and wellness tips!



Connect with us!

