

APRIL-SEPTEMBER 2017

# imagine

A BIENNIAL MAGAZINE ON MENTAL HEALTH

## ON THE *Sunny* SIDE OF LIFE

Why positive mental health matters, and how to maintain it



**STIMULATING  
THE BRAIN**

**ECT: MYTH  
vs FACT**

>> **EXPRESSIONS:** ARTIST YEN PHANG TALKS ABOUT HIS UNIQUE INSTALLATIONS

# Be equipped to handle your patient's mental health needs



As a General Practitioner (GP), you are often the first point of contact for those who are unwell. Your patient may walk in one day complaining of chronic insomnia and ask for sleeping pills, disguising possible symptoms of Depression or Anxiety Disorder. Another may present with a normal headache, but when probed further, reveal signs of addiction or substance abuse. Are you able to identify these possible mental health issues and detect the early signs?

The Graduate Diploma in Mental Health (GDMH), jointly offered by the Institute of Mental Health and the Division of Graduate Medical Studies, National University of Singapore, provides comprehensive and structured training in community psychiatry and counselling. It equips GPs and doctors with the knowledge and skills required to assess, identify and manage various psychiatric conditions and provide more holistic care to their patients.

**GDMH is open for registration from 27 March to 1 July 2017**

Government subsidy is available (subject to terms and conditions)

At the end of the 12-month course, participants would be able to:

- Identify the various types of psychiatric disorders
- Be familiar with the principles of treatment approach for different psychiatric cases
- Apply assessment methodology to different mental health disorders
- Learn management skills and prescriptions of medications

For more information, please visit [www.imh.com.sg/education](http://www.imh.com.sg/education). You may also contact:  
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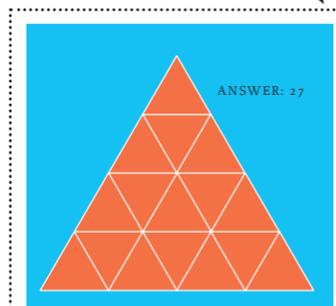
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Turn to page 7 for the puzzle

# THE PATH TO Well-being

“Positive mental health is about finding balance in our lives so that we can cope with the stress, feel good about ourselves and have great relationships with the people we love. That’s how I try to live my life. I also have three basic health strategies – have a balanced diet, be active in work and play, and sleep well.

A/PROF DANIEL FUNG,  
Chairman, Medical Board, IMH



Every year, the World Health Organization (WHO) marks the anniversary of its founding on 7 April — designated as World Health Day — by drawing attention to a specific global health issue. The theme for 2017 is depression: a mental illness that can affect anyone.

The aim of WHO’s campaign is to get people to talk openly about depression and break down the stigma surrounding it, so that more people with the condition will seek help.

In Singapore, major depressive disorder is among the top three mental health disorders. One in 17 people have had the condition at some point in their life. To show support for WHO’s campaign, we devote part of this issue of *Imagine* to the topic of depression. We speak to three individuals who have overcome depression. By sharing their stories, they hope to empower others to come forward with their own experiences.

Looking after one’s mental health should be a priority for all of us — not just those diagnosed with a mental illness. Achieving positive mental health (PMH) is about more than the absence of (or recovery from) mental health problems; rather, it refers to a state of well-being in which a person possesses positive attributes to cope with the stresses of day-to-day life. In our cover story, we look at areas that contribute to PHM in the Singapore population and share strategies that everyone can incorporate into their lives to maintain PMH.

Happy reading.

*the editorial team*

imAGINE

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FOR MORE INFORMATION // VISIT WWW.IMH.COM.SG OR WRITE TO US AT ENQUIRY@IMH.COM.SG

“I have never been formally diagnosed with depression but I had symptoms, and seriously contemplated suicide a few times. I didn’t have a lot growing up. My father was a gangster and my mother, a drug abuser. They married in their teens. I grew up with my grandmother in a three-room flat that had 13 people living in it at one point.

Irene Ang, the Founder and CEO of FLY Entertainment, played Rosie Phua in the long-running English sitcom Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd. An entrepreneur who runs six businesses, Ms Ang is Artistic Advisory Board Member at the SAF Music and Drama Company. She is also on the Board of the South West CDC Council and Media Literacy Council.

After that, I called my boss at the financial services company where I worked. I told him about the bank, why I hadn’t been working, and that my granny was dying. I said, “When she dies, I will be joining her. I’m just calling to let you know.”

He was calm and told me to meet him the next day. He lent me money to clear my debts. He then told

So I did. I learned that if you stay focused on your goals and believed in yourself, you can move forward.

On 26 November 1996, my uncle’s wife called me and said, “You better come back.” I rushed back, saw my granny smile with her eyes, and then she passed away.

I felt I had let my granny down because I hadn’t brought her back to China for a visit, and I still owed her \$500... But I heard a small voice saying I could pay this back by giving to society. So, speaking up about my life and inspiring people is one way I do this.

When people ask me for advice, I tell them three things: to have a faith to go to, that gives you peace; and to have a friend to talk to, who can give good advice



and who can help. If you need it, don’t shy away from seeking professional help.

Finally, I tell them to give back to others. When you are constantly focused on yourself and your problems, things can sometimes spiral downwards. But if you channel your attention to others, when you help other people, you gain so much more.

Everyone has a part to play, to notice if the people around them seem depressed. Don’t just ask, “Are you OK?”. Say “Can I buy you a coffee?” Then sit down and talk to them. You can make a difference.”

## FROM ROCKY TAKEOFF TO FIRM ground

Entertainer and motivational speaker Irene Ang talks about emerging from the lowest points of her life, and of making a difference to others

The first time I seriously contemplated suicide was when I was in Secondary Three. I failed my exams and had to stay back a year. I stared down from the 10<sup>th</sup> floor the whole night but I couldn’t do it in the end.

The next time was when I was in Pre-university. My boyfriend wanted to break up with me and I couldn’t accept it. I decided I needed courage to kill myself so I drank half a bottle of brandy. I passed out, and had a hangover for days.

The third time was about 20 years ago. My grandmother was very ill and in hospital. The bank had sent a letter threatening me with bankruptcy. I wasn’t able to work because I was spending nights at the hospital and sleeping during the day. I attempted suicide. Thankfully, I did not succeed.

me he was aiming for the Best New Manager of the Year award and that I was critical in his plans to win the award. He said, “Do me a favour, at least stay alive until December.” He made me feel like I was helping him.

Then he asked me to see at least 10 clients a day. He said, “If you do this, you will pay off your debt, you will have more money and you can help people with their financial planning.”

“IF YOU CHANNEL YOUR ATTENTION TO OTHERS, WHEN YOU HELP OTHER PEOPLE, YOU GAIN SO MUCH MORE.”



IRENE ANG,  
FLY ENTERTAINMENT

STAYING ON TOP, MENTALLY

# LIVE WELL!

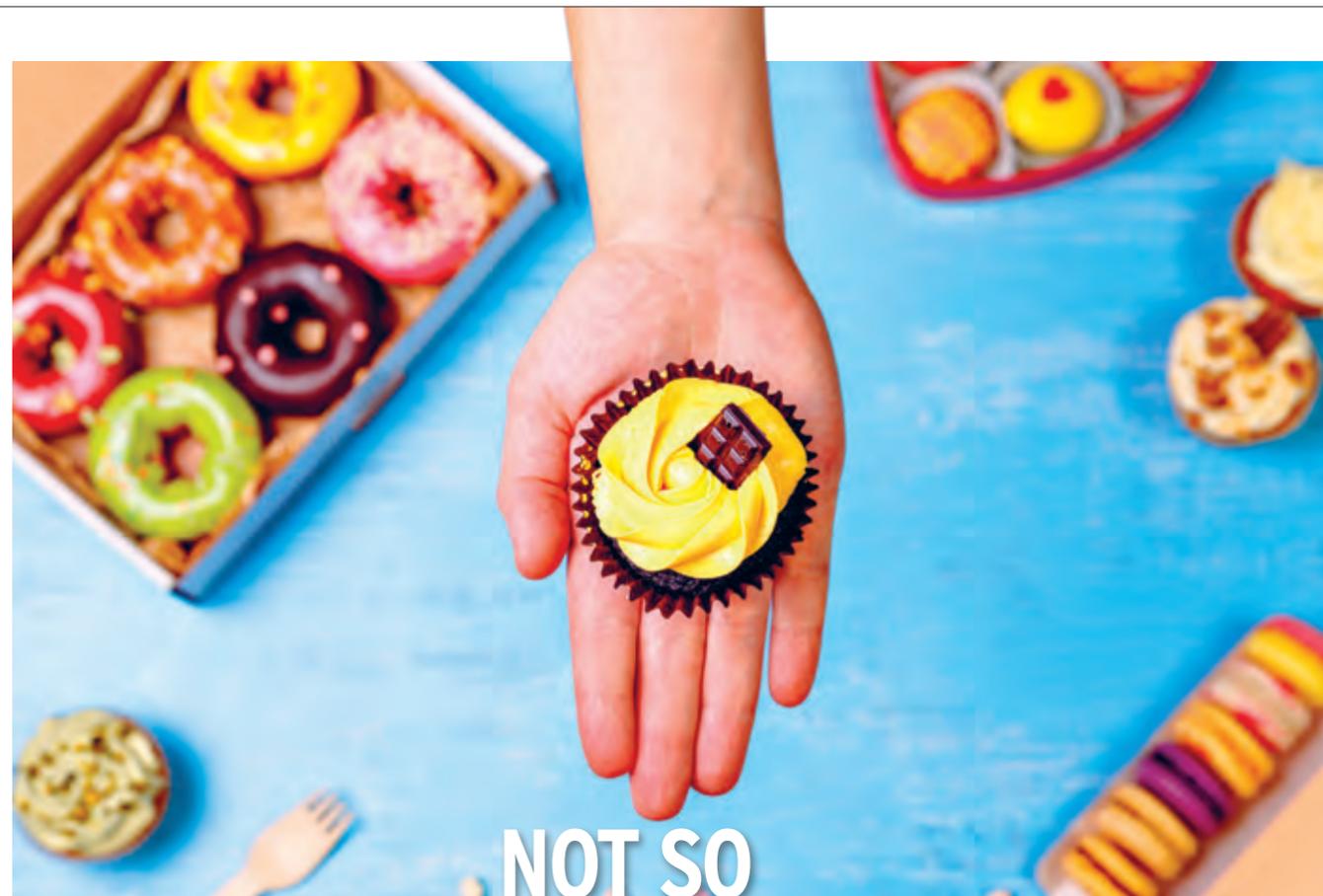
**BIRDPWATCH**  
to beat the blues

Feathered friends to the rescue!



According to researchers from the University of Exeter, birdwatching could help you de-stress and improve your mental health. Their survey of 270 participants showed that the more birds people saw, the less they reported feeling stressed, anxious and depressed. Researchers say that the type of birds

people saw did not affect the results, which are consistent with past studies that show that nature has a soothing effect. As lead researcher Dr Daniel Cox put it, "Birds around the home, and nature in general, show great promise in preventative health care, making cities healthier, happier places to live".



## NOT SO SWEET AFTER ALL

### #KNOW THIS

An average cup of:

- *teh* contains 5 teaspoons of sugar
- *kopi* contains 4 teaspoons of sugar

Making yourself some coffee as you read this? You might want to skip the sugar — a new study suggests that sugar-laden diets could be a risk factor for Alzheimer's disease. Researchers from the University of Bath and King's College London have discovered that excess glucose in the blood suppresses the activity of macrophage migration inhibitory factor (MMIF), an enzyme.

The enzyme is part of the immune response to the build-up of abnormal

proteins in the brain caused by the onset of Alzheimer's. Researchers believe that the suppression of MMIF is the "tipping point" that allows the disease to develop and progress.

"Excess sugar is known to be bad for us when it comes to diabetes and obesity, but this potential link with Alzheimer's disease is yet another reason to control our sugar intake," said Dr Omar Kassar from the University of Bath.



## > CATS GET THE ALL-CLEAR

Past research suggested that cat owners are at a higher risk of schizophrenia, because they are more likely to be infected with *Toxoplasma gondii*, a parasite that felines are host to.

This claim has now been dismissed by researchers from the University College of London, who have completed a 20-year study and concluded that cat ownership has no direct relationship to the condition. Owing a cat does not significantly increase exposure to the parasite, they said. "The message for cat owners is clear: there is no evidence that cats pose a risk to mental health," said the study's lead author Dr Francesca Solmi.

FELINES ARE FINE!



## BRAIN ALERT – EAT THESE

The state of your mental health could be decided by what's on your plate, so include these three superfoods in your diet:



**1 BERRIES** Strawberries, blueberries, blackberries ... whichever variety you go for, these antioxidant-rich fruits can help to improve memory function.



**2 BROWN RICE** Magnesium, one of nature's best stress-busters, can be found in rice. If you opt for brown rice over white, you get nearly eight times as much magnesium.



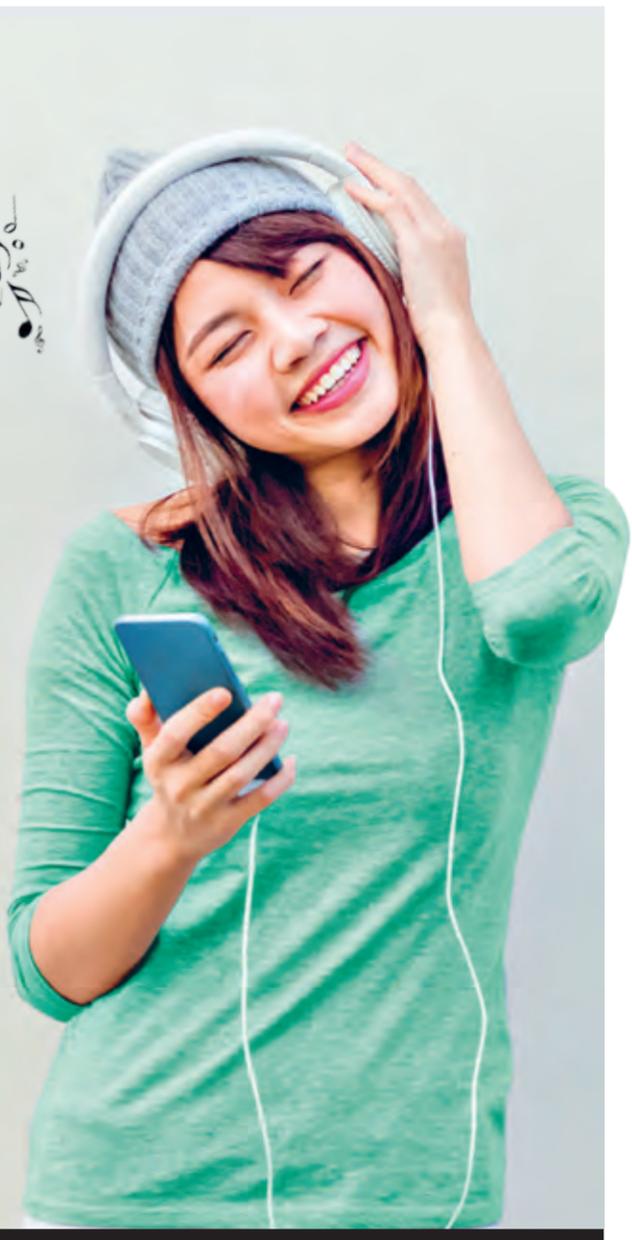
**3 FATTY FISH** Fish like salmon, sardines and mackerel are high in omega-3 fatty acids, which the human body cannot produce on its own. Fatty acids are vital for cognitive function.

## MANAGE YOUR ANGER

Anger is a normal emotion, but if it gets out of control, it can become destructive and cause problems at work and in your relationships. Here's a handy relaxation technique to help you handle your anger:

- Imagine that the anger you are feeling is a fire burning inside your body
- Drink a glass of cold water, and as you drink, imagine the cool water running down your throat and into your body
- As the water travels down your throat, visualise it pouring over the fire and extinguishing it





### > THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

Ever wondered why some songs lift your spirits so much, you feel as if you are walking on air? A study published in *Scientific Reports* may hold the key. Researchers from Canada's McGill University say that music creates pleasure in part by releasing natural opioids in the brain. Opioids are chemical substances that play an important role in our emotional functioning and can induce feelings of pleasure. As part of the study, 15 participants chose two songs they found "pleasurable". They were then given naltrexone, a drug that blocks the effects of opioids. After they had taken the drug, the participants became less reactive to their favourite songs. One participant even told a researcher, "I know this is my favourite song, but it doesn't feel like it usually does." Researchers believe the findings could help explain the role of music in human evolution.

#### #KNOW THIS

Researchers from the University of Missouri have concluded that the happiest song in the world is 'Don't Stop Me Now' by Queen, based on its winning combination of a higher-than-average tempo and the fact that it's in a major key.

### MARRIAGE LOWERS STRESS

You may have your spouse to thank for a less stressful life, say researchers from the Carnegie Mellon University in the United States. Their new study, published in the journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, found that married individuals had lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol than those who never married or

were previously married. High levels of cortisol can lead to premature brain ageing and memory loss. "This study provides important insights into the way intimate social relationships can get under the skin to influence our health," said its co-author, Dr Sheldon Cohen.

### SIT UP!

Sitting up straight in your chair doesn't just improve your posture — it has also been shown to make you more confident about your thoughts and ideas.

#### Are you sitting right?

- Your head should be straight and not tilted up or down
- Sit with knees slightly lower than hips
- Keep your shoulders back
- Feet should be flat on the floor

#### THE SCIENCE OF POSTURE



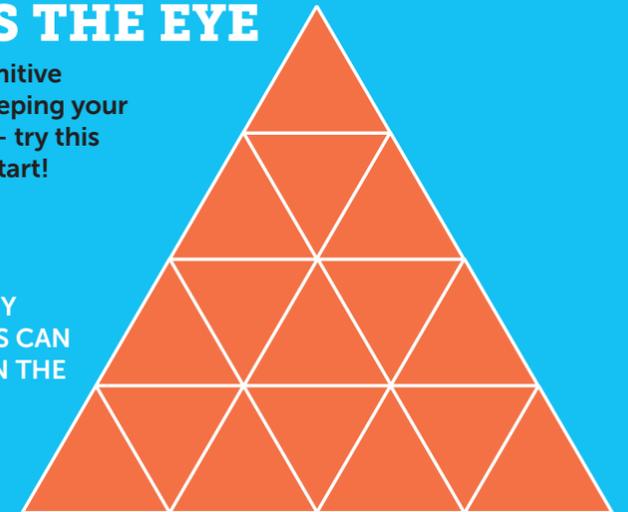
### MORE THAN FUN AND GAMES

Anyone who has played *Tetris* knows how addictive the building-block computer game can be. But British and Swedish researchers have found that the game could also play an important role in psychological interventions after trauma. For the study, researchers approached patients in an emergency room after a motor accident. Participants were asked to think of the accident and then told to play *Tetris* for about 20 minutes. Over the next week, they noted any intrusive memories, which bring back specific sights, sounds and emotions attached to the original incident, and can spark acute stress disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder. Researchers found that playing *Tetris* reduced the instances of intrusive memories by 62 per cent, as compared to a control group that did not play the game. "(It suggests that) a brief psychological intervention like *Tetris* offers a cognitive 'therapeutic vaccine'," says Dr Lalitha Iyadurai of the University of Oxford, one of the study's lead researchers. Their findings were published in the journal *Molecular Psychiatry*.

### MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Ward off cognitive decline by keeping your brain active — try this puzzle for a start!

> HOW MANY TRIANGLES CAN YOU SEE IN THE IMAGE?



REFER TO THE CONTENTS PAGE FOR PUZZLE ANSWER

### Changing with the times

It's often said that change is the only constant in life. Some people see change as a fresh start, while others view it more negatively and worry endlessly about its implications. If you belong to the second group, here are some tips to help you deal with change more effectively:

**SLOW DOWN** Everybody needs time to adjust and settle down, so don't rush yourself into accepting a new situation right away.

**STAY POSITIVE** Try to look for the good things that may come out of the change and focus on these, instead of the negative.

**KEEP THE END IN MIND** Changed circumstances aren't always new — they even become familiar after a while!



ILLUSTRATION: GETTY IMAGES

Whether or not one has a mental illness, maintaining positive mental health or well-being is of primary concern.



# Positivity BREEDS Positivity

TEXT BY WANDA TAN



**“A MENTAL ILLNESS DIAGNOSIS IS NOT THE DEFINING FACTOR OF AN INDIVIDUAL... HIS OR HER RICH LIFE EXPERIENCES, RESILIENCE, COURAGE, SENSE OF HOPE AND COPING SKILLS ARE MORE IMPORTANT.”**

Dr Hanita Assudani, Clinical Psychologist, IMH

**t**he World Health Organization defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”.

To put another way, mental health encompasses more than the absence (or presence) of mental disorders; attributes such as resilience, social skills and temperament — which together shape one’s personal well-being — also come into play. It is entirely possible for a person with a diagnosis of mental illness to have a high level of positive mental health. Indeed, Dr Hanita Assudani, Clinical Psychologist, Institute of Mental Health (IMH), calls her patients “some of the most resilient, strongest people” she has ever met.

“When someone is diagnosed as having a mental illness, it means he or she has symptoms that fit the criteria for a specific illness. A mental illness diagnosis is not the defining factor of an individual. This diagnostic label doesn’t take into account the individual as a whole — his or her rich life experiences, resilience, courage, sense of hope and coping skills, which are more important,” she says.

Conversely, it is just as likely that people who are not diagnosed with a mental illness may fail to prioritise their mental well-being. Dr Assudani gives the all-too-common example of the overworked employee: “Someone who works overtime daily and spends little time doing pleasurable activities, or with loved ones, may feel burnt out. This person may then not have the best mental health.”

Clearly, being aware and taking charge of one’s mental health is important. This was the basis on which IMH constructed its Positive Mental Health (PMH) instrument — an assessment tool to measure PMH in the Singapore population.

**A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL CONSTRUCT**

The PMH instrument was developed as part of the Singapore Mental Health Study (SMHS), a three-year research project from 2008 to 2011.

Spearheaded by IMH, the SMHS was a nationwide epidemiological study among adults in Singapore.

“Besides establishing the prevalence of common mental disorders among the adult Singapore population, the study also explored the psychosocial aspects influencing their mental well-being,” says Ms Janhavi Vaingankar, Assistant Director of IMH’s Research Division and Co-Investigator of the SMHS. “We wanted to find out the determinants of PMH in Singapore residents, and whether these differ from those in Western populations.”

The Research team conducted focus-group discussions and surveys with some 2,500 Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents aged 21 to 65 years old and belonging to the various ethnic groups. Based on their feedback, six components of mental health were identified to form a multi-dimensional PMH

## A Culturally-Relevant Tool

IMH’s PMH instrument is different from most tools to measure mental health — which are developed and used in Western societies — in two respects. For one, the adoption of local terminology makes it easily understood by Singapore residents. Secondly, spirituality is included as an independent domain. “Compared to other countries, participants in our study had a greater tendency to say that spiritual or religious beliefs contributed to their PMH,” explains Ms Vaingankar.

At present, the instrument is being used by IMH researchers to compare levels of PMH across different age, gender and ethnic groups in the second national epidemiological study on mental health (SMHS 2016). Ms Vaingankar is involved in the study, which will assist policymakers in developing targeted mental health policies and initiatives. “We can also use the instrument in longitudinal studies to measure and observe changes in PMH among the Singapore population over time,” she adds.



**"WE WANTED TO FIND OUT THE DETERMINANTS OF PMH IN SINGAPORE RESIDENTS, AND WHETHER THESE DIFFER FROM THOSE IN WESTERN POPULATIONS."**

Ms Janhavi Vaingankar, Assistant Director of IMH's Research Division and Co-Investigator of the SMHS.

instrument: General Coping, Emotional Support, Spirituality, Interpersonal Skills, Personal Growth and Autonomy and Global Affect.

The PMH instrument is currently used in research studies, and not in routine clinical practice. However, the issues raised by mental health practitioners during their sessions with patients — questions relating to the patient's family circumstances, goals, mood, etc. — closely resemble the dimensions covered in the instrument. Their aim is to treat not just the disease, but the whole person.

**BUILDING RESILIENCE**

To build and maintain PMH, follow these tips and strategies from Dr Assudani:

**General Coping**

The ability to react or cope well during stressful situations, think positively and engage in choice activities are signs of good mental health.

- > Engage in one pleasurable or relaxing activity every day. It can be a quick activity (e.g. write in a journal, drink a cup of your favourite tea, play with a pet) or something longer (e.g. take a scenic route home, do sports, watch a movie).
- > If you feel anxious or sad, firstly, acknowledge the feeling. Then briefly reflect on the cause of the feeling. Once you understand the cause, it

becomes easier to do something about it. If the problem is solvable, come up with an action plan. For instance, if you are worried about giving a work presentation, you could rehearse beforehand in front of family and friends. If the problem is a hypothetical situation, then try not to worry and let it go.

- > Practise self-compassion. If you've made a mistake, don't beat yourself up over it. Acknowledge that you did the best you could. If you went through a difficult day, reward yourself with a treat or give yourself a mental pat on the back for things you have done well.
- > Sometimes we forget to be positive, as negative thoughts tend to occur more naturally. Cue positive experiences and memories by keeping reminders around you (e.g. a holiday photo or your favourite inspirational quotes on your computer screensaver).

**Emotional Support**

Emotional support from family and friends gives the assurance of feeling loved and wanted, and provides an outlet to share one's burdens.

- > Sometimes when we are stressed, our first instinct may be to withdraw from others. This in turn may make us feel more lonely

and sad. Instead, reach out to people around you whom you can trust for help.

- > Remember that our friends and family cannot read our minds. Say to them: "I had a stressful day today", "I feel sad today" or "I have a problem, can you help me..." Then they will know and can offer support.
- > When help is given, it is okay to accept that help. Being able to accept help is a strength, not a weakness.
- > Give emotional support to others (e.g. offer small gifts or compassionate statements, hug them, listen to their problems). That way, you can build supporting relationships with people.
- > Remember, emotional support is more than taking turns to complain to each other. It is about offering kindness, compassion and sometimes solutions.

(Continued on pg 12)



**THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION**

The role of physical exercise in contributing to PMH cannot be overstated. Physical exercise stimulates the brain to release mood-enhancing chemicals, or endorphins, while personal growth and autonomy can be achieved by hitting fitness goals. Through group exercise, individuals can also strengthen their interpersonal skills and widen their support network.

Mr Julius Chan, 43, can attest to this. He was diagnosed with chronic schizophrenia, depression and

**"IN MY EXPERIENCE, EXERCISE IS A GREAT ANTI-DEPRESSANT."**

anxiety disorder at the age of 19, and it took him years to gain the resilience needed to overcome his situation. Not coincidentally, he was in bad physical shape as well. "At my most depressed, in 2012, I weighed almost 80kg and had borderline diabetes, high blood pressure and cholesterol, as well as fatty liver disease," he recalls. "I was low in confidence and had suicidal thoughts."

Fortunately, a friend who was also battling mental health problems suggested that he give regular exercise a shot. Mr Chan started walking daily from the Orchard MRT station to the one at Dhoby Ghaut, and the impact was immediate. "Going for walks cheered me up and cleared my mind. Seeing people go about their busy lives also inspired me to choose life rather than taking it away," he says. His weight steadily dropped to 65kg, and his physical — and mental — health improved.

Now a Peer Support Specialist at IMH, Mr Chan goes to the National Stadium every evening after work and walks along the river with a small group of friends for 1.5 hours (or, if it rains, in a shopping mall). He talks openly about his recovery journey with other IMH patients and shares coping strategies, including the benefits of physical activity.

"You don't have to be a sportsperson to incorporate exercise into your lifestyle," says Mr Chan, who also attributes his recovery to the support from mental health professionals, family and friends, as well as his Christian faith. "In my experience, exercise is a great anti-depressant."



**WE AS HUMANS NEED SOCIAL INTERACTION. SET ASIDE TIME EACH WEEK TO BE WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS.**



**Spirituality**

Spiritual and religious practices and beliefs can influence one's behaviour in life and help as a coping mechanism.

- > Carve out time to pray, meditate, read religious text or attend your place of worship.
- > Talk to your religious leader or prayer group members. They may serve as a source of emotional support.

**Interpersonal Skills**

Skills to develop and maintain good relationships are essential in building strong bonds.

- > We as humans need social interaction. Set aside time each week to be with family and friends. Ask people to meet you, rather than waiting for invitations.
- > Chat and connect with people around you, for instance, the coffeshop aunty you see every morning or your taxi driver.
- > Because of modern technologies, we can connect with people more easily now. Use these to your advantage (e.g. social media, online forums, WhatsApp, Skype). Don't be afraid to reconnect with old friends.
- > Remember that your family and friends are human and may sometimes let you down.
- > Do something nice for others, including strangers, for no reason at all.

**Personal Growth and Autonomy**

Having goals in life reflects well on one's level of confidence, freedom, sense of self and ability to take control of situations.

- > Set short- and/or long-term goals. These can be career or personal goals (e.g. get promoted, become a certified diver, master the art of making macarons).
- > Go out of your comfort zone and be open to new experiences. This helps us to learn

new things about ourselves and builds our identity.

- > Know that making mistakes is okay. Failure is a part of life; what is important is that you learn from your mistakes and keep trying.

**Global Affect**

Positive moods, such as being calm, happy and enthusiastic, are indicative of emotional stability and vitality.

- > Realise that mood states are transient. We cannot be happy all the time. Happiness comes in moments. Allow yourself to indulge in positive feelings.

It is okay to acknowledge that you had an awesome day, or to accept praise from others.

- > Practise mindfulness to be present in the here and now (e.g. perform deep breathing exercises, use your five senses to notice your surroundings). This will reduce dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.
- > Eat purposefully, and choose foods that make you feel nourished rather than guilty. It may be a colourful salad one day and a spicy mee pok on another.

**ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN**

Although the participants involved in the development of the PMH instrument are within the 21-65 age group, the tips for PMH recommended by Dr Assudani may be implemented throughout the life span. In the case of young children, parents can initiate these strategies. "If kids see their parents giving emotional support and showing compassion to others, they are more likely to model that behaviour," she says. "Parents can also set up play dates for their children or take them to the playground, so they can interact with other kids and hone their interpersonal skills."

Older adults may have more free time post-retirement to reconnect with friends. They are also never too old to learn new things, such as becoming adept at social media, and can impart knowledge or skills to the younger generation as a way of boosting their confidence.



**FINDING HIS Calling**

**As a counsellor at IMH's Mental Health Helpline, Mr Luqman Safiyuddin is fulfilling his wish of helping others.**



**A CLOSER LOOK:**



**IMH's Mental Health Helpline is manned 24/7 by a team of 9 counsellors**



**The service receives around 50-70 calls a day**



**Calls can last as long as 1 HOUR and as short as 5 mins**

**INTERVIEW ASHUTOSH RAVIKRISHNAN // PHOTOS HONG CHEE YAN**

**+ IF YOU OR A LOVED ONE IS FACING A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS, CALL IMH'S MENTAL HEALTH HELPLINE AT 6389 2222**

"Hi, how can I help you today?" Mr Luqman Safiyuddin's voice is cheery and comforting as he answers a call on IMH's 24-hour Mental Health Helpline. As one of the service's nine counsellors, Mr Luqman has been trained to help people with mental illness and their families, as well as the public, deal with mental health-related crises. "The first thing a counsellor does is to assess the mental state of the caller," Mr Luqman, 33, tells *Imagine*. To do this, counsellors pay attention to the caller's speech patterns, looking out for specific behaviour such as the use of noises instead of words. "If we feel that there's a risk either to the caller or the public, we notify the relevant authorities, like the

police. In the meantime, we try to keep the caller on the line and get more details," he says.

In such cases, counsellors may also activate IMH's Mobile Crisis Team. This multi-disciplinary group includes psychiatric nurses and doctors who then visit the caller to relieve his or her mental distress. If necessary, the team will accompany the person to IMH for admission and treatment.

In his eight years at the helpline, Mr Luqman has taken calls from people who wanted advice on managing a variety of mental health issues. He has also dealt with crises such as people on the verge of committing suicide. Sometimes, there are callers who just want a listening ear. "We are a crisis helpline, so our priority is to reduce any

extremely close-knit and I've forged many lasting friendships over the years.

**I take care of my own mental health by...** keeping stress at bay. When things get overwhelming, I either hop on my electric unicycle or play the drums in my band. Given the nature of my job, I think it's important to 'detach' and have some time for myself. I'm also busy preparing for the birth of my first child in a few months!

**RARING TO HELP**

- > **I was drawn to a career at IMH...** because I've always had an interest in psychology and helping people. I worked at a helpline for the Singapore Police Force during my National Service, so I thought of putting my experience to use in a healthcare setting.
- > **I look forward to work every day...** because I believe that my job is meaningful. It's also a plus that I have great colleagues — our counselling team is





«  
Ocean's  
Mind  
2016

**Y**en Phang, who started with Chinese ink, is no stranger to working with paper. However these days, the artist is also known for installations that rely on a kind of paper seldom associated with art — toilet paper.

Depending on the work, the dyed toilet paper is torn, stacked, rolled up or draped. The 37-year-old Singaporean, who splits his time between Singapore and Montreal, says that part of the appeal of using toilet paper in his work is its sensuality.

Toilet paper is one of the more intimate materials used in the home. "Think about how we interact with it, and how often we interact with it," says Yen. "It's about touch and comfort and the feel of things. So there's something quite sensual about the paper."

He tends to use cheaper toilet paper for his installations. "Two-ply paper from Johor Bahru works better," he says, without a touch of irony. "They are rougher, stronger and don't tear into fibres that easily. The four-ply ones are comfortable to use but don't hold up. If I use them in my work, it's because they don't hold up."

Toilet paper is the artist's take on the Chinese scroll. He used to work with *xuan* paper, the rice paper used for Chinese calligraphy and brush painting, having studied under the son of well-known local artist Chen Wen Hsi.

Being fragile and disposable, toilet paper is the opposite of *xuan* paper. "Rather than using something that's meant to be preserved, what happens when you use something where you don't have that control in terms of the spread of the ink or the fragility of the paper?" That, he says, is the basis of his art.

Rather than painting on the paper, he allows the toilet roll and ink to do the work on its own through a soaking process. "The remaining gestures comprise the accumulative motions of stacking, draping and wrapping," he says. "It's an attempt to be sensitive to the idea of how bodies work as conduits of life's experience,

and how paintings operate as objects in space, letting each respectively go where they want to go. Therein lies the balance between control and letting go."

Finding that balance is also how the intellectual property lawyer-turned-artist deals with his depression. Instead of constantly trying to master his condition, Yen sometimes tries to just be with it and to be sensitive to what it is doing to him.

While acknowledging that it is a part of him, he also treats his depression as a separate entity. "Some people call it a black dog. I treat it like a funny animal just sitting in the corner. Sometimes you notice it, sometimes you don't, sometimes you want to pet it, sometimes you want to listen to it, and sometimes you want to leash it."

It was when he was serving his National Service, that Yen, then 19, had a major breakdown. His mother, who also has depression, helped him to get a diagnosis and receive medical care. "It was a blessing to have someone in the family who knew what to do," he recalls.

"WHEN YOU ARE IN THE MIDST OF MAKING ART, THERE IS SOMETHING VERY LIBERATING ABOUT NOT HAVING TO THINK ABOUT WHO YOU ARE OR WHAT YOU'RE DOING."



# GOING WITH THE FLOW

Artist Yen Phang talks about his unique installations, his experience with depression, and art that involves the viewer.

INTERVIEW  
JIMMY YAP  
PHOTO NICKY LOH  
ARTWORK PHOTOS  
COURTESY  
OF YEN PHANG

YEN PHANG DESIGNED TWO LIMITED-EDITION PRINTS FOR THE LAST AFFORDABLE ART FAIR IN NOV 2016; HALF THE SALE PROCEEDS WENT TO THE WOODBRIDGE HOSPITAL CHARITY FUND. HE ALSO TOOK PART IN A DIALOGUE ON ART AS THERAPY WITH DR ONG SAY HOW, CHIEF, DEPARTMENT OF CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRY, IMH

»  
Body as  
Painting as  
Open Loop,  
2016



He responded to the medication he was put on, but he did not stay on it consistently. Four years after the first episode, Yen had another major breakdown. This time, he was in university in Sydney. He had to be hospitalised and at the time, the only way he could communicate was by pen-and-paper sketches. He eventually recovered from that episode, graduated and worked as an intellectual property lawyer until he turned to art full-time in 2012.

### INVOLVING THE VIEWER

Being an inherent part of him, his experience with depression naturally finds its way into Yen's work. "It seeps into whatever I'm making. And it's only when you look back, you go, 'Oh, I was in that state at that time, hence I did this'."

To some extent, he sees art as a form of therapy because the ability to make art enables the artist to lose himself or herself in the process. "When you are in the midst of making art, there is something very liberating about not having to think about who you are or what you're doing," he says.

However, for Yen, art has to be more than therapy, especially for artists. "For all artists, no matter what medium they work in, art is therapeutic. The trick is how do you make art that is not just therapeutic for you, but envelopes the experience of the viewer as well? If art is just self-therapy then you don't really need to show it."

Depression sometimes steals his resolve to make art, but he persists. As an artist, "you have to make art in spite of your depression," he says.

### OCEAN'S MIND, 2016 (220 BY 500 BY 200 CM, INK ON TOILET PAPER ON FISHING WIRE)

"This paid homage to my mum's anxiety about ageing... She wants her ashes to be scattered in the ocean. I needed to exorcise my own anxieties about that. *Ocean's Mind* was a huge block of toilet paper strands that you walk through. The work is also about being able to appreciate the transient. Toilet paper is fragile so as you walk through the installation, you might break some strands. At the end of the day, transience is what marks our relationship with those we are closest to."

### BODY AS PAINTING AS OPEN LOOP, 2016, (DIMENSIONS VARIABLE, INK ON TOILET PAPER AND WIRE)

"For this piece, I did a lot of bandaging movements, just bandaging toilet paper until it is unrecognisable. And I wanted it to be hung against the wall, a very slack bulge against the wall but what happens when you turn it on the side and you make it a lethargic, exhausted piece of ink on paper? You don't really know whether to call it a painting. It is ink on paper, but it has this tense quality of just rolls and rolls being bundled up together."

### LAYTILTITUPDOWN (HERE'S TO ALL OF MOM'S FISH I KILLED), 2016, INK ON TOILET PAPER

"This is part of my *Fishbowl Series*. The soft colours are the colours of the guppies I used to have. My mum worked with ornamental fish and would bring some home. Under my care, or non-care, they would end up dying. There's something quite funny and sad about childhood memories. The series is part of a bigger series called *Daily Monuments*. We think about monuments as these stone-like objects to memorialise someone, but these form odd, whimsical, little towers. A monument is supposed to stand the test of time, or give the illusion it will stand the test of time. This accepts the fact that nothing really stands forever. You just do what you can to achieve that uprightness and that verticality."

«  
LayTiltTiltUp  
Down (Here's  
to All of  
Mom's Fish  
I Killed)



# ANXIETY DISORDER OR JUST ANXIOUS?

It is okay to feel worried or nervous about things. But when such feelings continually affect your quality of life, help is needed.

TEXT DENNIS YIN // IN CONSULTATION WITH DR SUSAN ZACHARIAH, CONSULTANT, DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL PSYCHIATRY

Everyone experiences some form of anxiety from time to time. Some even feel anxious all the time. But when does it become a health concern, and how do we know if we are just being overly-worried or if we are suffering from an anxiety disorder?

Anxiety is the feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome, such as the feeling you get before your final exam or a big presentation at work. You feel some stress, but that "good anxiety" motivates you to prepare ahead. And when whatever has been causing you worry (for example, the final exam or presentation) is over, you stop worrying and don't carry the anxiety with you.

"Being anxious is a normal reaction to stress. It protects you and puts you on alert to potential dangers," explains Dr Susan Zachariah, Consultant with the Department of General Psychiatry at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH).

But if a person starts to experience physical discomfort such as the heart beating very fast, giddiness or shortness of breath, and is affected so much that he or she calls in sick or does not turn up for say, the exam, that may be the onset of an anxiety disorder.

"When anxiety debilitates a person's life in such a way that it interferes with day-to-day functions and relationships, professional help is needed," advises Dr Zachariah.

## MORE THAN JUST A FEELING

Anxiety disorders comprise a full spectrum of conditions, of which one of the more incapacitating is **panic attack**. Dr Zachariah describes a panic attack as "an unusual physical sensation where you feel like you are going to pass out". Your stomach becomes uncomfortable, your heart beats fast, you feel short of breath, and your body becomes hot and sweaty, or cold and clammy. The symptoms are intense, but short-lived; they last about 10 minutes each time, and can occur once or twice a day, or every morning when you wake up. Many people who have experienced a panic attack described it as feeling as though "you are going to die" (see box). A person is diagnosed as suffering from panic attack when the condition is present for at least a month.

Another condition is **generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)**, characterised by constant worry, fear and concern. Sometimes, you will experience shortness of breath and your heart may beat very fast. The symptoms can last throughout the day. A person is diagnosed with GAD if the condition recurs for six months.

Other conditions classified as anxiety disorders include:

**Phobia** — Extreme or irrational fear of something, such as the fear of heights (acrophobia), fear of insects (entomophobia), fear of open spaces (agoraphobia) and fear of people not of your own kind (xenophobia).

**Social phobia** — People with this condition feel extremely uncomfortable in social situations, such as making a speech or attending a social gathering, and will go to great lengths to avoid such events. They feel that they are being scrutinised by others.

**Post-traumatic stress disorder** — This occurs as a result of overwhelming stress from a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, physical or sexual abuse, or seeing a loved one die in an accident.

**Obsessive compulsive disorder** — The need to check

"WHEN ANXIETY DEBILITATES A PERSON'S LIFE IN SUCH A WAY THAT IT INTERFERES WITH DAY-TO-DAY FUNCTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS, PROFESSIONAL HELP IS NEEDED,"

Dr Susan Zachariah, Consultant with IMH's Department of General Psychiatry



Dr Susan Zachariah



## KEEP IN MIND

Ways to reduce your anxiety levels

- ▶ Take good care of yourself:
  - Have a good sleep pattern
  - Limit your alcohol intake
  - Eat a well-balanced diet
  - Drink coffee in moderation
  - Exercise regularly
- ▶ Talk about your feelings of anxiety to someone
- ▶ Try relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga or other activities that you enjoy
- ▶ Think positively

## Feeling unlike any other

Matthew (not his real name), in his 20s, describes his panic attacks.

**M**y first panic attack happened three years ago. There was a huge noisy quarrel between my parents, with glasses being broken.

The panic attack started with my chest tightening, followed by breathlessness. I was shocked and unsure of what was happening to me. I felt anxious, and I cried. I remember hiding under a table and feeling very frustrated.

My parents became concerned when they saw my reaction to their quarrel. But I couldn't register what they were saying. All I heard were noises, not words. My panic attack lasted about 10 to 15 minutes, after which I felt very tired, mentally and physically.

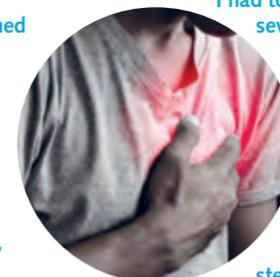
Subsequently, whenever my parents had a big fight, certain

symptoms would manifest. But it didn't occur to me to see a counsellor or doctor, as I didn't know then that I was suffering from an illness.

The panic attacks returned last year when I started having trouble at work. I became easily agitated, and that affected my relationship with my family. I eventually saw a general practitioner, who referred me to a specialist.

Two weeks before my appointment, I had to be hospitalised because I had a severe panic attack triggered by an unpleasant experience at work.

It has been more than a month since that episode. I feel relieved now that I know what happened to me was due to an illness. My doctor assures me that my condition can improve with medication and therapy. I feel better now and I'm on a steady road to recovery".



things or perform certain routines repeatedly. One in 33 people in Singapore may have OCD at some point in their lifetime.

It is possible to have one or more of these conditions at the same time.

**ROOT CAUSES**

It does seem that genes play a part in anxiety disorders. "When we look at the family patterns of many patients, there is usually a first-degree relative who has anxiety disorder, or some kind of mood disturbance such as depression," says Dr Zachariah.

Other reasons include the biological (chemical imbalances in the body) or environmental, for which she uses this example — a child who is stressed and anxious around a strict and punitive father while growing up may be inclined to feel the same when he is working with a supervisor who behaves like his father.

**SEEKING TREATMENT**

Anxiety disorders are treatable. "Our brain can change with new learning and therapy. If diagnosed early and the right treatment is administered, a patient can recover. About 60 to 70 per cent of patients get better and are able to lead normal lives," says Dr Zachariah.

If left untreated, anxiety disorders can lead to further complications such as depression. A person should seek professional help when the feeling of anxiety starts to chronically affect

their mood, social relationships and work performance.

Most patients are managed in an outpatient setting. "During the first visit, patients usually complain of stress and sleep difficulties," says Dr Zachariah. When probed further, they often reveal other symptoms such as "My heart bounces", "My heart feels heavy", or "My throat feels dry".

During consultation, the psychiatrist will also assess if the patient is suffering from other medical problems such as cardiovascular disease or hyperthyroidism that have similar symptoms to anxiety disorders (racing heartbeat and tremor).

Those diagnosed with anxiety disorder are referred to a psychologist for the management of the disorder. They may be asked to attend therapy sessions, or start on medication, or both.

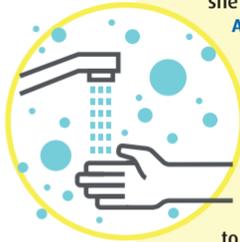
If well treated, within two to three months, most patients will show signs of improvement. If they continue treatment, within a year, says Dr Zachariah, they should "get back on their feet again".



**1 in 33**  
PEOPLE IN SINGAPORE MAY HAVE OCD, A TYPE OF ANXIETY DISORDER, AT SOME POINT IN THEIR LIFETIME.

**WHEN TO SEEK HELP**

**JUST BEING ANXIOUS:** A mother, concerned about her newborn baby's hygiene, makes sure she washes her hands each time she attends to the child.



**ANXIETY DISORDER:** A mother, concerned about her newborn baby's hygiene, makes sure she washes her hands each time she attends to the child... but she cleans them to the point that the hands become sore. She also stocks up on hand soap and her water bills are high. Sometimes she forgets to feed her baby due to the time spent on keeping things clean.

**JUST BEING ANXIOUS:** You attend a party alone and feel awkward at first because you don't know anyone.



But you settle in and find a seat, drink or someone to chat with, and your level of alertness reduces.

**ANXIETY DISORDER:** You feel very uncomfortable when you set foot at a party. You feel that everyone is scrutinising what you wear and say. You clam up, your heart beats fast and you feel dizzy. The symptoms last even after you leave the premises.

**JUST BEING ANXIOUS:** You get nervous before a job interview. You experience some mild stomach discomfort or a slightly faster heart rate, but the symptoms do not last. Once the interview is over, you feel relieved — or disappointed — but you are no longer nervous.



**ANXIETY DISORDER:** Your heart starts to beat very fast, and you feel giddy and short of breath. You are so affected by the symptoms that you decide not to attend the interview.

**STIMULATING THE BRAIN**

After seven decades of use, ECT remains an effective treatment for certain psychiatric disorders. *Imagine finds out more.*

TEXT JIMMY YAP // IN CONSULTATION WITH DR TOR PHERN CHERN, CONSULTANT, DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL PSYCHIATRY// PHOTO GETTY IMAGES

**W**hen most people hear about electroconvulsive therapy or ECT, they think of it as something unsafe, old-fashioned

and horrifying. Quite often, this is an image perpetuated by the media. The portrayal of ECT in the 1975 movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* for example, was particularly impactful. The image of Jack Nicholson as the convict R P McMurphy being pinned down on an operating table following 'shock therapy', has left an indelible impression in the minds of the general public.

So most people would certainly be surprised to learn that ECT, which involves the passing of an electrical current through the brain to induce a seizure, is regularly used as a treatment for certain psychiatric disorders. "ECT is the oldest psychiatric treatment that we are still using today," says Dr Tor Phern Chern, Consultant, Department of General Psychiatry, who also heads the Institute of Mental Health's Neurostimulation Service. "Doctors have been using ECT for 70 years and there is only one reason why doctors would continue using an old treatment, and it is because it works."

ECT is used as a treatment for disorders such as severe depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. It is generally used when the condition is unresponsive to medication and other forms of therapy. Or it might be used when patients pose a severe risk to themselves or others, and it is too dangerous to wait until medications take effect. In a 2014 US study\*, half of patients with schizophrenia who did not respond to drugs alone responded to a regime that combined ECT with drugs, Dr Tor notes.

In Singapore, six hospitals offer ECT as a form of treatment. Patients

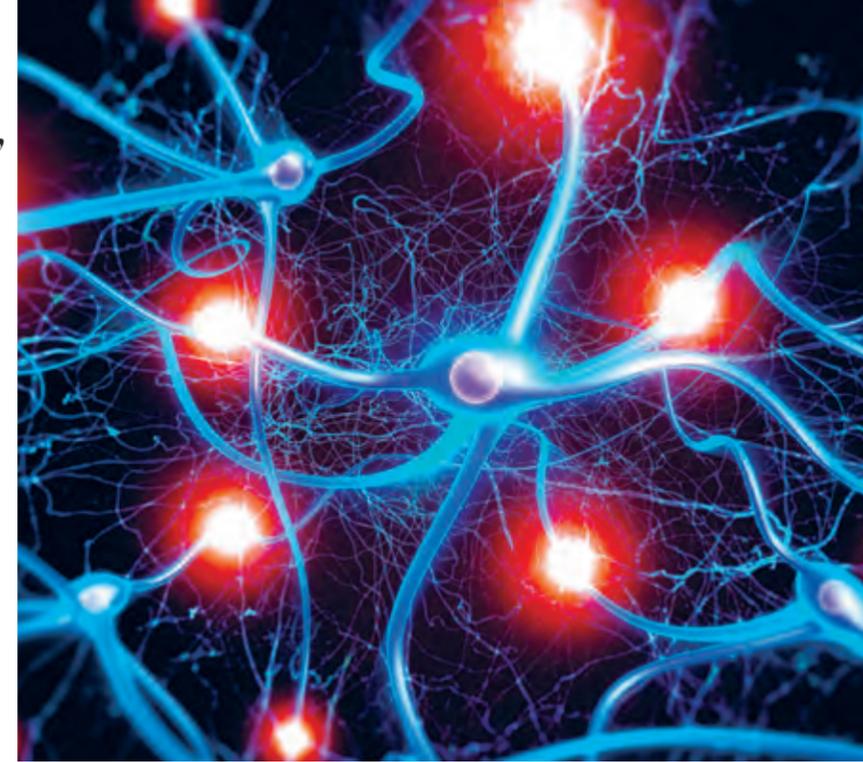


DR TOR PHERN CHERN



\*Petrides, et al., Electroconvulsive Therapy Augmentation in Clozapine-Resistant Schizophrenia: A Prospective, Randomized Study, *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 2015.

\*\*Shantanu H. Joshi, et al. Structural Plasticity of the Hippocampus and Amygdala Induced by Electroconvulsive Therapy in Major Depression, *Biological Psychiatry*, 2015.



of all ages are suitable for ECT. The main concerns are those who have experienced recent strokes or have heart disease.

**What happens during ECT?**

Patients first have electrodes put on their scalp, and then go under general anaesthesia (GA). While they are sedated, a finely-controlled electrical current is passed through their brain for between one to eight seconds to cause a mild seizure. Most seizures last between 15 to 30 seconds and there is only one seizure per treatment. ECT can also be done on an outpatient basis.

Most ECT treatments involve six to 12 sessions, which are given two to three times a week.

According to Dr Tor, evidence suggests that the seizures release a significant amount of neurochemicals in the brain that help to manage severe psychiatric disorders. ECT also helps to grow new brain cells. In fact, a 2015 study\*\* stated that stimulating the brain induces structural changes in the brain's amygdala and hippocampus, which play key roles in processing strong emotions and in learning and memory. Dr Tor says that brains are stimulated by the treatment and for patients with depression, ECT actually causes the hippocampus to grow.

**What about the risks?**

Many people are afraid that ECT will 'fry their brains', as Dr Tor says, because an electrical current is passed through the brain. But the biggest mortality risk of ECT actually comes from going under GA. However, deaths from GA occur in less than two per 100,000 treatments. These risks are present for anyone who go under GA, and are not specific to ECT.

ECT does come with side effects though, as all treatment therapies do. The main side effects are cognitive; immediately following



**"Doctors have been using ECT for 70 years and there is only one reason why doctors would continue using an old treatment, and it is because it works."**

DR TOR PHERN CHERN  
Consultant, Department of General Psychiatry

a session, there is some confusion and retrograde amnesia, often temporary and especially when using older, stronger forms of ECT.

Over decades, the treatment has been refined so that the current is only passed through for a very short period of time. It is also tailored to suit each patient. And instead of having electrodes on both sides of the head, modern ECT requires electrodes only on the right side of the head — which is opposite the brain's memory and learning areas. This has been shown to cause fewer memory problems. "Modern ECT is about reducing side effects while maintaining efficacy," says Dr Tor, "It is much safer now and has its place in the treatment of severe mental illness."

**MANAGING ANXIETY THROUGH ART**



Self-expression through painting can be used to help improve a person's emotional state and mental well-being. Ms Wan Sau Peng, Principal Occupational Therapist and Art Therapist at IMH explains:

"Art therapy is often used to help those with anxiety disorders. It involves making art in the presence of a certified art therapist. Feelings and thoughts that are difficult to put into words can be communicated through a painting or drawing using form, colour and patterns (as seen from the image, top left).

The therapist will then use the artwork as a point of conversation to examine the issues and feelings with the patient. It helps the patient to learn more about themselves and make positive changes in their lives.

After several sessions, the patient may feel calmer (as shown in the next image painted by the same person).

Other professionals involved in the patient's treatment will be kept informed of his or her progress."

Ms Wan Sau Peng



# ENCOURAGING EMPATHY

In recovery from depression and anxiety, Nicole K, 34, reaches out to others who have mental illness.

INTERVIEW PHYLLIS HONG // PHOTOS EALBERT HO

## I blamed academic stress

when I first experienced symptoms of depression in 2000. I was in junior college and taking Literature, so I thought I fitted the profile of a 'brooding' Arts student. But it was more than that, and my moodiness crossed over to full-blown depression in 2006. I was 23, at the peak of my youth, when I was diagnosed with major depressive disorder and generalised anxiety disorder. Many significant life events and transitions occurred that year which overwhelmed me. Besides graduating from school and starting work, I was struggling with preparing for my wedding. To top things off, my parents were getting a divorce and without a place to stay, I had to adjust to living with my then-fiancé's family. Apart from these external factors, I have a family history of mental illness.

## Having depression is not just about feeling sad.

Mostly, I felt broken, unwanted by society and a failure for being 'weak'. These emotions also led to anger — I was fed up of feeling judged by people who wouldn't know what I had been through and being told to "snap out of it". With depression, just getting through the day is challenging. It feels like swimming upstream with weights on. Friends with depression also describe feeling helpless, like they are drowning in a pool while people watch. In my case, I face the double whammy of having depression coupled with anxiety. When I become anxious, my mind often goes into a rabbit hole of negative thoughts and I spiral into depression. I would say that anxiety knocks you off your feet, and depression keeps you pinned down.

## It was a General Practitioner who first realised that I needed help.

I had gone to him because I had the flu and stomach

**NICOLE K, 34**  
WANTS PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS TO KNOW THEY AREN'T ALONE



Nicole participated in the "Walk with Us. Stamp out Stigma" event last year to support reducing the stigma of mental illness

discomfort and needed a Medical Certificate for work. At my first job, I was often ill. I was also crying all the time — before, during and after work. My colleagues attributed my behaviour to stress from work and preparations for my wedding. I knew something was not right but was in denial. The GP was sharp enough to piece together my symptoms and referred me for further review. I had mixed feelings after getting diagnosed. I was relieved that I could finally put a name to all the crying and weight loss, but the official diagnosis initially felt like a death sentence. My sister and then-fiancé, now husband, were shocked while my parents felt guilt-ridden and apologetic. Despite my family history, mental illness was not discussed at home.

## Getting the right prescription can be a trial-and-error process.

People may react differently to the same medication. My first psychiatrist prescribed an antidepressant which didn't work for me. I stopped it after a while and sought psychotherapy which helped to slow, but not stop, me from sliding downhill. In 2011, I hit rock bottom. I was struggling to complete my graduate diploma before starting a new job. I was also worried about my ill grandmother whom I am very close to. As my self-harm tendencies got out of control, I sought help at a public general hospital. I have since been taking medication and receiving psychotherapy. Medication helps to reduce the intensity of my emotions so that I can practise the techniques I learnt from therapy to manage my condition.

## Journaling stopped me from committing suicide once.

I had written my last words and final goodbyes. Thankfully, penning my thoughts brought clarity and objectivity, and I felt much calmer after. The therapeutic process of writing gives me emotional relief by releasing pent-up frustrations, but writing can be a double-edged sword. There is always the danger of feeling worse after journaling because the process allows one to replay negative thoughts, beliefs and emotions. Therefore, journaling has to be a guided process with suitable techniques; I always make sure to take breaks in between writing.

## Depression is not like the common cold

which people can recover from in days or weeks. The road to recovery has been lengthy and fraught with challenges — from

accepting the diagnosis to getting the right dose of medication and type of treatment. I am thankful for my loved ones, especially my husband who has been extremely supportive. It has been 10 years since I was diagnosed and I am still learning not to swamp myself with commitments, and to practise healthy coping mechanisms. Being able to better handle stressful situations now is a mark of recovery for me. Relapse remains a real fear but I refuse to let it cripple me. If it happens, I will learn from the experience, as with previous times.

## I was once advised to have children because then

I would have no time to be depressed! More can be done to educate the public on mental health issues. Mental illness may be invisible but it is real, just like



“INSTEAD OF PRESCRIBING SOLUTIONS OR DISPENSING TIPS LIKE 'LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE' OR 'THINK OF PEOPLE WORSE OFF', LISTENING UNCONDITIONALLY IS MORE HELPFUL.”

Nicole K

## THE TAPESTRY PROJECT SG

Launched in January 2014 by Ms Nicole K, this online platform features content on mental health, with articles and first-person accounts by professionals as well as people with mental health issues. By sharing heartfelt and authentic stories, Ms K hopes to make mental health issues more relatable. "Statistics like depression rates are cold facts that are hard to relate to. Through The Tapestry Project, I hope that people will realise that there are individuals behind the statistics with feelings, dreams and strengths," she says. She also wants to empower people with mental illness to share their experience as "having a community also helps to reduce the feelings of alienation".

VISIT: [THETAPESTRYPROJECT.SG](http://thetapestryproject.sg)

any other health condition. Just because there are no physical wounds or bleeding doesn't mean the person is not hurting badly inside. Instead of prescribing solutions or dispensing tips like "look on the bright side" or "think of people worse off", listening unconditionally is more helpful. I find it comforting when people assure me that they will be there for me no matter how long recovery takes.

ASK THE

# EXPERTS

IMH clinicians answer your questions.



## MENTAL ILLNESS AND FAMILY

My husband comes from a family with a history of mental illness. His mother has major depressive disorder and his uncle and a cousin have schizophrenia. Would our children be at risk of getting a mental illness?

Mental illness such as schizophrenia and major depressive disorder (MDD) are caused by a combination of genetic predisposition and environmental stressors. In this case, having a grandparent with MDD might slightly increase the risk of the condition in your children, compared to that of the general population. But they do not have an increased risk for developing schizophrenia or any other mental illness as the family members suffering from schizophrenia are distant relatives. The chances of anyone getting a mental illness can be reduced by taking care of his or her mental health. This includes having a cordial family environment, stable relationships, low stress levels and avoiding use of illicit drugs. It is also important to have sufficient sleep, healthy diet and regular physical activities.

**DR LIJO ALIAS**, Chief Resident, Department of General Psychiatry



## COULD MY YOUNG DAUGHTER HAVE OCD?

Recently, my daughter walks "sideways" as though she is avoiding the lines of the tiles or cracks on the pavement on her way home from school. She gets agitated if I try to change the path. She doesn't answer when I ask why she does this. She is 10. Does she have obsessive compulsive disorder?

While there could be many reasons contributing to your daughter's recent habit, it is also important to look at her behaviour as a whole. Is she worried or stressed otherwise? Does she engage in any other behaviours excessively, such as washing her hands, more than she used to do before? It is normal for children to have imaginative play and your daughter might have certain thoughts that stepping on lines or cracks could be unfortunate. Review the extent of her avoidance of these. Ask her gently about her thoughts and fears (she might believe that something bad will

happen if she steps on the lines) to gain insight into what is driving her behaviour. Get her to face her fears gradually. Children often learn by imitating adults. Sharing how you overcome your own fears is a good way to motivate her. However if her mood and daily activities are affected, or if she is unable to do tasks she used to do before, your daughter should be assessed by a professional to ascertain her condition and discuss early treatment options.

**MS HAANUSIA PRITHIVI RAJ**, Senior Clinical Psychologist, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

important to minimise mood swings. However, if the fluctuations in his behaviour are marked, out of character, and not responding to the above strategies, it is important to seek professional advice.

**DR MAGADI GOPALAKRISHNA HARISH**, Consultant, Department of Geriatric Psychiatry



## HOW SHOULD WE HANDLE GRANDAD'S DEMENTIA?

**My grandfather, 76, has mild dementia. Some days he is alert, responsive, and goes on his neighbourhood stroll. Other days he seems dazed, doesn't answer us, and is prone to tantrums. How should we handle him then?**

It is common for people with dementia to display varied emotions and minor fluctuations in cognition (the way they think and function) from time to time. As

caregivers, you and your family can try to mitigate your grandfather's mood and behaviour changes by understanding him well. This includes his likes and dislikes such as foods and activities, as well as what soothes or upsets him. You can then organise his day such that you anticipate and avert problems before they occur. For instance, if he prefers to take a shower after lunch instead of in the morning, schedule it accordingly to avoid any tantrums.

Knowing him well will also enable you to recognise signs of distress early and employ methods to deal with them. Some methods include filling your grandfather's day with pleasant experiences where he is comfortable and comforted by sights, sounds and tastes he enjoys. Engage him with a variety of activities so he isn't bored but also make sure he has adequate rest and is not overstimulated. Proper management of diet, sleep and pain if any, are also

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

### MORE GPs GET MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING

Twelve general practitioners (GP) graduated on 25 March from the Graduate Diploma in Mental Health (GDMH) programme which trains GPs to assess, identify and manage psychiatric conditions. The doctors are from private practice, polyclinics as well as restructured and community hospitals.

This is the sixth cohort to graduate from the 12-month programme since it was launched in 2010. So far, 114 doctors have obtained the diploma, which is



jointly offered by the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) and the Division of Graduate Medical Studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS) to grow a network of GPs to provide convenient and accessible mental healthcare in the community.

The graduation was witnessed by A/Prof Chua Hong Choon, Chief Executive Officer, IMH and A/Prof Chen Fun Gee, Director of the Division of Graduate Medical Studies, NUS. Also present were members of the teaching faculty as well as family members of the graduates.

### FAST HELP FOR THOSE WITH ADDICTION ISSUES

People with addiction problems can now get an immediate appointment at the National Addictions Management Service (NAMS).

The Same Day Appointment (SDA) scheme is offered to first-time patients who call the NAMS helpline or who walk in to the clinic. These patients will be seen by both a psychiatrist and a counsellor.

Both self-referred patients as well as patients referred to NAMS by other organisations will be eligible for this scheme, which is part of an effort to



improve and expand NAMS' services to the community.

In January, NAMS also expanded its services in the western part of Singapore by offering addictions management services at the Queenstown Community Wellness

Clinic (CWC) twice weekly.

The team — comprising a psychiatrist, counsellor and psychologist — provides medical and psychosocial treatment for various addictions. For assistance, please call the All-Addictions Helpline at 6732-6837 or visit [www.nams.sg](http://www.nams.sg).

### SHINING STARS

Two staff, a volunteer and a caregiver from IMH received the Healthcare Humanity Award (HHA) on 25 April.

Dr Ong Lue Ping, Head of Psychology, and Principal Occupational Therapist Ashley Jayapaul received the award in the open category. In the caregiver category, Madam Esah, who is the mother of an IMH patient, was recognised for her resilience and steadfastness despite the challenges she faces, while Mr Lee Poh Leng, received the award in the volunteer category for his efforts to develop the pool of volunteers in IMH and for spending time with long-stay patients every Saturday afternoon for the past 17 years.

The HHA is given out yearly to outstanding healthcare workers who inspire as role models and go the extra mile to offer care and comfort to others.



## CHAMPIONING MENTAL HEALTH

Is there an art and a science to well-being and happiness? That's the theme of this year's Singapore Mental Health Conference (SMHC), which will be held on 8 and 9 September 2017 at the Singapore Expo. Topics to be covered at the conference include mindfulness at the workplace, mental health issues of children, youth and the elderly, as well as society's role in mental health.

SMHC is a national platform — launched in 2013 — to promote discussion to better support people with mental health problems and their caregivers. It is attended by professionals in the healthcare, social service, intermediate- and long-term care, and education sectors, as well as community-based workers and consumers of mental health services.

For more information on this year's conference, go to [www.smhc.com.sg](http://www.smhc.com.sg)



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

TEXT  
ASHUTOSH  
RAVIKRISHNAN  
// PHOTO  
HONG CHEE YAN

**REMINISCENCE  
THERAPY**

encourages patients with dementia to talk about the past, using old photos and familiar items to guide them.

> **OBJECTS OF  
yesteryear**

*Preliminary research suggests that reminiscence therapy may improve the mood and cognitive abilities of patients with dementia. Reminiscence therapy sessions are conducted weekly for patients with dementia in IMH. Reminiscing activities are conducted in individual or group settings. Participants are encouraged to talk about their lives through discussions or even using collages and journals.*



In IMH's Reminiscence Room, patients can see and touch vintage objects that they or their family members might have once used, among them wooden clogs and a coal iron.

**KEEPING THE  
memories alive**

**Creating opportunities to relive the past is an important aspect in dementia care.**

**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  
Alzheimer's Disease Association**

Provides information and assistance on caring for a person with dementia.

**Tel: 6377 0700**  
(Monday to Friday; 9am to 6pm)

**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 Council on Problem  
Gambling (NCPG) Helpline**

Provides information and help for problem gamblers and their families.

**Tel: 1800-666 8668** (24 hours)

**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**  
(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

I don't feel  
like myself  
lately.  
What can I do?

She doesn't  
tell me her  
problems.  
How can I help?

Something's  
not quite right.  
Should I ask  
him to seek help?

The Community Health Assessment Team (CHAT) can help.

We offer confidential mental health checks for individuals aged between 16 and 30. Through the health checks, our friendly team of mental healthcare professionals can help youths in distress understand what they are experiencing, and how they can make things better.

Make an appointment at [www.chat.mentalhealth.sg](http://www.chat.mentalhealth.sg), or contact us to find out more.

Email: [CHAT@mentalhealth.sg](mailto:CHAT@mentalhealth.sg) | Phone: 6493 6500 / 01 (Tue – Sat, 12nn – 9pm)



Community Health  
Assessment Team