Beating burnout

Don’t let stress at work bring you down – here’s how to manage, and even avoid it

Discussing Disclosure

Things to note when deciding to reveal, or not reveal, a mental health condition

Promoting Inclusivity: A Personal Perspective

Meet an individual who seeks to eradicate stigma at the workplace

Life Through a Different Lens

Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
What constitutes workplace burnout, and how we as employees and employers can manage — and even prevent — it.

Autism spectrum disorder may manifest in different ways. But with treatment and support, those who have the condition can thrive.

What to note when deciding to reveal — or not to reveal — one’s mental health issues to others, and how we can respond appropriately.

Shell Ms Lyn Lee seeks to promote inclusivity and eradicate the stigma surrounding mental health issues at the workplace.

Becoming a father has helped IMH Senior Occupational Therapist Mr Tang Wei Kiat develop a deeper passion for his work with children.

The leaders of the trek to Mount Everest Base Camp, for the #YOLO2020 campaign to raise awareness on mental health issues, share what drives them forward — and upward.

What’s new in mental health research, and tips on maintaining your mental well-being.

IMH clinicians answer your questions.

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

Do you see ‘faces’ in everyday objects? It’s due to a psychological process called pareidolia.

Details might subject to change. Terms and Conditions apply. We will contact the winner on prize collection on the week after 30th November. Failure to provide the required details will result in immediate disqualification.
In Singapore, there is a growing desire among employees to seek a balance between work and leisure to ensure healthier outcomes and a better quality of life. The Employer Brand Research 2019: Singapore Country Report by employment agency Ranstad, for instance, noted that, after salary, work-life balance (at 61 per cent) was the most common reason employees gave here for staying in their jobs. Fortunately, employers are taking note, and in this issue’s cover story (pg 10-13), we examine the nature of burnout, how we can safeguard against it and manage its effects, and what steps companies are taking to prevent it.

Having a happy and comfortable working environment makes a huge impact on our overall wellness. This is particularly true for those who have experienced stigma owing to factors such as mental health issues or disabilities. We speak to Shell’s Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer Ms Lyn Lee (pg 14–18) on the need to create a safe and nurturing space for all employees. As someone with bipolar disorder herself, she has used her experience to build a culture where employees are able to bring their whole selves to work and feel supported and included.

We also catch up with Mr Uantchern Loh and Mr Chew Sutat, who will be leading a trek in April next year to the base camp of Mount Everest in support of #YOLO2020, a campaign aimed at raising awareness and funds for mental health issues. Our feature on autism spectrum disorder (pg 16-18) meanwhile sheds light on this often misunderstood condition. It also looks at what we need to know that they are not alone, and that they are valued members of our society. So let’s make building a culture of inclusivity, empathy and support a goal for us all.

>> WHAT STARTED OUT AS A LUNCHTIME CHAT turned into a mission to summit the Mount Everest Base Camp (EBC) for Mr Uantchern Loh, Mr Chew Sutat and Mr Yeo Siaik Ling (not interviewed in this article) – and for a good cause to boot. The treks goal for this literally uphill task is to raise awareness and funds for mental health issues. “It has been reported that one in seven people in Singapore has experienced mental health issues”, but there’s still a stigma attached to it,” says Mr Chew, 47, executive vice president at the Singapore Exchange (SGX), and member of the expedition team. Mr Loh, 55, chief executive for Asia Pacific at stakeholder communications firm Black Sun, agrees. “No one questions when you are physically ill, so why give people with mental health issues such a hard time? We hope the trek and #YOLO2020 can rally everyone together to eradicate that stigma.” Since November 2018, about 50 people have signed up for the 10-day expedition which will commence in April 2020. Mr Loh is heartened that Mr Chew, 47, executive vice president at the Singapore Exchange (SGX), and chairman of non-profit organisation Caregivers Alliance Limited (CAL), which supports caregivers of persons with mental health issues. “We hope to shed light on this through our #YOLO2020 campaign and trek to EBC. Mr Loh, 55, chief executive for Asia Pacific at stakeholder communications firm Black Sun, agrees. “No one questions when you are physically ill, so why give people with mental health issues such a hard time? We hope the trek and #YOLO2020 can rally everyone together to eradicate that stigma.”

The expedition to Everest Base Camp and to summit the Mount Everest will be a journey of resilience, says Mr Chew, symbolising the experience of people with mental health conditions and their caregivers. “For many of them, just getting through daily life can feel like scaling a mountain,” he says. Mr Loh – a trekking enthusiast who has reached EBC twice, scaled Mount Kinabalu in Sabah 10 times and summitted peaks in Europe and Mongolia – knows the trek will be challenging. “It is going to be arduous and cold, with some days involving nine hours of non-stop trekking,” he says. “So I urge the participants to not take the journey lightly.”

The team has started training for the trek in various ways. Some members hike up the trails at Bukit Timah Hill up to nine times every Sunday, while others walk up and down the 40-storey-high HDL blocks at Toa Payoh Central at least five times on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Participants are also raising funds and awareness at their workplaces. “To me, this is just a small step we can take towards driving lasting change towards a more caring society,” says Mr Loh.

Mr Chew, who admits to leading a mostly sedentary lifestyle, is up for the challenge. “You Only Live Once”, or YOLO, is ultimately his life mantra. “Life has its ups and downs, but I’d like to know I’ve put my best foot forward and given everything my best shot. And this certainly applies to our effort to get more people to talk about mental health issues, and debunk the many misconceptions surrounding them.”

Happy reading.

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STAYING ON TOP, MENTALLY

LIVE WELL!

HAPPINESS MATTERS IN GOOD GOVERNANCE

Bhutan is no longer the only country driven by happiness — New Zealand’s Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern is the latest world leader to adopt the Happiness Index metric when budgeting the country’s finances. Local governments will no longer only have to justify programmes based on how they contribute to New Zealand’s overall Gross Domestic Product. Instead, they will also be tasked to consider how such programmes increase the welfare of citizens. The country is already considerably happy; in the World Happiness Report Rankings for 2016-2018, which surveyed 156 countries, it was the 8th highest in the world.

A TIME FOR YOU

Many of us use our calendars to keep track of schedules and appointments but did you know that these tools can also be used to promote positive mental well-being? Here’s how you can design your own happiness calendar.

1. Take a blank piece of paper. Begin of the month. Get creative with colours and your designs!
2. VÌȚŒ'³áŒÃȳȑ°®u Ü­½¨Œwellness goal for yourself. This can be as simple as reminding yourself to switch off from your devices, giving yourself a treat, spending time with family or making an effort to exercise.
3. I¨vƒŒȚœÃƒv¨Œ®ˆvÀó­ŒÜšŒÀŒ½À³­œ®Œ®ÈƜ so you can remind yourself of the goals you have set.

Fun Fact: The world’s oldest calendar is an arrangement of 12 pits in Scotland. Possibly over 10,000 years old, these pits mimic the phases of the moon and track lunar months.

THE LINK BETWEEN

Hunger and Memory

There may be a link between your memory of food and hunger for your next meal, say neuroscientists from the University of Southern California. They have found that a hormone responsible for sending hunger signals to the brain may also be important for memory control. The hormone, known as ghrelin, is produced in the stomach and secreted when the body anticipates a meal. But when ghrelin was blocked in laboratory rats, researchers found that the rats’ memory became impaired — they performed poorly in tasks they were previously taught. Their eating behaviour also changed, which the researchers linked to the memory impairments. “Deciding to eat or not to eat may be influenced by the memory of the previous meal,” concluded Dr Elizabeth Davis, who led the study.

Hunger and Memory

Da Vinci DECODED

The man behind the world’s most famous painting, the Mona Lisa, and several feats of engineering might have suffered from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). That’s what a researcher from King’s College London suggests, after studying the work habits of the 16th-century Italian artist and inventor Leonardo Da Vinci. “Historical records show that he spent excessive time planning projects but actually lacked perseverance,” explained Professor Marco Catani, a member of the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience at King’s College London. “ADHD could explain aspects of Leonardo’s temperament and his strange mercurial genius.”

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FAMOUS STRUGGLES

Other creative people whose battles with mental health issues have been documented include:
- LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
- FRANCISCO GOYA
- ISAAC NEWTON
- MARK TWAIN

#KNOW MORE:

7.76 out of a possible score of 10.

INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH

OCT - JAN / 05
Exams are often thought to be an important way of measuring how well students understand a subject. But researchers from Dartmouth College in the United States hope to challenge this by developing a machine-learning algorithm. This tracks the students’ brain activity patterns to measure how well they understand a concept.

The algorithm was devised using the results of a previous study that tracked how brain activity differed between people who were familiar with a concept and those who were unfamiliar with it. Does this mean that we can — researchers stress that studies although they are encouraged by the development of the algorithm.

EXAMINING EXAMS

Planning your weekend? Make sure to spend at least two hours in a green spot. British researchers have found that people who experience nature for at least 120 minutes a week are more likely to report psychological well-being.

The study, published in the journal, was conducted by researchers from Britain’s University of Exeter. “It’s well known that getting outdoors in nature can be good for people’s health and well-being but until now we’ve not been able to say how much is enough,” said lead study author Dr Mathew White. To answer this question, they surveyed and studied the habits of 19,800 British respondents and found that people who spent two hours in nature during the last week had 23 per cent higher odds of reporting high well-being. This positive effect increased with additional time outdoors, they observed.

EXAMINING EXAMS

Taiwanese researchers might have found a novel way of managing pain: music. Researchers from Taipei Medical University provided a group of breast cancer patients with an MP3 player filled with a selection of classical, parlour, popular, Taiwanese and religious music. Another group was given a player containing environmental sounds. Study participants were then asked about their pain and fatigue levels six, 12 and 24 weeks after surgery.

Those who listened to music reported less pain and fatigue, while those listening to environmental sounds reported higher levels of pain and fatigue. Similarly, another study published in the Pain Management Nursing journal on patients with fibromyalgia (a chronic pain syndrome) found that those who listened to music for just one hour a day experienced a significant reduction in pain compared to those who didn’t.

What is the connection between music and pain relief? Studies have found that music modulates the brain’s endocannabinoid system, which controls both physical pain and emotional anguish. It triggers several neurochemical effects that help to distract listeners from negative feelings and view pain differently. Music also reduces the release of stress hormones and seems to affect the brain’s opioid system.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Coast to Coast

The new 36km Coast-to-Coast trail is a good place to start if you’re looking for a nature walk. Launched by NParks in April, the trail links Jurong Lake with Coney Island, leading walkers through a variety of parks and nature areas along the way.

WHY A GOOD NIGHT’S SLEEP MATTERS

Waking up after a night of interrupted sleep can leave you feeling groggy, grumpy and ill-rested. Now, researchers from the University of California (Berkeley) suggest that you could also be raising your risk of Alzheimer’s if you have disrupted sleep when you are in your 50s and 60s. The brain scans of those frequently having interrupted sleep showed higher levels of tau protein, a risk factor for Alzheimer’s disease. The new finding highlights the importance of sleep in maintaining a healthy brain into old age. The findings were published in the Journal of Neuroscience in June 2019.

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The study showed links between poor performance in physical tests and an increased likelihood of depressive or anxiety symptoms. A weak handgrip indicated a 68 per cent greater likelihood of displaying these symptoms.

Strengthen matters

Here are three ways to boost your upper body strength:

1. Your upper body consists of more than just triceps and biceps — be sure to also put in time to develop your shoulders, chest and back.

2. Muscle strengthening requires plenty of protein — according to the Health Promotion Board, the daily Recommended Dietary Allowance of protein for a healthy female is about 9-10 eggs.

3. Don’t neglect flexibility. Stretching your upper body for about one minute before and after your workout can improve your performance.

LEARN MORE TO LEARN BETTER

Seniors, if learning a new task proves challenging, here’s a trick. Researchers from the University of California (Riverside) believe they have figured out the best way to learn as an older adult: learning multiple things at once. This is a good way of staving off cognitive decline, says Dr Rachel Wu, the lead author of the study, which was published in The Journals of Gerontology.

For the study, researchers divided participants, aged between 58 and 86, into two groups. The first took 15 hours of classes every week, learning everything from Spanish to how to use an iPad, while the second group did not take any classes. Participants completed a series of assessments before, during and after the study to gauge their memory skills and cognitive control, which measures one’s ability to switch between tasks.

After one and a half months, participants who took classes showed an increase in their cognitive abilities to levels similar to those of adults nearly 30 years younger than them. The control group members showed no change in their performance. “The take-home message is that older adults can learn multiple new skills at the same time, and doing so may improve their cognitive functioning,” concluded Dr Wu.

Have a break, ditch the phone

Researchers from the Rutgers Business School have found that using a cellphone to take a break during mentally-challenging tasks does not actually recharge you. Instead, it may actually result in poorer performance. As part of the study, college undergraduates were tasked to complete a series of word puzzles. Halfway through the task, participants were divided into four groups. One group was given a break with a cellphone, another with a computer, another with a piece of paper and a final group was not given a break at all. They were then asked to return to the puzzle.

While those who used their cellphones performed better than those who had no break, they still performed worse than the other two groups. The act of reaching for your phone between tasks, or mid-task, is becoming more commonplace. It is important to know the costs associated with reaching for this device during every spare minute. We assume it’s no different from any other break — but the phone may carry increasing levels of distraction that make it difficult to return focused attention to work tasks,” said Dr Terri Kurtzberg, co-author and associate professor of management and global business at Rutgers Business School. “Cellphones may have this affect because even just seeing your phone activates thoughts of checking messages, connecting with people, access to ever-receding information and more, in ways that are different than how we use other screens like computers and laptops.”

The Dice Game!

DIRECTIONS: Which die completes the sequence? Hint: Note the dots in the top row.
Burnout is a growing problem globally. Fortunately, people, companies — and even the World Health Organization — are sitting up and taking notice. Interview Wanda Tan

WHAT IS BURNOUT? Strictly speaking, not all stress is bad. Some level of stress is needed to boost our work performance and to bring out the best in us, say, to meet a project deadline. When the body perceives stress, it releases the hormone cortisol into the bloodstream, which increases the heart rate and blood pressure and thus motivates us to take action.

It is a problem when stress continues at high levels over a prolonged period, causing fatigue, headaches, irritability, pessimism, difficulty sleeping and other symptoms. This lowers our productivity at work and may increase conflicts with others. Over time, potentially life-threatening physical and mental illnesses may develop, including hypertension, heart attack, anxiety and depression. “If an individual is stressed to the point that it starts to affect functioning in more and more aspects of his life, such as social, occupational and personal, it likely warrants more attention,” says Ms Sara-Ann Lee, Clinical Psychologist, Institute of Mental Health (IMH).

WHO IS AT RISK? People-oriented jobs. Workers, accountants and retailers. These jobs usually involve demanding clients and heavy workloads. For the same reason, lawyers and teachers tend to fall victim to burnout.

Volatile industries. Burnout is rife in media, advertising and marketing agencies, where people are constantly under pressure to brainstorm creative ideas for new campaigns and meet tight deadlines. Many in the tech sector, of which Alibaba is a part, also struggle to keep up with the fast pace of change within the industry.

Feeling the burn

According to global health service company Cigna, Singaporeans are among the most stressed at work. The 2019 Cigna 360 Well-Being survey found that 92 per cent of Singaporean respondents were stressed from work — higher than the global average of 84 per cent. Of this group, 13 per cent considered their stress unmanageable, causing lack of sleep. Burnout may be hitting the millennial cohort the hardest, due to the long hours they spend at work. A 2018 report by global recruitment agency ManpowerGroup found that millennials in Singapore, at 48 hours a week, is the second-longest working hours in the world. This was on par with their peers in China and Mexico, and behind only India (52 hours a week).

Feeling burnt out from work? Well, you’re not alone. Increasing numbers of people worldwide are complaining about being overworked and exhausted. Just think of the outcry sparked by Jack Ma, co-founder of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba Group, after he endorsed the ‘996’ work culture — 9am to 9pm, six days a week — earlier this year.

“After he endorsed the ‘996’ work culture — 9am to 9pm, six days a week — earlier this year,” says Ms Sara-Ann Lee, Clinical Psychologist, Institute of Mental Health (IMH). “This hot-button topic is getting more notice now worldwide are complaining about being overworked and exhausted. Just think of the outcry sparked by Jack Ma, co-founder of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba Group, after he endorsed the ‘996’ work culture — 9am to 9pm, six days a week — earlier this year. It starts to affect functioning in more and more aspects of his life, such as social, occupational and personal, it likely warrants more attention,” says Ms Sara-Ann Lee, Clinical Psychologist, Institute of Mental Health (IMH). ‘996’ work culture — 9am to 9pm, six days a week — earlier this year. It starts to affect functioning in more and more aspects of his life, such as social, occupational and personal, it likely warrants more attention,” says Ms Sara-Ann Lee, Clinical Psychologist, Institute of Mental Health (IMH). A 2018 report by global recruitment agency ManpowerGroup found that millennials in Singapore, at 48 hours a week, is the second-longest working hours in the world. This was on par with their peers in China and Mexico, and behind only India (52 hours a week).
To help organisations create a supportive work environment for mental health, HPB runs initiatives targeted at companies and people managers. One is a skills-equipped workshop for managers, who are taught to recognise signs and symptoms of common mental health conditions (including burnout), as well as how to approach such staff and encourage them to seek help early. HPB also organises corporate roadshows, where employees can assess their individual stress levels and learn practical stress management tips.

To help organisations create a workplace health and wellbeing environment for all organisations. After all, healthy employers result in a lower absenteeism and higher productivity. "Working adults may take it as a sign of failure if they are unable to meet the demands of work," says Ms Lee. For those who lend a listening ear, try not to downplay what that person is feeling (e.g. “Everyone works hard”) or give unwanted advice (e.g. “Think positive”). Oftentimes, says Ms Lee, just hearing them out is enough: “What that individual may need is just for someone to recognise that they are having a difficult time, without the need to provide concrete solutions.”

**FOR EMPLOYERS: A USEFUL RESOURCE**

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**HOW TO AVOID BURNOUT**

Tackling burnout requires cooperation between different parties. “Both employers and employees have a shared responsibility to eliminate burnout,” says Mr Daniel Chia, Head of Human Resources at Samsung Asia. “Organisations should institute policies and programmes to support their staff and promote workplace health. At the same time, it’s up to the individual to make use of these initiatives and manage his own expectations.”

**On the Employers’ Side**

Workplace health and employee well-being should be a top priority for all organisations. After all, healthy employees result in lower absenteeism and higher productivity. "Working adults may take it as a sign of personal failure if they are unable to meet the demands of work," says Ms Lee. But it is important to take heed of signs that may be time to slow down — and stop burnout early.

**Doing something that takes your mind off work and re-energises you. This, for example, could be mindfulness meditation, playing a musical instrument or jogging.**

"DON’T LET WORK DEFINE YOU" Then in his early 40s, Eric was several months into his job as the Chief Operating Officer (COO) of a consortium for a major infrastructure project when he started experiencing symptoms of burnout in 2013. He subsequently fell into depression. Eric tells Imagine how the combination of professional help and a strong support network got him through it.

"As COO, what pushed me over the edge was not as much the long working hours — I was used to that — but rather the complexity of tasks to be done. I didn’t have the full skillset or support resources at my disposal. I was also worried about missing the deadline, as delays would have cost the company double-digit millions of dollars each month. This developed into insomnia. I was so tired, but I could only get two or three hours of sleep nightly because my mind kept spinning around work issues. Four months later, having tried a range of sleeping pills, without success, I was given two months’ medical leave. The aim here was to remove myself from the source of stress (i.e. work) and get back to a normal sleeping pattern. However, I started having negative thoughts about my job and financial security, despite the company’s assurances that I would not be fired. This anxiety gave way to depression. Through regular visits to a psychologist, and with support from my wife and church friends who were better able to return to work — part-time at first, then full-time. I now work in a freelance capacity, utilising my faith-based education courses and also provide corporate consulting services. Although being a part of the ‘big’ economy relieves a degree of income instability, my faith has helped me to feel more comfortable with this. It’s vital to have a balanced perspective on life. Don’t let your work define you: find meaning in areas, such as your spiritual life or social sphere. This will build up your resilience to workplace stress."
Do I look like a failure to you? That was the question I asked a group of youth leaders at a recent event where I was invited to speak about my experience with bipolar disorder. They said no. I asked them this to show them that having a mental illness need not stop one from being successful and achieving set goals. Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder, which when unmanaged, can lead to extreme mood swings of emotional highs (mania) and lows (depression). I have bipolar disorder type 2 where I mainly experience low emotions with no highs (mania). I have bipolar disorder type 2 where I mainly experience low emotions with no highs (mania). My sister urged me to see a psychiatrist and taking medication helped but I do want to caution that recovery takes time. If you think popping a pill will immediately cure you, you will be disappointed. Sometimes, you may even feel worse at first. But it will get better, so stick to the programme.

Life stressors can bring about mental health issues. I had lost my father to cancer, and was also going through a divorce after being married for 16 years. This added tremendous pressure on me. When the symptoms started to emerge, it was gradual – like a car engine that first slows down, creaks more, malfunctions and eventually breaks down. I was a Global HR manager at Shell at that point. I didn’t miss a day of work because I love my job, but I was struggling. Eventually, it came to a point where I just could not get out of bed. My sister urged me to see a psychiatrist and I am glad she did. She didn’t judge; she simply acknowledged that I wasn’t okay, and told me I would be okay again with some help. That’s what all persons with mental health issues need – a}

solid support system and empathy, as opposed to sympathy. I would not have known I have a mental health issue had I not sought medical attention. Most of us tend to dismiss the symptoms or attribute it to stress or even hormones when it’s a woman. We think we can just shake it off, but we can’t just snap out of depression – it’s a medical condition.

With the diagnosis, I felt a veil was lifted. I can’t quite describe it, it felt instant clarity. Seeing a psychiatrist and taking medication helped but I do want to caution that recovery takes time. If you think popping a pill will immediately cure you, you will be disappointed. Sometimes, you may even feel worse at first. But it will get better, so stick to the programme.

I did not hesitate to inform my bosses of my condition, but I am one of the lucky ones. Being brought up in a supportive family enabled me to “come out” to my line manager. It also helped that there is a culture of respect and inclusion at Shell. My bosses told me to take the time I needed to recover, and they meant what they said. I did not have the barrier many persons with mental health issues have to face. Many worry they will be penalised, or that they will not have a job to come back to after taking a timeout. These issues are real in our society.

A company that wants to be inclusive, whether towards persons with disabilities or mental health issues, must do it for the right reason. It’s not just about ticking the relevant boxes or having a wellness room in the office. For me, success in this area means making a positive impact on the lives of often-marginalised people. Have things changed positively for them? Has their quality of life really improved with the initiatives? Approach with heart and kindness, and implement policies with their well-being in mind. Their experience is the true measure of how far we’ve come.

We have to make empathy the norm. In Singapore, there have been many steps taken in the right direction of late, but more has to be done to destigmatise mental illness. Organisations should come on board to address mental health issues and be a force that promotes change. When we talk about making the workplace inclusive, the discussion should also involve making it safe – both physically and psychologically.

Employees should be able to bring their whole selves to work. To stress this, we rolled out a campaign at Shell called I’m not OK to destigmatise mental illness and create a workplace where it is okay to reach out and say “I’m not OK”. We want to be there for our staff who need support and help, because ultimately we can only perform at our best when we are well.

I still see my psychiatrist once every six months. These reviews are important, just as how we see the doctor for our blood pressure, or sugar level if we are diabetic. These sessions give me a full-picture awareness of my condition and help me to manage it effectively. So when I’m at my low and don’t feel like doing anything, I make sure I keep active. Physical exercise has become an important part of my routine. And at my high, I remind myself to slow down, breathe, pause and be calm. Over the years, practising mindfulness has also helped me to manage myself. This comes with an appreciation of what the illness is.

When we talk about making the workplace inclusive, the discussion should also involve making it safe — both physically and psychologically. When we talk about making the workplace inclusive, the discussion should also involve making it safe — both physically and psychologically.

I advocate being physically active whatever or not you have a mental health condition. But especially for people with mental health issues, exercising is a great way to release positive hormones and manage stress. I go to the gym three to five times a week, and also practise qigong, a training method based on the principles of yoga and dance. It builds core strength, balance, coordination and agility, thus benefiting both my physical and mental well-being.

Find your bigger purpose. Most of us want to lead a meaningful life, I feel called to do work, in my professional role, which impacts under-represented communities. For someone in recovery, that is the silver lining — you can actually do good by spreading this awareness. But you cannot do this effectively unless you take care of yourself first. Seek help, and then make sure that you surround yourself with people who can provide support and make you feel safe, physically and psychologically.
Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) presents in a range of ways in people. Typically, it results in difficulty maintaining what society defines as a “normal” life. But with the right treatment and support, people with ASD can thrive.

Interview Esther Au Yang, in consultation with Dr Don Li Keat, Associate Consultant, Department of Developmental Psychiatry, Institute of Mental Health

As his caregiver, a big challenge is in managing expectations. I’ve started teaching him simple tasks — like taking a shower, brushing his teeth and taking public transport — that he can do by himself. But sometimes, he makes mistakes and I need to remind myself that he is trying his best.

While I don’t expect everyone to understand what we are going through, I hope that the public can have more empathy. When Phinn has a meltdown in public, hurtful comments are not helpful; don’t stare around and lim the incident if you can. Instead, it would help if bystanders offer an encouraging word. I get very tired and demoralised at times, but I hang on to my faith, and the community around me — they give me strength to go on.”

Ms Iris Chow, 45, shares her journey as the caregiver of her son Phinnaeusius, 13, who has ASD.

“Phinn started regular treatment — which includes psychotherapy and occupational therapy — at age 11, transferred to Pathlight School. The therapy regime has been effective. For example, he has learnt to control his anger and his blow-ups are less intense, and I do see him trying to calm himself using techniques taught to him.”

As his teacher because he was disruptive in class. When he was about seven and a half, I got him tested, and it proved a turning point. When he was diagnosed with ASD, I was actually relieved. Hay to finally made sense,” and I then knew how to help him and who to approach for help.

ASD is a developmental disorder that is evident from early childhood with varying degrees of severity and levels of functioning. It often affects an individual’s ability to interact and communicate with others. People with ASD may also have a restricted or repetitive pattern of sensory perception and pick up details that others miss. There are studies that show links to certain genes as well, and there’s a higher chance of a child having ASD if his or her siblings or parents have it.

Whatever the case, early diagnosis and intervention are important to improve the child’s skills and quality of life. But how does one tell that a child may have ASD? “Early in life, many children with ASD may have problems maintaining eye contact and may have speech delay,” explains Dr Don. “A classic sign would also be repetitive behaviour. When they are upset or even when they are excited, they may do things like flap their hands, rock themselves or turn around in circles, or even hit or bite themselves.”

Neat professionals are trained to spot signs at check-ups and “rely on suspected cases for further tests. “These tests, which are available in paediatric clinics, and psychological departments in schools, as well as IMH’s Child Guidance Clinic, include observation and examination of the child by a trained clinician and an extensive interview with the parents,” says Dr Don.

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"It’s a two-way street. While people who are ‘different’ try their best to fit in, people who fall under the category of ‘what’s considered the ‘norm’ should try their best to create more space for others to express themselves in their own ways too.’

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DR OON LI KEAT, Associate Consultant, Department of Developmental Psychiatry, IMH

A TWO-WAY STREET

While there is no cure for ASD, there are therapies that can help a child with autism, such as behavioural therapy—which changes what people do by teaching them to respond to things in a different way—and occupational therapy, to help children achieve their greatest level of independence in their daily activities. Medication is only used in extreme cases. Furthermore, when behavioural problems are so disruptive that they prevent learning, medication can be used to dampen these behaviours. As with the condition itself, treatment ranges within a spectrum and should be customised to the needs of the person with ASD.

Society at large also has a big part to play in helping those with ASD cope and thrive. “The community should learn to be more accepting of people who are different,” says Dr Oon. “It’s a two-way street. While people who are different try their best to fit in, people who fail under the category of what’s considered the norm should try their best to create more space for others to express themselves in their own ways too.”

HELP IS HERE

Here are some places where children with ASD or their caregivers can turn for help and support:

AUTISM RESOURCE CENTRE (ARC) 322, Anson Road. ARC’s core activities include support for families and professionals as well as psychiatrists, developmental pediatricians, and occupational therapists. The centre offers autism education and intervention programmes.

NEURO-BehAVIOuRAL CLINIC, INSTITUTE OF NEuROLOGICAL HEALTH Comprising a team of psychiatrists, psychologists, occupational therapists, and nurses, this clinic provides autism-specific services and evidence-based interventions for children and adolescents.

THE ENABLELING VILLAGE This transportable space houses retail, leisure, and training outlets. It offers a space that allows people of different abilities to interact via workshops and activities, and breaks.

AN EMPATHETIC Approach

Being a father has helped this occupational therapist develop a deep passion for his work with children.

Interview DENNIS YIN // PHOTO IMH

Senior Occupational Therapist Mr Tang Wei Kiat helps youngsters aged six to 18 with neurodevelopmental disorders, like autism spectrum disorder, and intellectual disabilities coupled with mental health conditions improve their social and motor skills. As a father of two children, aged one and four, he empathises with the struggles of parents of children with special needs. “The ways I help parents plan caregiving strategies have changed since I became a dad—I’m now more realistic in the suggestions I offer,” he says.

How different is your work compared to that of occupational therapists (OTs) in other healthcare settings? Like all OTs, my goal is to help patients optimise their functional abilities so they can return to perform their roles, for instance as a parent, an employee at work or student in school, and to participate in activities of daily living (ADLs). Mental health and physical health are intertwined—one can impact the other. For example, some children we see have motor coordination difficulties so playing at the playground and participating in physical education lessons in school becomes challenging (the physical aspect) for them. This may impact their self-esteem (the mental aspect) as they struggle to catch up with their peers.

My work also involves training community partners who run day activity centres (DAC) and adult disability homes for people who have neurodevelopmental disorders with mental health issues. I also teach a lab module at the Singapore Institute of Technology and mentor OT students during their clinical placements at IMH.

Having worked at IMH for eight years now, has your perspective on your work changed? When I first started, I thought I could “save” patients. But I now realise that my job is more about guiding them and being a facilitator in their journey towards recovery. What I do clinically is important, but it needs to be a partnership with the patient so we can take the steps together.

What’s the longest journey that you’ve embarked on with a patient? Three years, with a patient who has moderate autism. His speech is limited so he is unable to communicate his needs. He also often hurt himself. I worked with him and his mother to understand why he was doing this and taught them strategies to help manage his behaviours and enable him to participate in his ADLs. I also supported his mum in her caregiving journey. She was so involved in caring for her son that she neglected her own needs. It took our team about two years to help her understand that sending her son to a DAC would not only help him but also give her some respite.

What should the public be more aware of in the area of mental healthcare? I hope the public can be more compassionate. I experienced an incident recently at the MRT station, when a girl in a wheelchair grabbed hold of my daughter’s pram. The girl was non-verbal and seemed to have a neurodevelopmental disorder. Before we knew it, she grabbed my child’s shirt, which made her cry. The mother started scolding her child. I told the mother that it was okay and that I understand that her daughter didn’t do it on purpose. As a parent, I can empathise that she was trying her best to manage her child. It made me think about the challenges many of my patients and their caregivers face as they go about their daily lives. I sincerely hope that as a community, we can do our part by being a little more tolerant towards these differently-abled individuals and their families.
The Disclosure Discussion

The Who, What, When, How and Why to sharing— one’s mental health issues with others and the ways we can respond appropriately as a listener.

Interview Wah Nuan Lin, in consultation with Ms Loh Li Lyn, Principal Clinical Psychologist, Department of Psychology, Institute of Mental Health

“| [People with mental health issues] don’t necessarily want pity. They want people to understand them and know how they are doing as a person.”

Ms Loh Li Lyn, Principal Clinical Psychologist, Department of Psychology, IMH

There’s stigma surrounding mental illness in society that trickles down and translates into the individuals themselves. They start to think that they are choosing to be ill or that they are mentally weak. And it can start from a young age. For example, students may not go to the school counsellor because they don’t want to be seen as the kid with something wrong,” says Ms Leow.

Ms Leow highlights how that mental illnesses are no different from physical ailments: “It’s crucial to remember that there is a biological component to mental disorders, and the illness is simply the body’s response to certain factors. Just like a physical illness, you then need to take certain measures to manage your symptoms. That can include medication, lifestyle changes and therapy.” When given the right perspective, those with mental health issues can work on their self-stigma and be aware that they are not to blame for having the illness.

It will be difficult to share your mental health concerns if you think that you are to blame for them. When you change that mindset, you can then be clearer about whether or not to disclose your condition,” says Ms Leow.

Different degrees of disclosure

Some might choose not to tell anyone, while others might choose to selectively tell an intimate group of people. One may also be open about it to advocate awareness and to lend support to those with a similar condition.

Ms Leow highlights that each person’s circumstances are different and it is for individuals to ascertain the impact that disclosure will have on their lives. “Disclosure can be self-empowering for some because through it, they can feel like they ‘own’ the condition, and help reduce the stigmata around mental illness by raising awareness,” she says.

Also, disclosure doesn’t have to be an ‘all-or-nothing’ proposition. “Just as one would choose who to tell, one should also think about what to tell. Liff-based advocacy group National Alliance on Mental Illness advises one to carefully consider which parts of your experience to share, and which to keep private. The group also recommends sharing positive information, such as lessons one has learnt through coping with the condition, or experience one has managed to gather.”

Who to tell to get the support you want? Ms Leow suggests being clear about one’s objective – be it to seek support, to get work arrangements sorted, to let a significant other deeper into one’s life, or for the individual to be a role model for others. And depending on the individual’s objective, who he discloses may be different.

For example, a person seeking flexible work arrangements would speak to his direct supervisor or human resource manager; whereas somebody seeking emotional support might meet his goal better through opening up to close friends and family.

Avoid extreme reactions

Ms Leow highlights that whom the person has chosen to reveal such sensitive details should not trivialise the information shared or pretend that the conversation never happened. However, she also cautions against over-accommodation, such as by giving unnecessary concessions at work or tip-toeing around certain topics. “People want to be given equal opportunities. Don’t immediately assume that the person cannot cope because he cannot take the stress – ask and clarify instead.”

Mental health issues are the same as any challenging life event, such as a miscarriage, divorce or major illness. So, react as you would to those issues: sensitively and respectfully. Those with such issues don’t necessarily want pity. They want people to understand them and know how they are doing as a person.”

WHY I’VE ALWAYS BEEN OPEN

“Allowing oneself to be vulnerable is never easy. But disclosure comes with the implications, then it is the right decision. I decided to be honest to potential employers if asked about my diagnosis. Encouragingly, I found out later that employers were likely to favour a person without a mental health condition over a person with mental health condition, all other things being equal. I felt that the stigma would be worse. If I did not disclose, and my employer were to find out later, he or she would be at a disadvantage. It was better to be up front.”

MS GEORGE LEE, who had fully recovered from schizophrenia, on his decision to disclose his condition

WHY I’VE STARTED TO TALK ABOUT IT

“The stigma, shame and fear about how people would judge me held me back from telling anyone about my condition. I was always afraid that people would take me the wrong way. It took me many years but I decided that I had to get out of my shell and live the life I want. Many were taken aback and surprised when I told them. Some were even afraid if I was telling them the truth because, to them, I did not seem to exhibit symptoms of mental illness. Some were encouraging and supportive. But I took all those reactions in stride; I told myself that people can only live their own lives up to their right. But I too have a right to tell the world to help others with like minded people. And after disclosing my challenges to others, I didn’t feel trapped anymore.”

MR RONALD DRAKE, who started to disclose his mental disorder well after his divorce to his children and add his life more than a decade earlier.

WHY SECRETS ARE HARD TO KEEP

But when it comes to disclosing your mental health condition to those around you, it is not just a matter of secrecy, but also of privacy – just like it is with any other health condition or personal matter. Being open about one’s mental illness has positive effects, as this opens the door for others to offer support. There are also reasons why an individual might choose to keep this information to himself, such as fear of being judged, or simply because he would prefer to keep it private.

Here, Ms Loh Li Lyn, Principal Clinical Psychologist, Department of Psychology in IMH, highlights what to consider when deciding to tell, or not to tell, others of one’s mental health condition. She also shares pointers on how to react and lend support to someone who has disclosed his mental health condition.

Recognise that it is not your fault

In Singapore, people are often pushed to excel from young. This puts a lot of pressure on individuals. “The ability to see that everybody has strengths and vulnerabilities isn’t that well accepted. So when somebody has a vulnerability in terms of a mental health challenge, they often struggle to tell others about it,” observes Ms Leow.

Interview Koh Yuen Lin, in consultation with Ms Loh Li Lyn, Principal Clinical Psychologist, Department of Psychology, Institute of Mental Health
I can’t help thinking that I am not ‘good enough’, I feel that I don’t match up to my old friends, many of whom are quite accomplished, in terms of talent, charisma and success. And the one time I brought it up to my wife, she just said I was being ‘witty’. What can I do to get out of this state?

A: Feelings of inferiority can be influenced by negative beliefs such as ‘I am not good enough’. These beliefs may be formed through early life experiences, such as being criticised or excluded. Societal pressures, such as being ‘silly’, may explain why — despite placing about 2,800 clients in the open job market over the past decade — many of the positions were from sectors such as F&B, retail and cleaning. There are many people suffering from mental health issues who are very well-qualified and they need better jobs. Mdm Halimah also urged more employers to step up and offer ‘quality jobs’ to those with mental health issues.

Q&A

IMH clinicians answer your questions.

01: I AM A MALE IN MY 50s, AND THOUGH I AM FINANCIALLY SUCCESSFUL AND HAVE A HAPPY FAMILY, I AM WEIGHED DOWN BY FEELINGS OF INFERIORITY.

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02: MY DAUGHTER’S PRIMARY 1 TEACHER INFORMED US THAT SHE HAS NOT BEEN SPEAKING IN CLASS OR WITH HER CLASSMATES AT ALL FOR THE WHOLE FIRST SEMESTER. Her preschool teachers had said that she was very quiet in kindergarten but we thought it was just normal shyness because she is very chatty and cheerful at home. Could this be selective mutism? How can we help her?

A: Typically, children with selective mutism have a dry or anxious temperament from young, and they don’t speak due to a high level of social anxiety. Outward signs of anxiety such as the avoidance of eye contact or a tense posture are often observed when the child has to speak. Sometimes individuals with selective mutism communicate nonverbally, with gestures or writing, while others may whisper. It is possible that your child may have selective mutism, which could be assessed by a child mental health professional. In school, you could ask her teacher to assign her a buddy whom she is comfortable with. Be encouraging, do not pressure your child to speak or criticise her failure to speak. Enlist the help of the school counsellor, who (sometimes in collaboration with a child psychologist) can work out a step-by-step plan to help your child.

A: Speaking in class or with her classmates can also lead one to be ‘perfect’. However, no matter how perfect you try to be, it is inevitable that you will encounter failures. Changing these deep beliefs requires an awareness of your negative thoughts, feelings and actions, and learning to transform your thinking and biases. Lastly, it is important not to interpret setbacks as a sign of failure and redefine your self-worth to ensure that it is not solely based on your achievements.

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Do you see human-like expressions in the pictures on this page? You are not alone — and there’s a simple explanation for it.

**YOU ARE EXPERIENCING:** Pareidolia, a psychological phenomenon that causes people to see a random image as something significant. Very often, this is a human face — and faces have been seen in everyday objects ranging from inkblots to appliances. This is the result of our brain trying to impose order on our surroundings by identifying patterns and making associations. When we come across an image, the brain sifts through a range of possible matches in our memory, finds one that is the most relatable and assigns this to the image we see. But why faces? That’s because a familiar pattern is preferred by our brains, as it is what we recognise best from an early age.

**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; 7am 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 6pm)

**Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) Helpline**
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: 1800-666 8688 (8am to 7pm daily)

**National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) Helpline**
Provides information and help for problem gamblers and their families.
Tel: 1800-666 8688 (8am to 7pm daily)

**Touchline by Touch Youth Services**
Bonders 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; 9am 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)

**INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH**
Boulevard Green Medical Park
10 Boulevard View
Singapore 597947

**General Enquiries 6389 2000**

**Appointment Line 6389 2200**
(Monday to Friday; 8am to 6pm)
Email: info@imh.org.sg

**CHILD GUIDANCE CLINIC**

**SUNRISE WING**
IMH, Block 9, Basement
Monday to Thursday 8am to 5.30pm
Friday 8am to 6pm

**CHILD GUIDANCE CLINIC**
HEALTH PROMOTION BOARD BUILDING
3 Second Hospital Avenue #03-01
Singapore 168957
Monday to Thursday 8am to 5.30pm
Friday 8am to 5pm

**COMMUNITY WELLNESS CLINIC, QUEENSTOWN**
580 Stirling Road, Level 4,
Singapore 248958
Monday, Tuesday, Thursday
8am to 5.30pm

**COMMUNITY WELLNESS CLINIC, SUNSHINE CENTRE**
21 Geylang East Central, Level 4
Singapore 489707
Monday, Tuesday, Thursday,
Friday 8am to 5pm
Wednesday 8am to 12.30pm

**COMMUNITY WELLNESS CLINIC, TOBACCO-WITHDRAWAL CENTRE**
21 Geylang East Central, Level 4
Singapore 489582
Monday, Tuesday, Thursday,
Friday 8am to 5pm
Wednesday 8am to 12.30pm

**COMMUNITY WELLNESS CLINIC, SINGAPORE CHILDREN’S LIFE-SUPPORT COURT CLINIC**
21 Geylang East Central, Level 4
Singapore 489707
Monday, Tuesday, Thursday,
Friday 8am to 5pm
Wednesday 8am to 12.30pm

**COMMUNITY WELLNESS CLINIC, TOUCHLINE**
3 Second Hospital Avenue #03-01
Singapore 168957
Monday to Thursday 8am to 5.30pm
Friday 8am to 5pm

**COMMUNITY WELLNESS CLINIC, TINKLE FRIEND CLINIC**
21 Geylang East Central, Level 4
Singapore 489707
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
Mental Health Carnival
@ INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH
26 OCTOBER 2019, 9am – 3pm

Make your Saturday a therapeutic one!

Have fun learning to care for your mental health with these activities:

• Animal-assisted Activities
• Drum Circle Activities
• Horticulture Activities
• Art & Music Therapy
• Reminiscence Therapy
• Relaxation Workshops
• Mental Health & Wellness Talks

Also in the line-up:

COME JOIN US!

CARNIVAL HIGHLIGHT

Meet horses from EQUAL and get a chance to groom and feed them!

We are at 10 Buangkok View, Singapore 539747.

FREE Shuttle Service (15-min intervals)
Hougang MRT → IMH : 8.45am - 2.30pm
IMH → Hougang MRT : 9.45am - 3.30pm
Hougang MRT pick-up point : Taxi stand outside UOB

Scan QR code to visit website

Register for talks and selected activities!
For more details, please visit www.imh.com.sg

Sponsors: Pfizer PFE Pte Ltd, DKSH Singapore Pte Ltd, Johnson & Johnson, Lundbeck Singapore, Sumitomo Pharmaceuticals Asia Pacific