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Promote better awareness of mental illness in all settings

DEFENCE Minister Ng Eng Hen's response in Parliament to questions on the management of national servicemen with mental health disorders is both reassuring and timely ("2% exempted from NS annually over mental health"; last Friday).

Many in the community had written to the Forum page expressing concern over Private Ganesh Pillay Magindren's suicide, after the coroner pointed out several lapses in mental health care for national servicemen.

Letters from the public, mental health practitioners, caregivers and people who have struggled with, and recovered from, mental illnesses have rightfully brought the importance of mental health to the fore.

Education and empathy will eventually reduce the stigma attached to people with mental illnesses because of a lack of knowledge and misconceptions about the conditions.

To address this, the Singapore Armed Forces should have more personnel who are better informed of mental health conditions and able to respond appropriately. Those afflicted will receive help promptly, rather than punishment for being misunderstood. Thus, they can complete NS and emerge more resilient.

People with mental illnesses need not stay in institutions for the rest of their lives if society can help them on the road to recovery and reintegration into the community.

This dialogue should continue not only in the media, which plays a key role in public education and in changing mindsets, but also on other platforms. There is a need to promote better awareness of mental illness, not only in NS but also in other settings.

Effective leadership in providing early attention to mental health issues will prevent potential tragedies affecting entire families. Untreated mental disorders place tremendous pressure on the economy, and current projections by the World Health Organisation indicate that by 2030, depression could be the leading cause of disease burden globally.

Besides improving the mental resilience of the public through education, and engaging and collaborating with community partners, the Singapore Association for Mental Health helps persons with mental illnesses through psycho-social rehabilitation programmes, and through advocating acceptance and respect for them.

For those whose conditions have stabilised, we seek organisations to provide them with job opportunities, to help them reintegrate into society.

For more information or assistance, visit www.samhealth.org.sg or call our toll-free helpline on 1800-283-7019.

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