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Help for the mentally ill, by the mentally ill

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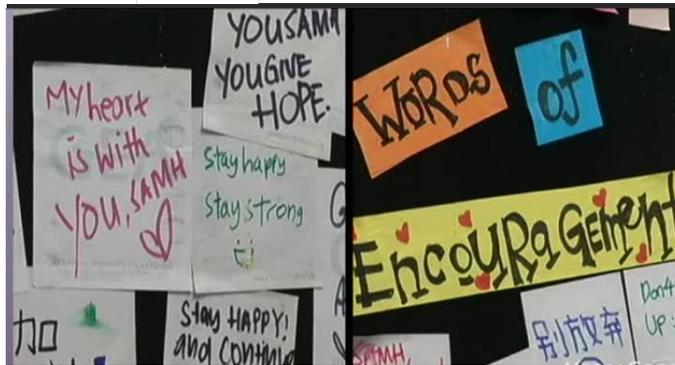
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A movement which began more than 20 years ago in the United States, which started in Singapore two years ago, has those who are recovering from mental illness give care and support to their peers.

PHOTOS VIDEOS



CAPTION

SINGAPORE: If you ever need help, there is nothing like getting it from someone with experience. That is the premise of a programme where those who are mentally ill get support and care from others who have made good progress recovering from mental illness.

The movement began more than two decades ago in the United States, but only started in Singapore two years ago. The Singapore Association for Mental Health (SAMH) is where so-called 'peer specialists' are formally trained and certified.

"We used to tell people about mental illnesses and what the options were in terms of treatment and how their recovery is like from a top-down, paternalistic sort of way where it is the doctor or mental health professional explaining it," said Associate Professor Daniel Fung, president of the Singapore Association for Mental Health.

"But it makes a lot more sense if somebody who is suffering, who has suffered and who has recovered is now able to share their story. It is much more powerful in terms of testimony to the patients and it really gives hope not only to the patients, but also to the caregivers in their families."

The specialists practice at SAMH, the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) and Club Heal.

Not just anyone can make the cut. "We are looking at somebody who is very stable, in good recovery," said Dr Joseph Leong, a community psychiatry and rehabilitation psychiatry consultant at the Institute of Mental Health. It's not somebody who is just discharged from hospital

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- these are people who actually have very good control of their disturbance, their emotional health and actually show success in gaining control of their emotional and mental health."

The four-day training programme, which involves workshops and role-playing, has a test at the end. Since 2012, 63 people have been trained, with 23 receiving certification. Only five are now working as full-time peer specialists, with a similar number doing it part-time.

For some, they were not quite ready to help their peers. "A peer actually tried to call me late at night. How late? You're looking at 4am," said Paul (not his real name), a former peer specialist trainee. "I have bipolar disorder. The thing is, for people with bipolar disorder, sleep is very important for us. With even one night of not good sleep, we will go into a hypomanic state. "One thing is boundaries. It's always boundaries. There are times you have to know yourself that sometimes you are unable to help the people that you want to help."

One of those who is now a full-time peer specialist at SMAH is Ms Rosalind Pek, whose recovery from severe depression motivated her to try to help others. "Amazing thing is that after your recovery, it seems like you know everything about psychiatric rehabilitation," she said. "We are also the bridge to professionals, so that we can get (patients) to speak up earlier about their concerns and their challenges and so that treatments and intervention can be intervened as early as possible, to help them in recovery."

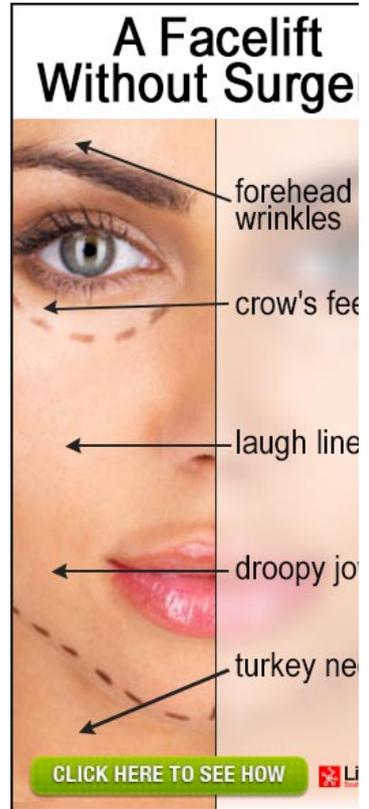
"They were very sensitive in approaching me," said Ms Leong Wei Ling, a person-in-recovery. "They know the right things to say, the things that will help me, not the things that will harm me. I find that the interaction between us and them is like brother and sister. Like one family."

Peer specialists may teach those recovering from mental illness social skills - as simple as how to behave on a crowded bus - or more complex like how to prepare for a job interview. They share coping strategies and goals and monitor progress and work as part of a larger team, which includes professionals.

"For me, when I work here in the hospital, I share that there is life after the diagnosis," said Mr Julius Chan, a peer support specialist at IMH. "We can have quality of life. We can have health and by having health, we can have wealth, by working, by contributing back and all this."

Giving hope and building belief through a shared experience may be the most valuable thing peer specialists can offer, to those who might feel that their illness is a dead end.

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