

New course to help boost job prospects of those recovering from mental illness



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By Kelly Ng -
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SINGAPORE — Each time she applies for a new job, Ms Linda Ha holds back from disclosing her medical history. She has dysthymia, a persistent depressive order, and she is afraid of being discriminated against by prospective employers.

“When employers sense that I exhibit symptoms (of a mental illness), they start to become sceptical and question my abilities ... Even my family members cannot get along with me,” the 29-year-old said.

Ms Ha lives in a housing facility managed by the Singapore Mental Health Association (SAMH). She has switched jobs 11 times since she was diagnosed with the condition in 2009, and is now setting her hopes on a new train-and-place programme at an upcoming vocational training centre for those recovering from mental health conditions.

To date, more than 20 employers — including property firm Hongkong Land, construction company Gammon, and the Dairy Farm Group of supermarkets and convenience stores — have committed to offering job opportunities to graduates from this new centre called MINDSET Learning Hub, which will be up and running in July. After training, graduates will be certified through the Singapore Workforce Skills Qualifications system under the Singapore Workforce Development Agency.

Ms Ha said: "Completing the course successfully would also help to prove that we are able to work like without these conditions, which might help lessen and lighten the social stigma."

Located at Jurong East, the centre will offer customised training programmes in cleaning, hospitality, healthcare support, retail, and food and beverage at a slower learning pace for this specialised group.

Participants will also be taught "soft skills" such as writing resumes, managing job interviews and work etiquette.

The centre's programmes are designed with more "active handholding" to cater to the trainees' special needs, SAMH executive director Tan Li Li said, adding that its staff members would follow up with graduates even after they have been offered jobs to ensure that they are "fully settled in".

The 5,800-sqf vocational training centre is a philanthropic initiative by the Jardine Matheson Group of companies, and it will house four classrooms and four simulated training environments: A cafe, a hotel room, a healthcare room and a kitchen.

MINDSET Care Limited, which is business group Jardine's philanthropic arm, has pledged S\$2 million to set up the centre. The money will be disbursed over five years to fit and furnish the premises and fund the centre's operations.

Modelled after a typical school, trainees will attend classes for six hours from Mondays to Fridays. Each programme will run for three months, with 15 students enrolled each time.

Apart from vocational training, they may also take part in co-curricular activities ranging from sports to the creative arts, drama and gardening.

The bulk of the trainers will be veteran SAMH staff, who are experienced in managing various mental health problems and handling unforeseen incidents that may happen in the classrooms. For instance, some students may get drowsy when the side effects of their medication set in, Ms Tan pointed out.

"Some external trainers may not be able to support these, but trainers at MINDSET Learning Hub expect such incidents and are prepared to provide one-to-one sessions for these trainees to catch up," she said.

Graduates from the vocational training stint will go on to take up internships lasting three to six months at firms in the respective industries. Those who perform competently will then be hired. SAMH expects about 300 job placements in the centre's first year of operations.

Ms Tan said: "Employment is a key part of the re-integration process (for the trainees) ... But employers and the community must be more ready to be inclusive."

While employment is one key feature of the Government's Enabling Masterplan, a five-year national roadmap towards creating a more inclusive society for people with disabilities, Ms Tan's view is that individuals with mental health conditions are excluded from the equation.

Citing Nominated Member of Parliament Chia Yong Yong's speech in Parliament earlier this month, where she spoke passionately for people with disabilities, Ms Tan said "invisible disabilities" such as the sufferings of mental health patients are often swept

under the carpet.

“Conditions like depression are often misunderstood. Many think it’s all in the patient’s mind, but it’s a medical condition. We’re encouraged by the support MINDSET Learning Hub has garnered among employers and hope more will come on board to support the initiative,” she said.

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