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New centre to offer WSQ courses to the mentally ill



Ms Ng and Mr Tan Wen Xiang, SAMH's deputy head of vocational services. Ms Ng, who has general anxiety disorder, has lost at least seven jobs in the past 10 years. It is hoped that with WSQ-certified training, there can be more acceptance of people like her in the workplace. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

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Upcoming centre aims to help recovering patients get jobs through skill qualifications

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It is not easy to find a job, or hold on to it, if you have suffered from a mental illness.

Ms Amy Ng, 37, who has general anxiety disorder, has been fired from at least seven jobs over the past 10 years.

Now, in a first here, the Singapore Association of Mental Health (SAMH) is setting up a training centre to offer Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) courses to those recovering from mental illness. Several employers have also agreed to look at hiring those who train there.

The centre, which opens in July in Jurong East, will offer courses in areas such as cleaning, hospitality, healthcare support, retail and food and beverage.

The 5,800 sq ft centre will have four classrooms and a cafe, hotel room, healthcare room and kitchen to simulate workplace environments for participants.

To tailor courses for those recovering from mental illness, classes may be shortened to support those who cannot focus for long, due to medication. Illness and stress management programmes will also be run.

After the course, trainees will be matched to jobs and the association staff's will follow up with them and their employers thereafter.

"With WSQ-certified training, we hope that it will increase their employability and promote acceptance in the workforce," said Mr Alex Newbigging, board chairman of Mindset Care, a charity supported by Jardine Matheson Group.

It has pledged \$2 million to set up the centre, which is called Mindset Learning Hub.

Besides the Jardine Group, 14 other employers have agreed to hire participants after they are trained.

Stigma and a lack of support prevent the mentally ill from being productively employed.

There is no data on this, but the number of mentally ill who land jobs and keep those jobs for a length of time may be small.

The Institute of Mental Health's (IMH) Job Club, for instance, made about 270 job placements each year over the past three years. In its 2013 and 2014 financial years, only 64 per cent of those placed in jobs stayed in them for at least two months.

For SAMH, it places about 150 to 200 of its clients in jobs each year.

In comparison, more than one in 10 here will be stricken by mental illness in their lifetime, the Singapore Mental Health Study of 2010 found.

Ms Li Zhong Ying, vocational specialist at IMH's Job Club, said some of the mentally ill will benefit from further skills training or education.

"Where the onset of mental illness has taken place earlier in life, such clients might not have been able to complete their studies or acquire work skills," she said.

Ms Ng, who gets tired or stressed out more easily on account of her anxiety disorder, is among those who dropped out of school early. Each time she loses a job, it hurts.

"When I lose my job, it is like I have lost my way," she said.

But organisers hope the new centre will make things easier for people like her once they are trained. Employers may gain too.

Said Ms Tan Li Li, executive director of SAMH: "In the tight labour market, employers realise that those with mental illness tend to stay longer in jobs and they are very diligent because they treasure the chance given to them by society."