

They aim to boost mental health of young people in Singapore



Ms Priyahnisha and her fiancé Devananthan co-founded Mental Act, an organisation to promote mental health awareness among the Indian community. Singapore Management University student Eugene Choy is another among the hundreds of people and groups who have responded to a call to improve youth mental well-being here. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

Individuals, groups to work with 3 ministries in new Youth Mental Well-being Network

Goh Yan Han

She struggled with symptoms of anxiety and eating disorder in secondary school, but did not think to seek help then.

Today, Ms Priyahnisha, 28, or Nisha, is a counsellor with Wings Counselling Centre. She sees many youngsters and young adults with mental health issues who turn to self-harm or ideas of suicide when they encounter troubles with friends, family, relationships or studies.

"It breaks my heart to see this is one of the first things they turn to, and that it's one of the behaviours they pick up to cope with stress," said Ms Nisha, who goes by one name.

As she grew older, she grew more interested in psychology and mental health and became more aware

of avenues of help available. She was clinically diagnosed with depression and anxiety last year, and now considers herself in recovery.

She hopes awareness about mental health issues and avenues of support will increase so that more youth can receive the help they need.

She is one of hundreds of individuals and groups who responded to Social and Family Development Minister Desmond Lee's invitation to those keen to improve youth mental well-being to step forward with proposals. Mr Lee told Parliament last month that more than 700 have expressed interest since Feb 7.

With the Ministry of Social and Family Development and the Health and Education ministries, they will be part of a new Youth Mental Well-being Network, which will identify opportunities and gaps to work on.

The topic of youth mental health has become more prominent, with many championing doing more or starting ground-up initiatives.

In 2018, the number of children aged seven to 18 admitted to public hospitals for mental health conditions stood at 607, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong told Parliament in a written reply on March 3. The number was 640 in 2017 and 569 in 2016.

In 2015, Ms Nisha set up Reset Right, which conducts talks, personal coaching and group work on mental health issues. She also co-founded Mental Act with her fiancé Devananthan, 28, a youth worker, to promote mental health awareness and support the Indian community.

"We felt that culturally, the Indian community has a huge stigma towards mental health issues, and sometimes when you connect with a professional from the same culture, you can relate more," said Ms Nisha.

Mr Eugene Choy, 26, a fourth-year information systems student at Singapore Management Univer-

sity, also responded to Mr Lee's call for ideas. A peer helper in school, he underwent training to better provide support to those around him.

"I can listen to my friends better, and point them to the right direction for more help," said Mr Choy. He hopes the network will review the peer support systems in Singapore and identify areas for improvement.

He felt the lack of a peer to talk to when his mother died of a stroke in 2011. "I didn't know who to talk to. I felt a friend might understand me more than an adult, so that got me interested in becoming a peer helper."

Parents are also keen to contribute to youth mental wellness here.

Ms Michelle Choy, 44, a mother of six children aged seven to 21, said she responded to the call because of feedback from one of her daughters on the mental health support available during her A levels. "She said a lot of kids in her class were stressed, and there would frequently be someone crying," said Ms Choy, an occupational therapist.

She suggested seeing a school counsellor, but her daughter said a friend's experience did not go well, which deterred the others.

Ms Choy hopes to provide feedback from the ground, especially from her perspective as a parent. She said: "I'm hopeful that the network being spearheaded by someone at the ministry level will bring greater impact or change beyond the ground-up initiatives."

Ms Nisha said having a governing body moderate and bring together ground-up initiatives could scale up existing programmes and allow more resources to be tapped. She said: "It also reduces the duplication of ideas and efforts. With more heads together, we can tackle some of the biggest problems in addressing youth mental health here - which are the lack of awareness and the stigma surrounding the issue."

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