



# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL



## CONTACT CLARITY SINGAPORE

CLARITY Singapore provides assessment and intervention programmes for those struggling with depression, anxiety, and mood disorders. Besides follow-up care and support for family members and caregivers, it also offers customised psycho-education sessions and mental wellness group exercises. If you are seeking assistance or know of someone who may need help, call 9710 3733 or e-mail ask@clarity-singapore.org

# There's beauty in brokenness

**M**ORE than one in 10 people living in Singapore today will suffer from mental illness at some point in their lives, according to the recently released Singapore Mental Health Study based on a survey of 6,600 people.

This means that someone seated beside you during Mass might well be living with a mental illness or may have an affected family member.

One such person is Angie Tan. If you looked at the bright-eyed 32-year-old university graduate, you would never guess that she has schizophrenia. She was diagnosed several years ago after she had a serious breakdown at home and turned uncharacteristically violent towards her family members.

Although no one was hurt, Angie's parents sought the help of a psychiatrist for their only child.

Since her diagnosis, Angie has been receiving regular therapy and treatment. She finds peace in church and takes comfort in attending Mass. She has had trouble holding a job, though, and intends pursuing her studies.

As a family, Angie and her parents decided to face the reality of her mental illness head on, without denial or delay. They regularly consult her psychiatrist and social worker.

That is in sharp contrast with what the mental health study found – two in three people with a mental illness never seek help. Even among those who do, many delay therapy or treatment by several years, possibly aggravating their condition.

People struggling with mental illness remain stigmatised. Surveys show that they are less likely to find employment or a life-partner. They are also less likely to obtain insurance or the quality medical care they need. These realities have much to do with how mental illness is perceived.

A common misconception is that the

*Many people live with mental illness but fear of the stigma stops many from seeking the help they need. As Christians, we are called to reach out to those struggling to cope.*

mentally ill are dangerous and should be institutionalised. Another common misconception is that mental illness is due to problems with the will, intellect or imagination of sufferers. These misconceptions have been scientifically disproved, but are difficult to change.

Perhaps it is the fear of discrimination that prevents people who need help from seeking it.

Roland Tay, 14, is a bright, fun-loving teenager attending a top school where the pressure to succeed is extremely high. His teachers, tutors and parents have high expectations for him, and he knows it.

Recently, Roland lost consciousness briefly during catechism. It was not the first time he had fainted. When physical checks drew a blank, a psychological examination revealed that Roland's fainting spells were brought about by his inability to cope with stress from schoolwork.

But his parents were unable to accept this diagnosis and opted against any further action – partly fearing that the stigma of mental illness might hinder their son's progress in life.

In the Bible, we hear of how Jesus cured those he encountered from physical, mental and even spiritual ailments (*Matthew 4:14*). Viewed in this light, churches are natural places of encounter with those struggling with mental illness. In their desire to be comforted or consoled, many turn to God and the Christian community for solace and support.

But how the Christian community treats the mentally ill ranges from acceptance to alienation.

Those coping with mental illness are human beings who possess an equal dignity that their conditions do not destroy or diminish. Blessed Pope John Paul II once said: "Whoever suffers from mental illness 'always' bears God's image and likeness in themselves, as does every human being. In addition they 'always' have the inalienable right not only to be considered as an image of God...but also to be treated as such."

The Christian community is where the unique gifts, talents and contributions of all, including those with mental illness, can be acknowledged and appreciated for the good of the whole community.

Clara Soh, 64, served in her parish's social work ministry for several years before stepping down because of her age. Soon, she began experiencing guilt and started contemplating suicide for not being able to serve as she did before. Normally friendly and full of life, Clara became withdrawn from her family and friends.

Her sons took her to a parish counsellor who found that Clara was depressed. She is coping with her condition, thanks to pastoral support from a religious brother in her parish's pastoral team.

The support of her family and community has been essential in helping Clara regain a sense of self-worth.

**In our families, parishes, ministries and communities, how accepting or loving have we been towards those with mental illness? Here are some points to consider.**

### If you have a mental illness

- Seek out a spiritual director or companion to confide in so you can get help and allow others in your community to understand your background.
- Seek professional therapy or treatment.
- Turn to family and friends for support.

### If you know someone with a mental illness

- Educate yourself about the different types of mental illness.
- Accept those who exhibit unusual behaviour and give them the benefit of the doubt.
- Consciously reach out and engage those you know are struggling with mental illness and involve them in your community.

### For clergy, religious and pastoral workers

- Educate yourself about the different types of mental illness and their accompanying symptoms.
- Provide simple educational material to parishioners.
- Be conscious of the possibility that some of those you encounter may be struggling with mental illness.
- Find out which support groups are available to refer to those who need help.
- Set aside one homily a year to preach the Christian response to mental illness.