

## IS MENTAL ILLNESS A MORAL AND SPIRITUAL FAILING?



by **FR DAVID GARCIA, OP**

First, let us talk about the false connections.

In morality, the point often ignored is that judging acts and judging people - are not equivalent. Rather, the morality of the person depends on responsibility, which in turn depends on the degree of free will. "Responsibility for an action can be diminished or even eliminated by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors." (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1735).

This helps us to understand that wrong acts, such as stealing or suicide, could be excused if the persons who committed them are not responsible for the acts due to, say, severe kleptomania or depression. After all, mental health condition is often linked to biological factors, such as brain structures, neurotransmitters, and the like, which are outside the control of free will. It is sinfully unfair to blame people for what they are not responsible for.

Another erroneous belief is that mental health condition is closely linked with the spiritual world or have some spiritual source. Therefore praying or conducting some religious ritual can 'cure' it. Praying is always good. But God helps those who help themselves by seeking the appropriate professional help.

So, what does our faith have to offer?

*“Probably none of us fits the ideal model of mental health. But we don't have to. We are all in the same boat trying to become better persons with the help of God's grace.”*

We can learn from the Church's approach **not to preach any fixed, ideal model of being perfect or even adequate.** Problems arise when we try to impose such models of



normality. Think about whether the model of physical attractiveness of a woman (as portrayed in the media today) helps women celebrate their beauty or creates feelings of inadequacy when they fail to match that standard. Something similar happens with a monolithic fixed model of mental health. Yes, we need medical labels to help with diagnosis and cure, but using the labels to stigmatise people because they fail to meet the ideal normal standard is counterproductive.

Instead of ideals, **the Church preaches "reals", that is real people who lived real lives:** the Saints. They are proposed as models or examples, not for us to mimic or repeat them, but for us to be inspired to become the best version of ourselves without needing to give up our personalities or even mental conditions.

In fact, some of the Saints were clearly eccentric, if not experiencing some kind of mental health condition. Moral theologians Frs. Ashley and O'Rourke noticed that, "psychological studies of the Catholic saints often fall into either the error of reducing everything remarkable in their lives to mental illness or the other extreme of supposing everything in their lives was a sign of holiness. For example, we cannot be sure whether the inability to eat of the great St Catherine of Siena was anorexia nervosa or a miracle of sustenance by the Eucharist alone. Perhaps it was both!" (Health Care Ethics, Benedict Ashley & Kevin O'Rourke, 1996)

Probably none of us fits the ideal model of mental health. But we don't have to. As a Church, we are called to question what the world now considers normal. We are all in the same boat trying to become better persons with the help of God's grace. ✿

# I'M GONNA LET MY LIGHT SHINE

Wendy\* is a client of Clarity Singapore who is on the road to discover her true self.

I am me. And just like everyone else, I want to be loved and accepted exactly the way I am; with my faults, my strengths, and with my joy for the world!

I was 18 when my world slowly turned dark. It was only in hindsight that I was able to see how I had a part in it too. At that time, I was massively involved in my projects in school that I lost sight of my own rest and joy. When I was sent to Institute of Mental Health (IMH), I slept for days. When I awoke, I was faced with a new world I did not understand; a place where I felt that I did not exist anymore.

How can my parents say they love me, and abandon me here? I was distanced from everything I knew: my friends and my schoolmates! Oh my, even my phone. Without my phone, I felt cut off from the world outside. They left me in a world where I felt I just could not exist!

There, I did not feel like me anymore. There, there was only a void in which I received no answers; I only had more questions every day. Why am I left here? How long will I be left here? What's going to happen to me? All my questions were answered with, "You are sick." Amid the confusion, I raged against my parents, the doctors, anyone in front of me. I also raged against God. The darkness crept in and swallowed me up.

It took many months of therapy and treatment before I could let go of my anger. I began to see when I needed sleep and rest, and I would step back. And this has made me stronger. This normalcy to 'my old self' brought tears to my eyes.

When I spoke with the counsellors at Clarity, I learnt more about myself. I understood how much mental and physical space I need, and also how much I could allow a person to come closer to me and still be me. I also saw how I was neglecting myself when I deserved more for myself. Then, slowly, with the little cracks of realisation, light started to come in.

I realised that God had put me in places that really stretched me, but He was also there with me. He had surrounded me with people who could help me. There was kindness, there was humility. And there was joy! You know, it is nice to love and be loved in return!



Now I participate in some group activities with Clarity. It's nice to make new friends, and to laugh and share my thoughts and ideas. How wonderful it is to be accepted just the way I am.

*“Let your Light shine before men!”  
- Matthew 5:16 ”*

A person cannot be a true friend or a loved one if they choose to hold a label over another person. Yes, the stigma is real. But it is only damaging if people allow this to cloud how they see a fellow human. Whether a person is rich or poor, whether he has bipolar or depression, he is still a father, son or a friend ... with all his dreams and passions. We should have no labels.

So, who am I to complain? I have been given so much: a family who loves me, friends who accept me, and even myself. Yes, I have been given myself to love.

Everyone is so different. We make the world diverse. We do not need to be like each other. If we are exactly like each other, we cannot see how each person is beautiful in his own way.

Remember Dr Seuss: "Today you are you, that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is youer than you." ❁

\*not her real name

## OUR MEMBER ORGANISATIONS



FAMILIES, YOUTH & CHILDREN

POOR, SICK & THE ELDERLY



# YOUR ROLE IN THEIR STORY OF RECOVERY

by Fred Cordeiro,  
Executive Director, Clarity Singapore

Some villagers were having a day out when they noticed some children being swept up in a downstream river. Several villagers jumped in to pull the children to dry land; while others taught the children to tread water and swim safely to shore. But still more children were being thrown in. So the rest hurried to nearby villages to get help except for one villager who ran off in a different direction. The others shouted: "Where are you going?" He answered: "I'm going upstream to stop whoever's throwing them in!"<sup>1</sup>

Why would a story of a bunch of villagers saving floating children resonate with me? As a mental health service provider, this story reflects what we can and should do if we truly wish to help people who are marginalised or vulnerable.

## Alone, We Can Only Do So Much

At Clarity Singapore, our work is similar to those villagers who promptly responded by jumping into the river to save the children. We observe and intervene. When a person with a mental health condition comes to us looking for professional help, we assess and connect him to one of our trained counsellors. The counsellor then journeys with him to manage his difficulties and struggles.

We also teach them how to 'tread water and swim'.

Our many activities and programmes like the YES (Your Empowered Self) initiative were rolled out for this reason: to enable persons with mental health conditions to thrive independently. Some clients formed new friendships and returned to volunteer with us.

This is what we, at Clarity Singapore, can do with our given resources. Like many other service providers, we do this to the best of our ability.

## Together, We Can Do More

But, clinical intervention can only do so much.

For persons with mental health conditions to lead meaningful and dignified lives, we need to build an inclusive society that accepts them for who they are.

Just as the villagers delegated tasks from direct intervention, volunteer building, to upstream support in order to pull off rescue efforts, the community as a whole must work together to effect positive and sustainable changes in the lives of those with mental health conditions. This is where family, friends, and you come in.

Each of us plays a vital role in their story of recovery. When prejudiced, we may say or do things that worsen their condition. Conversely, when we are open and understanding, they feel accepted and loved. This goes a long way to support a full recovery and help persons with mental health conditions improve their quality of life.<sup>2</sup>

Let us work together and be a village that saves.✿

*"A person cannot be a true friend or a loved one if they choose to hold a label over another person. Yes, the stigma is real. But it is only damaging if people allow this to cloud how they see a fellow human."*

- Wendy\*

# SOLVE THE MYTHS PUZZLE FACTS



"It's just focus. Snap out of it and all will be okay!"

"They are violent and dangerous to society!"



Mental health conditions are caused by a variety of biological and environmental factors.<sup>3</sup> They require professional treatment, and the support of family and friends.

Mental health issues are not specific predictors of violent behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Violent acts are rarely committed by persons with mental health conditions.<sup>5</sup>

"They cannot handle stress! So they shouldn't go to school or work."

Given the chance, persons with mental health conditions can study and work just as productively and fruitfully as other employees.<sup>6</sup> For some, slight adjustments may be needed to enable them to do their jobs effectively.



In Singapore, many mental health conditions have their onset in childhood and adolescence.<sup>7</sup> Globally, 10 to 20 percent of children and youth have mental health issues.<sup>8</sup>



"Children and youth don't get mental illness."



"Mental illness is rare - I won't get it."

In Singapore, one in seven people has experienced a mental disorder at some point in their lives.<sup>9</sup> Depression was the most common condition, experienced by 1 in 16 people.<sup>10</sup>



## PLAY YOUR PART

Here are some suggestions on what you can do to fight mental health stigma and build an inclusive Singapore.

- Use respectful, person-first language** when talking about mental health.<sup>11</sup> For example, refer to them as "people with mental health condition". Words have the power to heal and reduce stigma.
- Offer support.** Show you care by lending a listening ear and encouraging them to seek professional help. Refer them to the Resource Directory (next page) if they express their need for help.
- Treat them with the same respect and dignity** as you would anyone else. Remember that all of us, including those with mental health conditions, are God's children who possess infinite dignity and worth.
- Learn about the different types of mental health conditions** to better understand their lived experiences.<sup>12</sup>

## Early Identification and Detection

**Response, Early Intervention and Assessment in Community (REACH)** [Students]

W [imh.com.sg/clinical/page.aspx?id=1635](http://imh.com.sg/clinical/page.aspx?id=1635)

(Appointment through school counsellors only)

**Community Health Assessment Team (CHAT)** [Young persons aged 16-30]

T 6493 6500 / 6493 6501

W [chat.mentalhealth.sg](http://chat.mentalhealth.sg)

**COMMunity Intervention Team (COMIT) @ Clarity Singapore**

T 6757 7990 (Yishun)

W [clarity-singapore.org](http://clarity-singapore.org)

## Crisis and Suicide Prevention

**Institute of Mental Health**

T 6389 2222

(24-hour Helpline)

W [imh.com.sg](http://imh.com.sg)

**Samaritans of Singapore**

T 1800 221 4444 (24-hour Helpline)

W [sos.org.sg](http://sos.org.sg)

## Counselling Services

**Clarity Singapore**

T 6757 7990 (Yishun) | 6801 7467 (Toa Payoh)

W [clarity-singapore.org](http://clarity-singapore.org)

## Caregiver Support

**Caregivers Alliance Limited**

T 6388 8631 (Helpline) | 6460 4400 (General Enquiries)

W [cal.org.sg](http://cal.org.sg)

## Employment Support

**Institute of Mental Health's Job Club**

T 6389 2678

W [jobclub.sg](http://jobclub.sg)

**Singapore Association for Mental Health's (SAMH) MINDSET Learning Hub**

T 6665 9220

W [samhealth.org.sg](http://samhealth.org.sg)

## Rehabilitation

**Singapore Association for Mental Health**

(Day / Residential Rehabilitation)

T 6255 3222 (Main Line) | 6282 6332 (Oasis Day Centre) |

6564 7003 (Group Homes)

W [samhealth.org.sg](http://samhealth.org.sg)

**Institute of Mental Health**

(Outpatient / Residential Rehabilitation)

T 6389 2000 (Main Line)

6389 2200 (Outpatient)

6389 2003 / 6389 2004 (Admission)

W [imh.com.sg](http://imh.com.sg)

# RESOURCES FOR PERSONS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS\*

## Addiction Helpline and Services

**National Addictions Management Service**

T 6732 6837 (6-RECOVER)

W [nams.sg](http://nams.sg)

**National Council on Problem Gambling**

T 1800 666 8668 (Helpline)

W [ncpg.org.sg](http://ncpg.org.sg)



\*For a more comprehensive list, please scan this QR Code for National Council of Social Service's list of programmes and services for persons with mental health conditions.

<sup>3</sup> In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association redefined mental disorders as a "syndrome characterised by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behaviour that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning." The World Health Organisation added that mental health issues are partly attributable to environmental factors such as standards of living. American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing. World Health Organisation. (2018). *Mental Disorders*. Retrieved from [www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders](http://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders).

<sup>4</sup> Glied, S., & Frank, R. G. (2014). Mental Illness and Violence: Lessons from the Evidence. *American Journal of Public Health*, 104(2). doi:10.2105/ajph.2013.301710.

<sup>5</sup> Leyton, M. (2018). Are people with psychiatric disorders violent? *Journal of Psychiatry & Neuroscience*, 43(4), 220-222. doi:10.1503/jpn.180058.

<sup>6</sup> Chong, S. A. (2017, Oct 7). People with mental illness deserve a shot at work. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from [www.straitstimes.com/opinion/people-with-mental-illness-deserve-a-shot-at-work](http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/people-with-mental-illness-deserve-a-shot-at-work)

<sup>7</sup> Chong, S.A., Abidin, E., Vaingankar, J.A., Heng, D., Sherbourne, C., Yap, M., Lim, Y.W., Wong, H.B, Ghosh-Dastidar, B., Kwok, K.W. and Subramaniam, M. (2012a) 'A population-based survey of mental disorders in Singapore', *Ann. Acad. Med. Singapore*, 41: 49-66.

<sup>8</sup> World Health Organisation. (n.d.). *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*. Retrieved from [www.who.int/mental\\_health/maternal-child/child\\_adolescent/en/](http://www.who.int/mental_health/maternal-child/child_adolescent/en/).

<sup>9</sup> Institute of Mental Health. (2018, December 11). *Latest nationwide study shows 1 in 7 people in Singapore has experienced a mental disorder in their lifetime*. [Press Release]. Retrieved from [www.imh.com.sg/uploadedFiles/Newsroom/News\\_Releases/SMHS%202016\\_Media%20Release\\_FINAL\\_web%20upload.pdf](http://www.imh.com.sg/uploadedFiles/Newsroom/News_Releases/SMHS%202016_Media%20Release_FINAL_web%20upload.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> A guide is available on American Psychiatric Association's website: <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/reporting-on-mental-health-conditions>.

<sup>12</sup> Information on the different mental health conditions is available on Silver Ribbon's website: <https://www.silverribbonsingapore.com/facts.html>.



## EVENTS

12  
JUL

### TALKS@AGAPE VILLAGE: PARENTING ESSENTIALS

- Christian Parenting
- What a child (really) needs

Fr Henry Siew will explain how Christian parents can develop essential parenting qualities by prioritising spiritual values.

Ms Josephine Loh, Morning Star Community Services will share how to apply key elements of communication, identify crucial social skills, coach emotional regulation, and apply problem-solving steps with your children.

🕒 7.30pm to 9.45pm  
**To register**

📍 Agape Village, Multi-Purpose Hall, 7A Lorong 8 Toa Payoh, Level 1, S319264  
☎ 6801 7400 ✉ [agapevillage@caritas-singapore.org](mailto:agapevillage@caritas-singapore.org)

12  
JUL

### PERSONAL MORAL COMPASS 2019 (EVERY FRIDAY)

**Module 4** (Ethics of Love, Sex, and Marriage) - 7 sessions

This module explores Church teachings in light of today's perceptions of love, sex, and marriage. This includes the principles and applications of the Philosophy of the Body and personal and sexual relationships.

**Module 5** (Social Justice) - 7 sessions

Covering topics on human dignity and the common good amongst others, this module touches on the application of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) principles in living out our faith.

🕒 7.30pm to 9.30pm  
**To register**

📍 Catholic Centre, 55 Waterloo Street, Level 3, S187965  
✉ [formation@caritas-singapore.org](mailto:formation@caritas-singapore.org)

18  
JUL

### YOUNG ADULTS - INTO THE CAVE

A series of reflective sessions for young adults to pray, reflect, and discern the various social issues and concerns in their lives, and put their faith in action.

Session 1, 18 Jul 2019 | Session 2, 3 Oct 2019

🕒 7.30pm to 9.30pm  
**To register**

📍 Catholic Centre, 55 Waterloo Street, Level 3, S187965  
☎ 6338 3448 ✉ [youngadults@caritas-singapore.org](mailto:youngadults@caritas-singapore.org)

14  
AUG

### GOLF FOR CHARITY

An annual fundraiser in support of the work of the Caritas Singapore family.

🕒 11am to 10pm  
**To register**

📍 Singapore Island Country Club – Island Course@Thomson Road  
☎ 6801 7400 <https://bit.ly/caritas-golf2019>

28  
- 29  
AUG

### REVIEW OF LIFE

Participants will be introduced to the Review of Life (ROL) Method as a tool to help integrate faith and life.

🕒 7.30pm to 9.30pm  
**To register**

📍 Agape Village, 7A Lorong 8 Toa Payoh, Level 1, S319264  
☎ 6338 3448 ✉ [formation@caritas-singapore.org](mailto:formation@caritas-singapore.org)

28  
- 29  
SEPT

### LIVING THE GOSPEL IN THE WORLD

Discover how we are called to live our faith more intentionally in our daily lives.

🕒 Part 1 - 2D1N retreat (stay-in)  
🕒 Part 2 - 7.30pm to 9.30pm,  
Oct 8, 15, 22  
**To register**

📍 Montfort Centre, 622 Upper Bukit Timah Road, S678117  
📍 Agape Village, 7A Lorong 8 Toa Payoh, S319264  
☎ 6338 3448 ✉ [formation@caritas-singapore.org](mailto:formation@caritas-singapore.org)



### CONNECT WITH US

Wish to receive an e-copy of this newsletter? Write to us at [comms@caritas-singapore.org](mailto:comms@caritas-singapore.org)

### CONTACT US

📍 55 Waterloo Street #08-01 Catholic Centre S187954

☎ 6338 3448

📘 [facebook.com/CaritasSingapore](https://www.facebook.com/CaritasSingapore)

✉ [comms@caritas-singapore.org](mailto:comms@caritas-singapore.org)

🌐 [caritas-singapore.org](http://caritas-singapore.org)