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SPEECH BY DR ALINE WONG, MINISTER OF STATE FOR HEALTH,  
AT THE LAUNCH OF THE MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION PROGRAMME  
AT THE SINGAPORE LABOUR FOUNDATION AUDITORIUM  
ON SUNDAY, 7 FEB 1993 AT 2.00 PM

THEME: "HEALTHY MIND, HEALTHY LIFE"

Mental Health and You

By most indicators, Singaporeans today are enjoying good health. As compared to twenty or thirty years ago, Singaporeans not only live longer, but also healthier lives. However, there is still room for improvement. Many still die prematurely, or have their quality of life compromised by ill-health and preventable diseases. Thus, we have launched a National Healthy Lifestyle Programme since last year, with particular emphasis on behavioural modifications so as to reduce the risk factors associated with the major killer diseases, such as heart disease, stroke and cancer.

While emphasis is put on tackling the killer diseases, the relationship between physical health and mental health is by no means forgotten. Indeed, they are interrelated. If we are psychologically distressed, we cannot have good physical health and vice versa. The benefits of a healthy lifestyle will be reaped not just in terms of physical well-being, but also in terms of psychological well-being. One of the priority health programmes for the 1990s identified by the Review Committee on National Health Policies is improving mental healthcare.

Although there is a lack of consensus on the concept of "mental illness", depending on how broad or narrow a definition is adopted, it is generally agreed that prevention and early treatment are crucial to controlling mental health problems, an approach which is no different from that used for controlling diseases.

While some types of mental illness are related to genetic

and personality dispositions, most mental health problems can be prevented. They can also be treated and cured. We have today effective methods of treatment. We also have the expertise and facilities to treat such conditions. For example, some people suffering from depression may have abnormal levels, either too much or too little, of certain brain chemicals. By correcting this abnormality with medication, the symptoms of depression can be relieved for this particular group of patients. Among some people, psychological distress is triggered off by traumatic life events, such as childhood abuse or neglect, loss of loved ones, sudden change of environment, etc. Avoiding the occurrences of such events may not always be possible, but by understanding and learning to cope with them, we can prevent certain problems such as depression, undue tension and stress. In general, we can say that 80-90% of patients, given proper treatment, can lead normal and productive lives.

Prevention and early treatment are thus crucial. However, the greatest barrier preventing people from seeking proper treatment early are fears, misunderstandings and stigma attached to mental illness. To improve mental health, we need to understand the various common psychological problems which may affect anyone, young or old, rich or poor, at various stages of our life. It is fear, misunderstanding and neglect to face the problems and seek medical treatment which often lead to illnesses, causing unnecessary misery to oneself, one's family and community.

Therefore, one major thrust to mental health programmes must be the education of the public on the nature and causes of mental ill health, and on its preventability and curability.

Today, we are here to launch the Ministry of Health's first major public education programme on mental health. This is one of the components of a comprehensive mental health programme which my Ministry is implementing.

#### National Mental Health Programme

To promote good mental health and prevent disability as much as possible among Singaporeans, the National Mental Health

Programme adopts a 7-pronged approach, comprising the following:

- i) convenient community mental health clinics.
- ii) a modern hospital inpatient service.
- iii) a rehabilitation and home follow-up programme, including support for family members.
- iv) an expanded training programme for psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, clinical psychologists, occupational therapists and continuing medical education for doctors and nurses.
- v) a public mental health education programme to promote good mental health and inculcate a more positive attitude towards mental health.
- vi) epidemiological and clinical research into the trends, the causes and the treatment of mental health problems, and
- vii) a closer working relationship with the many voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) which are playing a leading role in providing counselling and preventive mental health service to the high risk groups. We need to have a more integrated approach to link up all the services provided by the public and private sectors, the VWOs and the professional bodies.

We started 10 years ago with training more psychiatrists to implement the mental health programme. The number of psychiatrists in Singapore has increased from 38 in 1985 to 65 in 1992. By the end of the decade, we target to have 100 psychiatrists in the country. We have opened new clinics, day centres, started a community nurse follow-up programme and more recently, we built a new psychiatric hospital which will be

opened in April 1993. We are now ready to launch a whole series of new programmes, including health education for the public on mental health. Today's Forum is the beginning of this public education programme. All these will enable Singaporeans over the next 3 years to see in place a comprehensive mental health service which will promote good mental health, prevent the preventable, allow for early diagnosis, ensure effective treatment and rehabilitation.

### Improving Mental Health Service

The new Woodbridge Hospital at Hougang with 2,695 psychiatric beds and costing more than \$170 million, has just been completed. It will provide a much upgraded range of services. New programmes will be provided for example, in the treatment of persons with alcohol dependence, the elderly with depression or dementia, and children and adolescents with psychological and emotional problems. The new Alcohol Treatment Centre will provide a continuum of inpatient, outpatient and home support programmes for such persons. In the area of forensic psychiatry, more attention will be paid to the medico-legal aspects of mental illness and problems of sexual and child abuse. Besides medication, these programmes use various modes of psychological treatment such as individual or group and family therapy.

Some patients need only a short period of hospitalisation following which they can be treated as outpatients. We now have 7 outpatient clinics for adults and 3 for children. For the convenience of persons who require psychiatric consultations, some of them are functioning in polyclinics. These clinics see

new and follow-up cases. We will be expanding to more clinics as the population move into more new towns. We have also started Departments of Psychological Medicine in NUH and TTSH to serve patients who have physical as well as psychiatric problems. Another such Department will be established in the Eastern General Hospital when it opens.

For some patients, they will also benefit from a transitional phase between inpatient and outpatient care. They attend treatment sessions in the Day Centre and return home in the evening. For those who have recovered, the Centres offer sheltered employment, behaviour therapy and social skills training. All these will assist in the total rehabilitation of the patient. Today, day care is available in 3 centres. In another year, a 4th centre in Choa Chu Kang will be set up.

The clinic for children and adolescents will be expanded and upgraded to fully exploit the potential for early diagnosis and treatment of psychiatric, behavioural and emotional problems in children. It will be re-located to the new Institute of Health in 1996. The upgraded and expanded child and adolescent psychiatric service will also complement the work of the School Psychological Service to help children with learning difficulties.

#### The Institute of Mental Health

Lastly, we are establishing an Institute of Mental Health next to the new Woodbridge Hospital to promote mental health education, training of professionals and research. It is through research that we can work towards new and better ways to combat

ill health. Research will uncover the biological factors leading to mental ill health, as well as assess the different types of treatment best suited to the needs of the local patients. With the establishment of the Institute, we can have a continuing systematic education for the public, which will help them dispel some common misconceptions and increase their ability to cope with psychological problems.

I ask all of you to support our public education programme. The fact that you have taken time today to attend the Forum is already a good start.

### The Role of Stress

Before I close, a word about "stress". It has almost become fashionable to complain about stress in our modern lifestyles. I think we must be clear in our mind what this means. Are Singaporeans actually experiencing more stress now than, say, compared to thirty years ago? In the past, we had to struggle against the harsh realities of hunger and unemployment; people worked fourteen, sixteen hours a day, seven days of the week, just to earn a meagre living. Housing was crowded and bad. The poor had no educational opportunities, no hope for the future. Compared to this, the present life of most Singaporeans is so comfortable; there is a great deal of security, and the young are pampered. Indeed, one of the commonest observations about Singaporeans now is that they are too complacent!

Like it or not, we live in a competitive world. When everybody else is running, we have no choice but to keep running in order to just stay at the same spot, or risk being left

behind. The right amount of stress will keep our adrenalin flowing, goad us on to do our best. Thus, problems can turn into challenges, to be overcome, giving us a sense of pride and achievement and a sense of satisfaction in life.

I am not denying that too much stress may cause mental ill health and even physical illness. In fact, I believe that, to succeed, one must learn to manage stress, otherwise our effectiveness will be impaired. What is "too much" stress? It is the amount that is beyond our capacity to cope. This capacity varies with individuals, but no one should go beyond his own limits. For all of us, the keyword must be to lead a balanced life, between work and family life, having time for recreation, time for others and for oneself. Because it is so much up to the individual to manage his own life, we must not blame a host of social problems on so-called stressful lifestyles.

I suspect Singaporeans' tendency to complain of stress has something to do with our having lost some of our cultural capacity to absorb stress. In the past, life events were viewed as natural and unavoidable; there was a quiet acceptance of what may be called the "human condition": birth, old age, illness and death ( ). This made the transition between different stages of the life cycle much easier, much less traumatic. In the past grown-up children lived with their parents; daughters-in-law lived with their parents-in-law and some other relatives in large households. Yes, there were family tragedies arising from family conflicts. But by and large, people accepted and adjusted to the traditional institutions of marriage and family as part of their social obligations. Today,

the situation is quite different. There is more demand for privacy and individual rights, and a much lower threshold for pain.

In dealing with psychological problems, whether it is in prevention, treatment or rehabilitation, we should be constantly aware of our own cultural traditions and the need to adapt Western methods of treatment to our local situation.

I wish you a fruitful and enlightening Sunday afternoon.

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