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SPEECH BY MR MAH BOW TAN, MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AT THE OPENING OF THE SAMARITANS OF SINGAPORE (SOS) 30TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, "WHEN LIVING HURTS", AT THE YORK HOTEL ON FRI, 29 SEP 2000 AT 9.00 AM

National Archives of Singapore

Mr Anthony Yeo, Chairman, Board of Management, SOS;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would firstly like to congratulate the Samaritans of Singapore on its 30th anniversary. It is three decades now since you opened Singapore's first and I believe only 24 hours a day, 365 days a year hotline. At any time, day or night, SOS volunteers are just a phone-call away, providing a listening ear to anyone who may be in desperate need of advice and assurance because of loneliness, pain or despair.

2 Although you operate behind-the-scenes most of time, the service you provide, especially to someone who is unable to cope with the emotional pain of life's tribulations, is truly priceless. What makes it all the more admirable is that those who provide this counseling service to the public are mostly volunteers, helping out in their free time. This is most commendable.

3 We live in a highly urbanised city. While city living has its attractions and conveniences over living in a rural, laid-back environment, it is usually accompanied by higher stress levels. Ours is a highly-competitive society, where striving for excellence and keeping up with global trends are essential to ensuring the nation's growth and prosperity. And as we work at a pace that can be described as "Internet" speed, our families must adjust to many challenges, including that of having both parents holding full-time jobs. All this poses stressful demands on individuals and their families.

4 As a community, we must be sensitive not only to the needs of those who keep up with the pace of life, but also to the needs of those who are unable to cope. There are, for instance, the elderly who may be no longer economically productive or financially independent, people caught in the poverty trap, and people with chronic illnesses, physical disabilities or mental illness. They often cannot fit into the mainstream of life without assistance. And they also need to be assured that despite their disabilities or troubles, they still matter to us.

5 The Government is mindful of the special needs of these Singaporeans. Programmes and services to meet their needs have been put into place through the Ministry of Community Development and Sports, grassroots organisations and Voluntary Welfare Organisations. The Housing and Development Board, in its provision of public flats and design of neighbourhoods, is always conscious of the need to help low-income families, facilitate mobility of older persons and promote family cohesion.

6 Yet these efforts on the part of the Government alone cannot alleviate all the problems of the less fortunate. This is where society has an important role to play, motivated by the desire to care for a fellow human being in distress. This role is so easily overlooked as we go through our daily lives, and the competing demands on our time and energies. It is therefore not surprising that we witness incidences of stress-related behaviour, from road rage and queue rage to divorce, from mental disorders to suicidal attempts.

7 To arrest such trends, we must focus on how to link people with people in

mutually caring and sensitive ways -- husbands to wives, children to parents, neighbours to neighbours, and so on. Social support from family, friends and colleagues holds the key to a more resilient society. We need to realise that an individual's problem must also concern his family, that the loss of a job or failure in an examination does not mean shame or a letting down of loved ones, that being old and infirm does not mean being useless and a burden to others. Family and friends must make it very clear that a person matters for who he or she is, and having a problem only makes him or her matter more, not less.

8 In a way, the SOS telephone hotline service offers a microcosm of such a caring and compassionate society, and demonstrates how immensely helpful an understanding and empathic response can be to someone who is down and nearly out.

9 In congratulating the SOS and its volunteers on what they have accomplished, I would also like to urge you good Samaritans to continue with your excellent work. Your service is as relevant today as it was 30 years ago, indeed much more. I urge you to constantly think of new ways of reaching out to the vulnerable members of our community and also to give greater impetus to your Community Education Programme so that more and more people will be empowered to be of help to one another in times of need.

10 I wish you a fruitful and interesting Conference.

Thank you.

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