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08 Sep 2018 11:00AM(Updated: 08 Sep 2018 07:50PM)

SINGAPORE: At first glance, Mr Eugene Tan's 20-year work history shows a strong background as a counsellor and social worker.

But on closer inspection, you will find that he took a year's break at the age of 24 and there have been some gaps between jobs.

This was due to Mr Tan's condition. He has bipolar disorder - a mental condition characterised by extreme highs and lows in mood.

Diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder after a car accident, his emotions took a turn for the worse, culminating in fits of rage and hallucinations. It was then, in 2002, that he was diagnosed as bipolar.

After that, he was reluctant to declare his condition in job applications.

"Once you declare, you may not even get an interview," he told Channel NewsAsia.

While that had been a hunch, proof that it was true came earlier this year. During an eight-month break, and looking to switch careers, he asked a consultant at a recruitment agency: What if the potential candidate has mental health issues?

The answer he received was: "Better not, lah. We don't know when the person will snap. And I don't think the company will know how to handle this group."

But withholding the truth at work comes with its own challenges, he said.

"There's always this insecurity. When colleagues' behaviour towards me suddenly changes, I will wonder whether they found out from somewhere that I have bipolar. I will also think about what the consequences would be if my employer found out," Mr Tan said.

He is now one month into his job at Club Heal, a voluntary welfare organisation that helps people with mental illnesses and their families.

CAMPAIGN TO GET RID OF THE STIGMA
Mr Tan could be better off than others who have a mental condition struggling to find a job.

The National Council of Social Service (NCSS) on Saturday (Sep 8) revealed findings of a study showing that five in 10 respondents believe that those with mental conditions should not be given any responsibility.

NCSS hopes to change this perception through the first nationwide anti-stigma campaign.

The Beyond the Label campaign launched on Saturday is a five-year public education effort funded by the Tote Board's Mental Health Strategic initiative.

NCSS deputy chief executive Tina Hung, deputy chief executive at NCSS, said research shows that perceptions and attitudes are the most critical in changing the behaviour of individuals.

"Hence, it's crucial for us to change perceptions and attitudes towards persons with mental health conditions, to support inclusion and a better quality of life for all. With support and acceptance, persons in recovery can integrate into society and thrive," she said.

TACKLING MISCONCEPTIONS
Employers need to understand that mental illness is a disease and, like other illnesses, it is manageable with medication, therapy, self-help and societal support and understanding of the affliction, a spokesperson for the Singapore Association for Mental Health said.

Ms Li Zhong Ying, principal occupational therapist at the Institute of Mental Health's (IMH) Job Club, said very often supervisors and managers on the ground do not know how to better support employees with mental health conditions, or are unsure about the community support and services that are available.

"I've heard some of them say that they might as well set up a charity if they are going to employ people from this group. Others are afraid of being held responsible. They think the staff will have outbursts, and that there will be complaints," said Ms Porsche Poh, executive director of mental health advocacy organisation Silver Ribbon.

It has been reaching out to firms to provide them with the information they need on hiring people with mental health issues.

REMOVING EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION
However, the need to declare one's mental health history when applying for a job remains a bugbear among advocates.

Ms Li from IMH's Job Club said it encourages discrimination.

"The job market is already very competitive, and to state it on a job application form will only further lower the chances of persons with mental health conditions securing a job, given the negative assumptions held by the public towards people with mental health conditions," she said.

She stressed that people with mental health conditions deserve a chance to prove that they can work productively.

"Many such individuals are not only able to function as well as others in the workplace, but also often have qualifications, skills, abilities and experiences as required by the jobs," she said.

A perception shift is critical when it comes to the declaration of mental illness in a job application process, the Singapore Association for Mental Health said.

"With greater awareness and understanding of mental health conditions, the declaration of one's mental health conditions should be considered with respect and empathy as this is an act of strength and courage," its spokesperson said.

Even for those willing to hire, Ms Li cautioned against treating this group differently.

"Employers should accord them the same pay rates and benefits as other workers. Employers should not have a mindset of doing 'charity work' and pay people with mental health conditions less or view them as beneficiaries," she said.

Still, the organisations acknowledged that more employers are now open to hiring those with a history of mental health issues. Between 2015 and 2017, Job Club has been in touch with 45 new companies who expressed interest in hiring its clients, Ms Li said.

The Singapore Association for Mental Health's MINDSET Learning Hub, the first vocational training centre for those with mental health issues has placed 123 individuals in jobs between July 2016 and July this year.

"To encourage a more inclusive workforce, incentives could be given to employers to encourage them to employ persons with mental health conditions, as well as to reward organisations that have already been doing so," Ms Li said.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE
Eyewear shop Nanyang Optical has pledged to hire people with mental illnesses. So far, the firm, which has about 100 employees, has hired three people with schizophrenia and depression, said managing director Bernard Yang.

"We made a slight adjustment to the job scope and environment so that it is easier for them to adapt. In addition, we also try to be more generous in giving words of encouragement to them," he said, adding that a lot of understanding and cooperation is required across departments and colleagues.

Mr Yang encouraged other companies to hire people with mental illnesses, and stressed the need for inclusion, as "everyone deserves a chance".

"Actually, they are not any different from any of us. If we can adapt to the different kinds of people at a workplace, we can definitely work with people with mental illness. All they need is a little encouragement and a little kindness, and also an opportunity," he said.

Although it may entail making changes to workflow, he said he believes it means a lot to them. There is also satisfaction, he said.

"We feel good and happy when we see them improving along with the job, their condition becomes stable, and they smile more often," he said.

Mr Tan hopes that more employers will be accepting, hire people with mental health issues and see them for who they are.

"I don't want to be Eugene Tan with bipolar. I want to be just Eugene Tan."

Editor's note: An earlier version of this story reported that the survey found that six in 10 people believe employees with mental conditions are less reliable. This statistic has been updated by NCSS.

Source: CNA/ja(ms)(db)