



mental health matters

handbook for library staff

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS:

Handbook for Library Staff

Statement of Intent

Silver Ribbon (Singapore) is a non-profit organisation launched by Former President S R Nathan on 4 Feb 2006 to combat mental health stigma and encourage early treatment.

The contents of this publication are guidelines to promote positive mental health among library staff so that they would be able to understand the importance of mental health, recognise the signs and symptoms of mental health issues, manage certain situations, and know where to seek help from.

Adherence to these guidelines may not ensure a successful outcome in every case. These guidelines should neither be construed as including the best practice, nor exclude other acceptable types of management.

The mention of specific organisation or of certain mental health programmes/services does not imply that they are endorsed or recommended by Silver Ribbon (Singapore) in preference to others of a similar nature that are not mentioned.

The responsibility for interpretation and use of this publication lies with the reader. In no event shall Silver Ribbon (Singapore) be liable for damages from its use.

To learn more about Silver Ribbon (Singapore) and mental health issues, please visit www.silverribbonsingapore.com.

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health is described by the World Health Organisation as:

"... a state of well-being in which the person realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community."¹ In this positive sense, mental health is the foundation for the well-being and effective functioning of individuals and communities.

According to the Singapore Mental Health Study (SMHS), which was spearheaded by the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), Alcohol Abuse and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) emerged as the top three most common disorders in Singapore. One in 16 people in Singapore have suffered from MDD at some time in their lifetime, while Alcohol Abuse and OCD affected one in 29 and one in 33 people, respectively.²

However, that tells only one part of the story as it only identifies those who are diagnosed and have sought out medical help. There are many others who display a host of behaviour that reflect poor mental health. The effects of poor mental health can often leave people feeling confused, hurt or shut down. Dealing with different kinds of health issues is never a simple or straightforward matter. And, as a library staff, it is no surprise for you to encounter anyone with mental health issues at the library.

Thus, the aim of this book is to assist you in understanding the importance of mental health, recognising the signs and symptoms of mental health issues, managing certain situations, and knowing where to seek help from.



UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Mental health issues do not arise by reason only of age, gender or occupation. They can strike at any time and are treatable. Early detection and treatment have been clinically established to be able to put them under control.

The aim of this chapter is not to encourage one to probe into other's personal life, to diagnose them, or act as their counsellors. Being aware of the signs that suggest someone may be experiencing mental health issues is important as the consequences of delayed treatment can be shattering, leading to unnecessary disability, homelessness, unemployment, incarceration and even suicide.

Meanwhile, the person may be going through a particularly stressful time in their life for any number of reasons.

Signs of Depression

People who are depressed may:

- Be tearful, nervous or irritable
- Have low confidence
- Lose interest in their work and find it difficult to concentrate
- Feel overwhelmed and unable to deliver what is expected of them
- Lose their appetite
- Get tired easily

At worst, they may feel suicidal.

Signs of Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar is also known as "manic-depression", and is characterised by the constant changing of moods. A person with bipolar experiences highs and lows, and the period vary from person to person. People with bipolar may experience:

- Extreme mood swings
- Rash spending sprees
- Poor concentration and easily distracted
- Poor appetite and weight loss
- Heighten sense of self-importance
- Lesser need for sleep

Signs of Anxiety

Anxiety takes many forms from general anxiety to anxiety triggered by a particular situation (a phobia). People experiencing anxiety may seem unusually worried or fearful in most situations. They may:

- Appear pale and tense
- Be easily startled by everyday sounds
- Have difficulty concentrating
- Be irritable
- Try to avoid certain situations

Panic attacks are usually a sign of anxiety and are common in the workplace. Someone experiencing a panic attack may breathe rapidly, sweat, feel very hot or cold, feel sick or feel faint. A task that other people consider simple may seem impossible to them. The symptoms of a severe panic attack can be quite similar to a heart attack, and someone experiencing one may be convinced that they are going to die.

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is a common form of anxiety involving distressing repetitive thoughts. Compulsions are the actions which people feel they must repeat to feel less anxious or stop their obsessive thoughts. For example, some people cannot stop thinking about germs and the diseases they could catch. To cope with this anxiety, they may start washing their hands over and over again. Compulsions commonly involve checking, cleaning, counting or dressing rituals.



Signs of Schizophrenia³

Schizophrenia means “split mind”, it is a chronic and debilitating disorder characterised by the inability to distinguish between what is real and what isn't. From the eyes of an outsider, a sufferer's behaviour might seem odd or outrageous. They may be:

- Seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling things that isn't really there
- Showing no emotion or expressing inappropriate affect (e.g. giggling at a funeral)
- Showing little interest or drive in daily activities
- Exhibiting disorganised speech and behaviour
- Unable to remember things
- Unable to process information and make decisions

Signs of Relapse⁴

Just as there are warning signs of mental health issues, there are warning signs to its relapse – it does not happen in a whim. A percentage of relapse is to be expected, recognising early signs and being proactive can help prevent or minimise a relapse. Prior to a relapse, people will often experience changes in their feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Here are some observable signs that can be taken note of:

- Loss of interest/motivation
- Difficulty sleeping or change in sleeping habits
- Neglect personal care and seem to be more distant
- Alcohol/drug use
- Extreme anger outburst
- Changes in work performance

HOW TO HANDLE?

1) Stay calm

You might feel uneasy dealing with someone who exhibits signs pertaining to mental health issue as listed on pages 5 – 6 due to various reasons such as unpleasant experience in the past or the media representation of people with mental health issues as unpredictable and violent.

Generally, they are no more dangerous than those in the general population. However, with the presence of certain disturbances, he/she might believe that someone wants to harm him/her, thus act on the delusion and take action against certain people.

It would be helpful if you stay calm and react to the person as you would with anyone else.

2) Assess the situation

If he/she is distressed and threatening,

- Do not get involved physically.
- Contact the security officer/police for their assistance.

3) Manage the situation

- Do not approach the person in a hostile manner as this carries a high risk of an equal response.
- Greet him/her with a smile while staying an arm's length away.
- Introduce yourself and communicate the reason for approaching him/her.
- Maintain eye contact when talking to him/her to show that you are completely focused and is taking them seriously.
- Focus on the issue and avoid giving personal opinions.
- Allow him/her time to calm down and express his/her thoughts.
- Do not get into an argument with him/her.
- Do not interrupt until he/she has completed his/her sentence.
- Acknowledge his/her concerns and be prepared to give a clear explanation of the usual procedure for registering a complaint.
- Invite him/her to propose ways to address the issue.

By talking to the person, you can learn more from their point of view, recognise any underlying cause of unhappiness or stress, and determine ways to manage the issue.



After trying your best to manage the situation, you may wish to consider some suggestions on ways to handle those possible outcomes:-

Possible Outcomes	Suggestions
The undesirable behaviour stopped immediately.	Thank him/her for his/her cooperation.
He/she shares openly about his/her mental health condition.	Recommend those services as listed on page 11.
He/she makes unreasonable demands.	Record them and request for his/her name and contact details so that that you could get back to him/her after discussing with your team.
He/she raises his/her voice at you.	Invite him/her for a discussion along with a colleague in a room.
He/she starts appearing distressed and threatening.	Do not get involved physically and contact the security officer/police for their assistance.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why is mental health important?

Mental health is the essential for a person's well-being and effective functioning. The World Health Organization defines it as "a state of well-being in which the person realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community."

Do children get mental illness?

Yes, childhood is a vulnerable period and a whole range of mental illnesses can occur in childhood including various learning disorders, autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders, elective mutism. In addition, children may become depressed, anxious, or even develop psychosis.

Can mental illness be treated?

All the various types of mental illness can be effectively treated with medications, psychological treatments, or a combination of both. People with mental illness can recover completely or at least the symptoms may be controlled.

Is mental illness contagious?

Most of the mental illnesses are caused by multiple and interacting social, psychological, and biological factors. None of the mental illness is caused by germs and so mental illnesses are neither infectious nor contagious. So "catching" the same illness from close contact with someone with mental illness is a myth and completely untrue.

Are people with mental illness dangerous?

Generally people with mental illness are no more dangerous than those in the general population. However, the presence of certain disturbances like a delusion of persecution where the person believes that people want to harm him or her, and may cause them to act on the delusion and take action against these people. People with certain types of mental illnesses may be dangerous to themselves e.g. those with severe depression may kill themselves.

What are the consequences of delayed treatment?

Mental illnesses are like many other physical illnesses e.g. diabetes where delay in treatment would result in more complications. For most of the mental illnesses, delay in effective treatment would lead to more distress to the person and family, greater impairment to either his or her academic or occupation functioning, disruption to the person's social network. For some mental illnesses, delay would also result in greater severity of the illnesses, and lessen the chance of a full recovery.

Why would one delay treatment? And, how shall we assist them?

This is a fairly common and difficult problem with no single solution. Here are some of the possible reasons:-

- Lack of awareness that he or she is ill.
- Fear of rejection by family, friends, relatives, employers or colleagues.
- Misattributing the disturbances to some other causes e.g. supernatural influences.

It may be helpful to

- Find out why the person does not want treatment, and address the apprehension or misconception.
- Persuade the person to seek help and relief for some of the complaints that he or she may also be having e.g. sleep problems, or feeling low in mood rather than suggesting the person should seek help because he or she may be having a mental illness.
- Enlist the help of someone (e.g. friend, teacher, religious leader, etc) the person trusts and respects to persuade the person to seek professional help is another approach.
- Contact a professional mental health worker like a counsellor or a psychiatrist, or even a family doctor to discuss this problem may also help. The family doctor or psychiatrist could make a home visit, make an assessment and persuade the person to take the appropriate treatment.

Mental Health Services

Agency for Integrated Care

No. 5 Maxwell Road, #10-00 Tower Block, MND Complex,
Singapore 069110
Tel 6603 6800
www.aic.sg

Caregivers Alliance Limited

Blk 707 Yishun Avenue 5 #01-36
Singapore 760707
Tel 6753 6578
www.cal.org.sg

Caregivers' Association of the Mentally Ill

84 Riverina Crescent
Singapore 518313
Tel 6782 9371
www.cami.org.sg

Clarity Singapore Limited

Church of our Lady Star of the Sea
10 Yishun Street 22
Singapore 768579
Tel 9710 3733
www.clarity-singapore.org/

Health Promotion Board

3 Second Hospital Avenue
Singapore 168937
Tel 6435 3500
www.hpb.gov.sg

Institute of Mental Health

Buangkok Green Medical Park
10 Buangkok View
Singapore 539747
Tel 6389 2000
www.imh.com.sg

Singapore Anglican Community Services (SACS)

Simei Care Centre

10 Simei Street 3
Singapore 529897
Tel 6781 8113
www.sacsscc.org.sg

Hougang Care Centre

20 Buangkok View, IMH Blk 4
Singapore 534194
Tel 6386 9338
www.sacshcc.org.sg

Community Rehabilitation and Support Service (CRSS)

Blk 267 Bukit Batok East Ave 4 #01-206
Singapore 650267
Tel 6562 4881

Blk 707 Yishun Avenue 5 #01-36
Singapore 760707
Tel 6753 5311

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www.samhealth.org.sg

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SILVER RIBBON (SINGAPORE)

Stigma that surrounds mental illness often prevents people from seeking treatment and the consequences of untreated mental illness can be shattering, leading to unnecessary disability, homelessness, unemployment, incarceration and even suicide.

Silver Ribbon is a non-profit organisation that combats mental health stigma and encourages early treatment in Singapore.

To date, we have organised many mental health talks and events to educate the community on mental health issues.

Join us to combat mental health stigma and encourage early treatment.

Visit www.silverribbonsingapore.com to read more about mental health issues