

Experts share tips for mental health

Almost a billion people live with a mental illness, but professional help is hard to find and waiting lists are long. Here are some positive strategies

South China Morning Post · 10 Oct 2022 · B10 · Anthea Rowan life@scmp.com

Almost a billion people live with a mental illness, according to the World Health Organization. That's more than 10 per cent of the world's population, and includes about one in five of all children and adolescents.



Depression and anxiety cost the global economy US\$1 trillion each year, yet before the coronavirus pandemic the average government spent less than 2 per cent of its national health budget on mental health.

Because of this, people who are brave enough to seek help – which takes strength and courage – often don't get it quickly enough.

Minal Mahtani, CEO and founder of OCD & Anxiety Support Hong Kong, is familiar with the situation in Hong Kong. The waiting time for non-urgent cases to see a government psychiatrist, she says, ranges from 48 to 125 weeks.

The average time a psychiatrist has to spend with a patient once they finally see them is between five and seven minutes – so there's only enough time to prescribe medication, rather than get to the crux of why a person is feeling the way they are.

"It breaks my heart to know how many people are suffering and how little support there is out there," Mahtani says.

The theme for World Mental Health Day 2022 October 10 – is "Make mental health for all a global priority". It is an ambitious goal, given such statistics and the lack of public resources worldwide devoted to mental health.

So what can we do to protect our own mental health, and how can we support those struggling with a mental illness? Five Hong Kong experts give their top tips.

1. Dr Vanessa Wong, psychiatrist

Wong worked with the Hong Kong Hospital Authority for a decade before starting her own practice. She advocates doing something just for "kicks and giggles" once in a while.

As adults, she says, we don't do this – we have lost the carefree-ness of youth. "Children don't worry about homework, dinner, tax returns. They do things for the sake of doing things" for amusement, she says. Wong makes a habit of doing things that make her laugh out loud.

She urges people to compartmentalise. During the pandemic, living under social-distancing restrictions, we forgot about making the distinction between time at work and time off, Wong says.

"We let it become an unhealthy habit and we worked all hours."

She has at times prescribed time off work to preserve or support a person's mental health. Leave work at work, she stresses; and don't let toxic relationships in the office into your home.

Wong has a term for self care: mental hygiene, "as opposed to dental hygiene". Ask a person why they brush their teeth and they'll tell you it's because it's a daily habit born of the desire to have good teeth – it's preventive. We don't think about our

mental health in the same way.

“If somebody feels anxious, say, I’d prescribe breathing exercises, or exercise or meditation; it doesn’t have to take long, a few minutes every day rather than a week’s retreat every five years. Something regular, consistent, a good habit – like brushing your teeth, in fact,” Wong says.

2. Minal Mahtani, OCD & Anxiety Support Hong Kong

Mahtani, founder and CEO of the charity OCD & Anxiety Support Hong Kong, urges us to be aware of our inner critic, as it can bully us by saying negative things: I am not good enough, I am unlovable, I am defective. We wouldn’t say these things to a friend, so why say them to ourselves?

Give yourself permission to feel and express yourself in a way that feels good for you, she says. “This can include speaking to someone about what you are going through, writing your thoughts in a journal, exercising as a form of stress relief.”

And back to this year’s theme – mental health as a global priority – she reminds us that it should matter to us all “because we all have it, just like we all have physical health; it’s our responsibility to look after it”.

3. Nivedita Ramanujam, psychotherapist

Ramanujam employs several strategies to support her own mental health so she can support others. Be friends with yourself, she says, to develop the ability to take on life alone.

Engage in “flow” – the art of “mindful play” – regularly. She says: “I get into this state when I hike in forests or mountains or when I allow myself to become immersed in quick sketching with watercolours. I enter a state of creativity, energised focus and contentment.”

And finally, review your “sociogram” – a graphic representation of your social relationships, groups and interactions. Observe which tend to be conflictual, stable, positive or negative. Then prune back as necessary, ditching the thorny ones.

4. Carol Liang, counsellor

Liang, a counsellor and deputy CEO of mental health charity Mind HK, would like to see real commitment to promoting mental health as a priority in Hong Kong “within corporates, policies, schools, and beyond – both at a systemic and interpersonal level”.

We need to talk about mental health more, she says. The stigma surrounding it is still rife, so the more we all talk about it the more chance there is of “normalising” mental health.

“Research shows there are a lot of misconceptions about mental health in Hong

Kong, which in turn have informed the public’s negative attitudes” towards those diagnosed with a mental illness. So we need to work on our mental health literacy, she says.

To safeguard her own mental health, Liang stays physically active, taking advantage of Hong Kong’s great hiking trails, beaches and green spaces. “Going for a 15-minute lunchtime walk has been imperative in maintaining both my physical and mental health,” she says.

If you aren’t feeling yourself, talk to a friend or loved one, she suggests. That simple act can pre-empt a bigger problem.

Be ready to reciprocate, too. Supporting good mental health in those we love is also about listening. Give your full attention, and never be judgmental when somebody is trying to articulate a distress you may struggle to understand.

It’s all too common to feel like we’re all alone ... [But] that’s almost always not the case

DR BRENT HORNER, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

5. Dr Brent Horner, clinical psychologist

Dr Brent Horner, of the The London Medical Clinic in Hong Kong, agrees the most helpful thing people in distress can do is talk to someone – and not fear telling others if they are getting professional help.

“It’s all too common to feel like we’re all alone, like no one else can know what we’re going through. That’s almost always not the case,” Horner says.

“I’ve had countless clients tell me that once they finally told a friend or two that they were seeing a therapist, they invariably run into someone they knew very well who discloses, ‘I’ve had my struggles, too’, and even, ‘I’ve seen a therapist myself!’”