



Two widows who have gone through the the Wishine programme are (facing camera from left) Madam Quek Puay Swan and Madam Julia Ng. They are seen here with Wicare chairman Lim Poh Hong and vice-chairman Esther Ng (back to camera). About 30 widows, aged from 50 to 78, have gone through the Wishine programme. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

Book provides insights into conquering mental illness

Raffaella Nathan Charles

It was a Friday afternoon in 2009 when Ms Aneez Fathima received a phone call from her son's school – not only to take him home but also to take him out of the school.

A couple of days earlier, her seven-year-old son Faheem, who was autistic, had poked one of his Bukit View Primary School classmates with a pair of scissors.

When she and Faheem returned home, her husband Mohamad Farook said he would take their only child out for “lunch and Friday prayers”.

The next time Ms Aneez, then 32, saw them was at the foot of a residential block nearby – father and son had fallen 24 storeys to their death. She was devastated.

In 2015, the Indian permanent resident became a volunteer at Club Heal, a charity that offers rehabilitation and counselling services to those suffering from mental illness.

She called it a “calling from God”, and is today a full-time para counsellor with Club Heal.

Her story is one of the 17 published in a book on mental illness that was launched yesterday at the club's fifth-anniversary dinner at Keat Hong Community Club.

Titled *A Place In The Sun*, the book is written by the club's resident writer Yohanna Abdullah, 50, who shared her own 20-year journey with bipolar disorder. The book has a Malay version, *Di Bawah Sinaran Mentari*.

A book on mental health tips, *You Can Be Your Best*, by retired mental health nurse Heryani Jamaludin, was also launched yesterday.

In a speech at the dinner, President Halimah Yacob, Club Heal's chief patron, called for more understanding to break down the stigma and barriers against mental illness.

“A good starting point for us to be helpful is to find out more about mental illness so that we will not prejudice the sufferers or subject them to ridicule and contempt,” she said.

Club Heal, which runs three centres, has helped almost 2,000 people since 2012.

In 2016, it expanded its services to dementia patients and their caregivers, a move President Halimah called timely, given Singapore's rapidly ageing population.

Club Heal president Radiah Halim said yesterday the club is now looking at expanding services to addiction issues.

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Free scheme helps ease widows' grief

Nine-hour programme offers counselling and support sessions for those aged 50 and above

Theresa Tan

When her husband died of lung cancer three years ago, Madam Quek Puay Swan felt so bereft and lonely that she would cry during her drive home from work.

The quantity surveyor in her 50s said the first year after her husband's death was the hardest. “It's heartbreaking. I miss my husband so much. Grief has no end, it's how well we cope with it,” said the mother of two children in their 20s.

But Madam Quek's spirits lifted after she befriended other widows

from the Wicare Support Group for widows, a charity which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

In December last year, Madam Quek also attended the Wishine programme, a new initiative to help widows cope with grief and find support from those who have been in their shoes.

“Wishine has also helped me to heal. I know we can express our feelings freely (during the sessions) and others in the group will understand me,” she said. “When I talk about my husband, my family will try to change the subject, afraid it will trigger sadness in me. But I want to remember him.”

Developed by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) together with Wicare, Wishine started last September and is free of charge. The nine-hour programme run by Wicare consists of individual counselling and support group sessions aimed at widows aged 50 and older.

Most of the widows from Wicare fall into this group, said Wicare chairman Lim Poh Hong, a widow herself. Wishine is the first structured programme here to help widows cope with grief, she added.

NCSS deputy chief executive Tina Hung said: “Grief and bereavement are often seen as private issues. Furthermore, death and dying tends to be taboo in our culture. Seniors in their grief journey often experience uncertainty, regret and pain, and they may be unable to

find closure without external help.”

An NCSS spokesman noted that older widows are also at risk of falling into depression or becoming isolated from their community.

In 2016, NCSS spoke to 35 widows, who were mostly over 50 years old, to find out their needs. The widows said they found it hard to share their grief with family and friends, whom they felt were unable to understand or empathise with them. They also highlighted the lack of support programmes for widows.

The number of older widows has risen in tandem with Singapore's rapidly ageing society.

In 2016, there were 140,100 Singaporeans or permanent residents who were widows aged 50 and older, according to the Population Trends 2017 report. This is up from the 108,241 listed in the General Household Survey 2005.

About 30 widows, aged from 50 to 78, have gone through the Wishine programme, said Madam Lim. For many, their husbands died less than three years ago.

Madam Lim said they had expected about 50 participants by now, but felt the lack of awareness may have contributed to “lower than hoped for” numbers.

She said one key benefit for widows joining Wishine is the support they get from other widows.

“When they make friends, they feel they are not so alone. They learn what they are going through is normal, that it's okay to laugh or cry,” Madam Lim said.

She noted a support group is important as most people do not know how to react when someone says she is grieving.

Some members of the group who have received help go on to help other widows.

Take Madam Julia Ng, in her 50s, who attended the Wishine programme to learn how to better respond to grieving women.

She said she felt very lonely when her husband died of a brain haemorrhage 21 years ago.

“I didn't feel like doing anything, except to cry.”

“But I found so much support from other widows at Wicare. I'm also here to make new friends, as we feel lonely when our children are grown up,” said Madam Ng, who has a 28-year-old son.

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