

INTO EACH LIFE...

"Into each life some rain must fall,
Some days must be dark and dreary."

So observed Henry Longfellow in his poem "A Rainy Day".
The relevance of these two lines will be clear when you read
about the two events happening in the month of October 2000.

NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH WEEK

Are we able to deal with the setbacks in life and say to ourselves, "Be Positive. Take Charge!"? This is the theme for this year's National Mental Health Week, which will be held from 7-14 October 2000.

The bi-annual event is organised by the Ministry of Health, Mental Health Education Programme Steering Committee.*

The Steering Committee has put together three events, which together provide the strategies for being positive in adversity. They epitomise the theme "Be Positive. Take Charge!" for the public as well as for healthcare professionals.

In the opening event, which is a public symposium on "Be Positive in Setbacks - Take Charge", Mr David Lim, team leader of Mt. Everest Expedition 1998, Dr Robert Goh, co-leader of Antarctica Expedition 2000 and Dr Mok Ying Jang, team leader of Mt. Vinson team 2000 will share with us on how they coped with difficulties to stay positive in adverse situations where others dare not venture.

For the second event, a symposium for doctors and counselors will be held to educate them on how to deal with national crisis and mass disasters. It will use the Silkair Crash, Hotel New World collapse and the Taiwan earthquake as teaching examples.

In the final event, we invite a patient with throat cancer, one with breast cancer and a person who has a demented father to share with us their ways of coping with the "rain that falls" in their lives. We must profit from their experience. Only then, they would not have struggled in vain.

BREAST CANCER AWARENESS MONTH

One group of disease strikes fear into each of our hearts. This is cancer. The fear for cancer is a variegated one. To ourselves and to our loved ones and friends, the

shared fear of loss of normal body image and even life is real.

To those of us who are practitioners, there is yet another fear; the fear of being sued for missing a cancer. As hell may know no more fury than missing a cancer in a patient, our best strategy is to be ever vigilant and be aware that cancer can strike anyone at any age. If the patient and his/her family can forgive you, then you are lucky. But luck favours only the prepared. To be aware is to be prepared.

In this issue, we tell the story of the Pink Ribbon to bring home the message of Breast Cancer Awareness - a month long programme to help all the women folk be aware that breast cancer needs to be considered possible and that every woman is at risk of having breast cancer. The monthly breast self examination coupled by a visit to a doctor once a year or whenever an unexplained lump is felt will hopefully detect a breast cancer at an early stage.

CONCLUSION

The message that I have for this issue of the News is - Whilst it is true as Henry Longfellow astutely observed 120 years ago, that "into each life, some rain must fall", the way ahead is to learn well how to cope with the days that must be "dark and dreary".

We can be positive! We can take charge! We can of course also be aware. Prevention is better than cure but if that fails, we must not be caught mentally flatfooted.

Let us remember two more lines from Henry Longfellow (1807-1882):

*"Be still, sad heart! And cease repining;
Behind the clouds is the sun still shining..."*

(*Members comprise of National Health Education Department, Singapore Medical Association, College of Family Physicians, Institute of Mental Health, Singapore Association for Mental Health, Singapore Association of Mental Health, Singapore Psychiatric Association and National Council of Social Service). ■

THE PINK RIBBON



A handsome, middle-aged man walked quietly into the cafe and sat down. Before he ordered, he couldn't help but notice a group of younger men at the table next to him. It was obvious they were making fun of something about him, and it wasn't until he remembered he was wearing a small pink ribbon on the lapel of his suit that he became aware of what the joke was all about.

The man brushed off the reaction as ignorance, but the smirks began to get to him. He looked one of the rude men square in the eye, placed his hand beneath the ribbon and asked, quizzically, "This?". With that the men all began to laugh out loud. The man he addressed said, as he fought back laughter, "Hey, sorry man, but we were just commenting on how pretty your little ribbon looks against your blue jacket!"

The middle aged man calmly motioned for the joker to come over to his table, and invited him to sit down. As uncomfortable as he was, the guy obliged, not really sure why. In a soft voice, the middle aged man said, "I wear this ribbon to bring awareness about breast cancer. I wear it in my mother's honour."

"Oh, sorry dude. She died of breast cancer?". "No, she didn't. She's alive and well. But her breasts nourished me as an infant, and were a soft resting place for my head when I was scared or lonely as a little boy. I'm very grateful for my mother's breasts, and her health". "Umm," the stranger replied, "yeah."

"And I wear this ribbon to honour my wife," the middle aged man went on. "And she's okay, too?", the other guy asked. "Oh, yes. She's fine. Her breasts have been a great source of loving pleasure for both of us, and with them she nurtured and nourished our beautiful daughter 23 years ago. I am grateful for my wife's breasts, and for her health."

"Uh huh. And I guess you wear it to honour your daughter, also?". "No. It's too late to honour my daughter by wearing it now. My daughter died of breast cancer one month ago. She thought she was too young to have breast cancer, so when she accidentally noticed a small lump, she ignored it. She thought that since it wasn't painful, it must not be anything to worry about." Shaken and ashamed, the now sober stranger said, "Oh, man, I'm so sorry mister."

"So, in my daughter's memory, too, I proudly wear this little ribbon, which allows me the opportunity to enlighten others. Now, go home and talk to your wife and your daughters, your mother and your friends. And here ...". The middle-aged man reached in his pocket and handed the other man a little pink ribbon. The guy looked at it, slowly raised his head and asked, "Can ya help me put it on?"

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