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## Be Positive! Take Charge!

**B**e responsible for one's own mental health and adopt a positive mindset towards life's crises and challenges. This was the message sent out to the participants of the week long Mental Health Week from 7 – 14 October, in conjunction with the World Mental Health Day on 10 October 2000. Mental health education activities comprising talks, seminars and workshops were conducted during, before and even after in support of Mental Health Week by various health organisations including the Singapore Medical Association, The Institute of Mental Health, Singapore Association for Mental Health, Singapore Psychiatric Association and the Ministry of Health.

### OPENING SPEECH

In his speech delivered at the opening of the Mental Health Week at Marriott Hotel on 7 Oct, Mr Chan Soo Sen, Parliamentary Secretary, PM's Office and Ministry of Health, said that "Be Positive. Take Charge" is particularly timely as we enter into the new economy in the new century. With rapid advancement in technology and the changes to our business and personal and family lives, many people feel stressed out.

Mr Chan offered an antidote to cope with these stresses, "Be Positive. Take charge". Let us take failure positively, like the many successful people. Some say, "There is no failure. Only temporary setback." This is very well said. They consider failure as a learning opportunity.

In fact, setback is inevitable when we embark on a new task for the first time. The important thing is how we recover from it. Instead of feeling depressed, stressed, or desperate, why not ask what could we learn from the setback? Did we approach the problems wrongly? Is there an alternative way to achieve better results? Are there other people who may be able to help us? Indeed is the original goal too ambitious and should we adjust the goal?"

Mr Chan stressed the importance of mutual support from family and friends in managing personal setbacks. He was concerned that excessive emphasis on electronic communication can be at the expense of getting to know friends and interacting with family members. "This expense is heavy, as encouragement of friends and families have been vital factors in many great people's struggle to success. As we are busy in developing our career, and pursuing a higher standard of living, let's never forget the people element, our friends and families, which has served mankind so well through all civilizations".

Expression of one's feelings in various art forms can also help keep excessive pressure in check. "The greatest literary works, as well as paintings, are usually done when the authors or painters were emotionally disturbed. Through their works, they share their feelings with their readers, feeling relieved in the process. The readers view their work and feel inspired. Through this, mental stress becomes a positive force contributing to culture".

Finally, Mr Chan recommended new style and approaches to adapt to the new century. "To cope with the rapid economic and social changes in the new century is like sailing in a heavy sea. It is very stressful. While we need to be skilled, courageous, and determined as good sailors, we will also need to be alert in looking for quiet waters. The quiet waters are our antidote "Be Positive. Take Charge". We must also learn to relax and recuperate in the quiet waters. This is like the factors to facilitate the antidotes. This way, our spirit as sailors will remain strong, and we will always be ready to sail again in the heavy sea towards our destinations."

### PUBLIC FORUM ON "BE POSITIVE IN SETBACKS. TAKE CHARGE"

Guests speakers at the opening public forum included Mr David Lim, Team Leader of Singapore's Mt Everest Expedition Team 1999 and Member of Singapore's Antarctica Expedition Team 2000, and Dr Mok Ying Jang, Team Leader of Mt Vinson Team 2000. They shared with the audience their experience in achieving the great tasks of climbing Mount Everest, trekking to South Pole and climbing Mount Vinson by overcoming initial failures and setbacks. Following their presentation, Dr Joseph Ozawa, Clinical Psychologist with the Ministry of Community Development and Sports, reflected on the psychological and motivational aspects of their experiences.



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**MEDICAL SYMPOSIUM ON  
“BE POSITIVE. TAKE CHARGE –  
HELPING PEOPLE COPE”**

Mount Elizabeth Charter, SMA and Institute of Mental Health came together to organise a medical symposium for doctors and counselors. The objective of the talk was to provide carers with insight into managing national crises and mass disasters, using the Silkair Crash, Hotel New World collapse and Taiwan earthquake as teaching examples.

Mr Long Foo Yee, Senior Psychologist, Institute of Mental Health shared his experience in dealing with emergency behaviour of the family and relatives of the MI-185 crash victims. He described the behaviour that will be manifested by people in emergency as this is crucial to the understanding of those who are there to help them. There will be traumatic reactions: good and poor morale in crisis, acute stress reaction, grief reaction, traumatic stress, post traumatic stress disorder.

What is also important is to recognize the circles of vulnerability – Police, victims, medical rescuers, SCDF – security personnel, families, relatives – teachers and students, media, observers, hospital staff, others in community are in various layers of concentric circles round the victim. They too may be affected by the suffering and will therefore also need support. Some provision must be made for caring the carers.

The MI 185 tragedy happened outside Singapore and there were no surviving primary victims so the main focus was on next-of-kin and service personnel. There

was the need to set up and man a hotline to respond to the queries from the next-of-kin and to give them support while waiting for more news to arrive. There was a need to also set up an operations committee, condolences service working committee and mass burial working group.

Lessons learnt:

1. Need for timely and accurate provision of information to affected people
2. Need to protect NOKs from media harassment but manage media's need for reporting
3. Need for officials to show concern and presence early but be cautious not to make difficult promises
4. Recovery phase can be prolonged so the parameters of involvement need to be defined
5. Adequate trained manpower is essential

A/Prof Lim Meng Kin, Dept of Community, Occupational and Family Medicine, NUS spoke on his role as co-ordinator in the Hotel New World Disaster.

Ms Jessica Leong, a counselor, dispensed several useful lessons to remember in helping patient cope with disaster and overcome trauma.

1. Listening. Having someone to listen and be understanding provides for emotional healing.
2. Holding the hand. Giving permission for people to grieve or not to grieve is part of facilitating the grieving process. Be there with him or her during the period of crisis.
3. Experiencing grief. Let people cry and say what they want. Avoid restraining any reactions as long as they are not hurting themselves or others and

listen to them even though you may not have the answers.

4. Avoid stereotyped views of how people should grieve; it's personal as well as corporate experience. It is also possible that people may be too shocked to grieve openly. Lack of display of grief should be accepted and responded with understanding that some people need a time and an occasion to grieve.

What can the grief-worker do? Jessica suggested 3 ways of resolving their grief:

1. Rituals. The act of doing something for the deceased, such as putting personal belongings in an empty coffin, even though body is not recovered.
2. Talking. The NOK may engage in recounting the event, reliving experiences and reminiscing about the deceased.
3. Adjustments. Making changes and doing something different to make life more tolerable. This may include taking on new roles in the family.

**THE PUBLIC FORUM ON  
“BE POSITIVE. TAKE CHARGE -  
LIFE EXPERIENCES TO SHARE”**

The public forum marked the finale of the Mental Health Week. Cancer patients, Mr Raymond Chan and Mrs Eleanor King as well as Mr Bobby Ang who is caring for his mother with Dementia shared with the hundred odd audience at the National Cancer Centre auditorium about their experiences in coping with their diseases, and in Mr Ang's case, his difficulties as a carer. Their courage in facing emotional and physical struggles were encouraging and the audience, including the invited Psychiatrists and Psychologist went home with much food for thought.

**CONCLUSION**

The Mental Health Week has given us opportunities to revisit and learn from the experiences in situations where we must be positive and take charge. We need the mutual support and encouragement to overcome such setbacks in life. For those of us that become carers, there is a need to recognize and learn the core skills and mindset to be able to provide positive help. ■

**OCULOPLASTIC PUBLIC FORUM**

11 November 2000 (Saturday)

2.00 – 3.30pm (Tea provided)

Singapore National Eye Centre Level 3 (LT)

*“New Advances in Treatment of Eyelid Problems”*

Registration :

Tel: 322 8372 / 322 8390

Email: [snecpt@pacific.net.sg](mailto:snecpt@pacific.net.sg)

Fee: \$5/-

OCULOPLASTIC PUBLIC FORUM