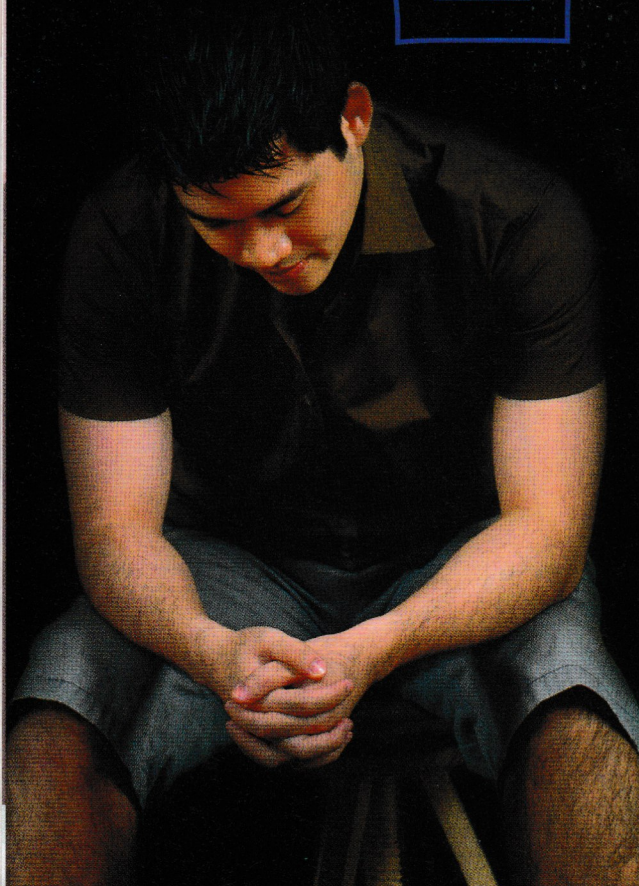


Driven To Desperation



ART DIRECTION: ZABINA • MODEL: IMANUPURFRONT MODELS

Got more problems than you can handle? We speak to psychologists on how you can take charge of your life and not drag your family into the doldrums. **By Lynette Leong**

When you are grappling with more problems than you can count on your fingers, such as being torn between a feuding spouse and parents, stuck in an unhappy marriage (because your spouse is adulterous?), or burdened with financial woes, the mounting stress can be indeed hard to bear.

And where children are involved, matters could get worse. They could range from the emotional to the physical, from their less-than-impressive academic results to health.

The list could go on, but the important thing is how you deal with such problems. Challenge the problems head-on? Sink into depression? Or worst of all, throw in the towel, sometimes even dragging your family with you in desperation.

Ms Tan Li Jen, a senior clinical psychologist at Changi General Hospital (CGH), shares, "A depressed mother in her 40s confessed that she had once said to her teenage daughters 'let's all die together'. Luckily, her daughters refused because they said they still had many things to do and see in their life – it's not time to die yet!"

Courting death. Is it worth it? Is it fair for the innocent, sometimes clueless loved ones?

Depression & Suicidal Thoughts

Others are not so lucky, as is the recent case of a family of four that perished because the father sought death as an end to his financial woes. In his desperation, the desolate man killed his wife and two kids before leaping to his own death.

While it seems unfathomable why someone could resort to such drastic measures, some people driven to desperation can sometimes entertain irrational thoughts like suicide and homicide.

Ms Tan explains, "Those who seriously consider suicide, or even homicide, are probably in a state of profound depression or helplessness. Severe depression causes people to have distorted and extremely negative thoughts about their problems."

That said, there are parents who hold on to their lives precisely because of their children. Ms Carolyn Kee, a senior psychologist at the Child Guidance Clinic at the Institute of Mental Health, shares, "Of the parents I have seen, none had seriously considered suicide as a solution. Parents who seek professional help are here because they are concerned about their children and as such, suicide is not a viable option."

The Impact On Children

Depressed parents who are unable to cope do sometimes behave in manners that are detrimental to their children's development.

Warning signs of depression

- Persistent low, sad or empty mood
- Loss of interest and enjoyment in life
- Lack of drive or motivation that makes even simple tasks or decisions difficult or impossible
- Feeling tired all the time
- Agitation, restlessness, irritability
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Withdraws from friends or social activities
- Feeling useless, inadequate, helpless or hopeless
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Frequent thoughts of suicide or death

Warning signs of suicide

Be concerned when depressed person...

- Prepares for death by making a will and final arrangements
- Gives away personal and prized possessions
- Takes unnecessary risks that puts his or her life in danger
- Is preoccupied with death and dying
- Makes negative and hopeless statements like: "Life isn't worthwhile" or "People are better off without me"

Ms Tan elaborates, "Depressed parents can become withdrawn, inattentive, and less able to be affectionate and responsive to their children. Children may consequently feel unloved or rejected. Young children may develop attachment problems."

One depressed mother, for instance, totally lost interest in her children's needs. "She slept the entire day and fed her two children – aged five and eight – biscuits and bread. Wrapped up in her own problems, the mother had said 'I just could not feel any love for them, and could not care less what they did,'" shares Ms Tan.

Due to the fact that children pick up coping skills from watching their parents, a depressed parent who turns to alcohol each time she feels the blues could be sending the wrong message to her children.

Ms Tan says, "In the long term, if the parent's depression persists over many years, it is common to see children developing behavioural problems, depression, social problems, academic problems, low self-esteem, etc."

Worse, because children have limited resources compared to adults, they may feel even more helpless and powerless when they see their parents sinking into depression.

Ms Kee elaborates, "(Children) may become anxious, fearful or depressed and experience difficulty focusing on their schoolwork. As a result, their school performance may deteriorate and relationships with their peers may be affected as they become engrossed with their worries and withdraw from social relationship."

Are You At Risk?

According to Ms Kee, research shows that women tend to be more prone to depression and more women attempt suicide than men.

"This may due to biological factors such as hormonal changes during the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, the postpartum period and menopause. Women also face additional responsibilities such as caring for children and ageing parents, and balancing between family and work," says Ms Kee.

On the other hand, Ms Tan notes some personality traits that put a person at risk of depression. She says, "People who keep problems to themselves and resolutely refuse to share their feelings and difficulties with others, those who

habitually avoid problems rather than work on how to tackle them, can be prone to depression."

Ms Kee adds, "(They) tend to think about themselves, the world and the future in negative and pessimistic ways. They tend to attribute events and experiences to things outside their control and fail to see how they can exert control and make changes.


"In addition, they tend to focus on negative events and generalise single negative episodes on the whole. They have low self-esteem, lack confidence and tend to approach adversity with cynicism and hostility."

What Can You Do?

Knowing now how depression can have adverse impacts on a child's growth, it is important to get a grip on and not let problems overwhelm oneself.

Resilience is the key to coping with life's challenges, according to both psychologists.

Ms Kee emphasises, "People who are most likely to cope well in the face of stress believe in themselves and what they are doing, possess a sense of control over what happens to them, and expect change and see stressful events as challenges that offer opportunity for growth."

As Ms Tan sums it up in a nutshell: "You owe it to yourself and your family to take care of yourself, and in doing so, protect your children." 

Ways to help

If you think someone in your family is suffering from depression, here's what you can help to do:

- Show that you care, and be there for the person
- Offer comfort and encouragement
- Offer constructive advice if the person needs help with decisions
- If you suspect that the person is suicidal, talk openly and ask directly about the person's intention (eg, whether they are thinking of hurting or killing themselves)
- Listen to what is and treat it seriously. Don't debate, argue or lecture the person
- Encourage the person to seek help, and talk to someone they trust
- Get help from a medical professional
- Call SOS or other helplines

HELPLINES

- SOS (Samaritans of Singapore) at 1800 221 4444
- SAMH (Singapore Association of Mental Health) at 1800 283 7019
- Care Corner Mandarin Counselling Centre at 1800 225 5227
- IMH (Institute of Mental Health) Child Guidance Clinic at 6435 3878