

DOING GOOD WELL

The act of giving not only creates a sense of empowerment, but can also encourage personal healing.

A line from a well-known church hymn goes: “For it is in giving that we receive”. These are wise words to bear in mind on a daily basis, especially in Singapore where we frequently get too caught up in the demands of the day to slow down and show some kindness to others.

Nurse Clinician Sharon Tan from the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) says giving is a positive and healthy action. “Giving is also about receiving good mental health, which is a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential. Therefore in giving, he or she already makes a significant contribution to the community,” she adds.

Some who have gotten into the act include volunteers who escort patients for medical appointments and injections, and others who serve as “befrienders” helping people in IMH’s Community Mental Health Teams (CMHTs)”. She explains: “The latter volunteer to use their van in escorting patients to clinics for medical appointments and injections. They also willingly give support to patient outings in the community as well as inpatients.”


Meanwhile, medical experts have talked about how the act of giving can bring about health benefits. In his book *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*, author and Director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care, and Bioethics at New York’s Stony Brook University has written about how science research shows that giving (money or time) can actually improve your health because in doing unto others, you will feel happier, healthier, and possibly live longer.

HELP ME TO HELP YOU

Can the impact of giving be quantified? Dr Joseph Leong, a consultant at IMH’s Department of Community Psychiatry believes the manner of giving is worth more than the gift. He explains: “Giving and giving generously and cheerfully gives the giver an overflowing sense of abundance and joy. Meanwhile, the receiver of a cheerful and generous gift may not only benefit materially but also experience the overflowing joy and abundance of the giver.

“This will be sustained by *‘paying it forward’*. You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.”

This has also been found to be especially true among those undergoing medical treatment. At Duke University Medical Centre in North Carolina, former heart patients visit those currently receiving treatment, to provide a listening ear and lend some support. It was found that volunteers had better health after their heart attacks. And based on research studies conducted at the University of Miami, HIV patients who helped others enjoyed higher levels of immunity resistance and lowered their stress levels.

Here in Singapore, similar incidences can be found. Tan shares that benefits have been evident through support groups. She explains: “People who suffer from mental illness and recover become experts in coping with their difficulties and finding ways to recover. Their success in recovery often brings happiness to them, that naturally leads them to share with others whom they have identified as their friends.” 

BY TINA WANG IN CONSULTATION WITH DR JOSEPH LEONG, CONSULTANT, DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY PSYCHIATRY, AND MS SHARON TAN, NURSE CLINICIAN, INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH



SPREAD THE GOOD CHEER

SHARON TAN, A NURSE CLINICIAN AT THE INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH (IMH) SAYS THE ACT OF GIVING HARNESSES YOU WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL, EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL BENEFITS.

▶ PSYCHOLOGICAL

Giving is empowering. "People gain a sense of achievement or empowerment when they show competency in the act of giving," says Tan. "Neuroscience studies have shown that positive behaviour activates reward areas of the brain, suggesting that good feelings follow the act of giving to another."

▶ EMOTIONAL

Naturally, an act of giving precedes good feelings. Says Tan: "People feel good, happy, worthy, peaceful and stronger; these positive feelings motivate people to continue their good work. Similarly, people with mental illness are

motivated whenever they have achieved good behaviour accompanied with good feelings."

▶ PHYSICAL

A little act of giving one's time, thoughts, experiences, and so on can enhance one's self-worth and confidence towards a better recovery. Tan explains: "This can be seen when a group of people with mental illness come together every week to attend a group therapy session on illness self-management and a recovery programme. They help one another with their recovery plans, attitudes and strategies in overcoming their difficulties. Together, they succeed in progressing towards their recovery goals and regaining the life they want."



HELPING OTHERS, HEALING HERSELF

IN STEPPING FORWARD TO CARE FOR HER FELLOW PATIENTS, ALICE*, A FORMER PATIENT AT THE INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH (IMH), NOT ONLY HELPS OTHERS BUT ALSO FINDS COMFORT AND HEALING HERSELF. HERE IS HER STORY.

“Last year, when I saw a doctor at IMH for a change of medication, she suggested that I join a social support group that’s part of the Illness Self Management and Recovery programme. I agreed, and started going for meetings which were held every Wednesday in the morning at Queenstown Polyclinic’s Community Wellness Centre.

“During the meetings, nurse clinicians provided notes and told group members about the benefits of medication, their costs and side effects. Members were also taught relaxation techniques and coping strategies for symptoms.

“After my first few visits, I decided to stay on because I could see the benefits. I felt I was given positive guidance and counselling, which allowed me to better cope with my symptoms. For instance, I learned that one way of dealing with leg shaking and panic attacks was to take some medication, practise deep breathing and practise progressive muscle relaxation.

“As part of the group activities, nurses helped me draw up a personal Relapse Prevention plan — a card detailing events that would trigger my relapses, what I felt would help me experience early warning signs and symptoms, and my emergency contact person. It is very useful; I carry this plan with me and it’s in my bag all the time.

“I’ve found that helping others also helps me. For instance, there are two members in the group who have persistent difficulty in getting a job. I provide them with a listening ear as they share frustrations and offer some suggestions. And it feels good. It is very socially rewarding, knowing we are there for each other.

“One challenge I have faced is trying to reach out to a member who suffers from mood swings. I try to be there for her and contact her through phone calls and SMS texts, but she is quite resistant to the idea. However, I will keep trying.

“I was among seven members and have been part of the group since April 2009. If another support group is formed I will be happy to continue attending meetings and be a part of it indefinitely.”

*Not her real name.

Tan cites an example of one patient who became a mentor to and closely supported another who frequently fought with her mother. She listened to the patient, encouraged her and took her for long walks to break away from angry and difficult situations. In other words, she who recovered from her illness became the comforter and adviser to another who is still suffering.

GROWING THE GIVING CULTURE

In this case, the patient who shared her ‘expertise’ by giving her help, time and knowledge not only enjoyed helping her friends to recover, but personally gained a lot of satisfaction and sense of achievement. For her efforts, she received much affirmation during the group therapy, and serves as an example to other patients who see the possibility of change and are motivated to do better or be challenged to try again in their recovery efforts.”

For those who are inspired to give, where can they start? Tan recommends baby steps. She says: “Giving does not always have to be monetary. Assisting others with our time and goodness always returns a smile. A kind word can change a difficult moment to a special time. Time is a precious gift that is always worthy of giving away when most needed.

“For first-time givers, it would be good to start small and do things such as giving a smile, a handshake, a hug, and showing simple gestures of kindness such as giving a cup of water to the person next to you. This is an easy and achievable step to work at, especially for people with mental illness.”

Dr Leong adds that the best way to grow a giving culture here in Singapore is to start creating awareness among the young. “Young children learn by role-modelling — they will follow the examples of their parents. They also learn by social conditioning; being in a conducive social environment with positive consequences of giving will promote giving. Children will respond well if their giving is reinforced with praises and even more gifts,” he stresses. +





YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN BY ROLE-MODELLING —
THEY WILL FOLLOW THE EXAMPLES OF THEIR PARENTS.
THEY ALSO LEARN BY SOCIAL CONDITIONING; BEING IN
A CONDUCIVE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT WITH POSITIVE
CONSEQUENCES OF GIVING WILL PROMOTE GIVING.