

## **Do you have to be crazy to see a psychiatrist?**

The recent number of suicides in Hong Kong has given renewed thought to mental health and preventive issues.

Hong Kong is advanced in many areas, reaching or exceeding international standards. However, our society can be quite backward in managing its mental health, remaining essentially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An important reason for this might be related to the common term in Cantonese “tse-sin” literally meaning wiring problem in the mind.

This term arouses a great deal of fear and rejection in the general population in Hong Kong. This fear and rejection are deeply rooted in the local culture and permeate almost all ranks and professions in society, including many of those in healthcare. This irrational fear and rejection also directly affects the Hong Kong citizen's opportunity to receive mental health care, care which they rightly deserve, such as a yearly mental health checkup and non-psychiatric hospital beds in general hospitals when they suffer from non-psychotic psychiatric problems which do not warrant lock-up wards. Too commonly we see the erroneous belief that all psychiatric patients are undesirable, dangerous, potentially aggressive individuals for whom a lock-ward is the only place to put them. A bed in a private open door ward, of course, is seen as a no-no. All these reflect badly on the obsolete mentality of Hong Kong towards mental health and have caused serious losses to Hong Kong society. Suicides in celebrities, high ranking officials and bright students with multi-A records only occasionally reflect to us, that a 100% person could have thinking and emotion problems.

In a society which falls behind in mental health management, people have a simplistic bipolar view on problems with mood and emotion. Things are either black or white. One is either normal or “tse-sin” (crazy). Normal people do not see a psychiatrist; seeing a psychiatrist makes you a “tse-sin” person. This simple stone-age mentality prevents those who need treatment from seeking psychiatrists during the early stage. Either they are afraid of coming forward because of the taboo, or they feel that they only need treatment when they became totally “tse-sin” (crazy). When they do come forward because they could not function at work, they still would be resistant to taking medications when indicated.

It is strange that people in Hong Kong are very willing to spend money on taking care of their body, judging from the popularity of many over-the-counter preparations with dubious effects. Our organs such as the lung, kidney, heart, or our bones and joints, and even our hormones could suffer from illnesses. But people in Hong Kong generally refuse to accept that the brain could become ill as well. The brain is the most complex organ of the whole body. Its complexity actually lends itself to many possible disorders.

We could take a step back and think about some common sayings in Hong Kong like “If it carries on like this, sooner or later I will be “tse-sin””, or “ Sooner or later, I will become “tse-sin” if you bothered me like this!” These sayings imply that “tse-sin” is the end point of stress and that there is a process which takes time. Recent research supports this view.

Our brain is the platform through which we interact with the outside world. In the days of our ancestors, our brain sensed outside dangers such as a vicious animal, or other dangerous situations, and prepared us for the challenge. Thus, adrenaline came out from the adrenal glands and made the heart pump faster, elevated the blood sugar and also made our mind more vigilant. This simple response requires the coordination of many systems of the body and calls on many physiological responses which do not normally occur. As it is a complex procedure requiring the proper functioning of many parts, it could go wrong, and illness, genetically based or acquired, could affect it. Thus, the heart could pump faster, the muscles become tight and the hands sweat when they are not supposed to. The brain, in particular, could be damaged by the abnormal hormonal profile. Suppression of certain genes beneficial to brain cells have been demonstrated when the corticosteroid secretion remained high, resulting in damage to the hippocampus area of the brain, leading to memory problems and other effects. These changes could be interrupted with medicine in the early stage. However, in Hong Kong society, fear and rejection of mental health care results in the general ignorance of information such as the above. Many simply do not know that depression and anxiety are highly treatable. Many should not have died. We frequently heard the saying, from people and in newspapers, that “It is hard to understand why such a bright student, or this high ranking official with such a promising future, would end his life.” Some would even blame the victims for being a “coward” or irresponsible, and fail to understand that the victims could have had a treatable mood disorder and simply could not handle his or her mood and emotion. This lack of understanding of mood and emotion disorders has also resulted in many parents, teachers, friends, co-workers, or some healthcare professionals, attempting to “talk” or “challenge” the patient out of a medically treatable mood or emotion problem. Their intentions were good but the delay could result in more sufferings for their family member, the friend or their co-worker.

In summary, in an advanced and progressive society, we should realize that the brain, just like any other organ in our body, could suffer from illness. It is nothing to be ashamed of when that happens, just like we would not be ashamed of having a flu, hypertension, or broken bones. Treat the problem early, otherwise it may well escalate and cost you your relationship with your loved ones, your job productivity, or your enjoyment in life. To label seeing a psychiatrist as “tse-sin”, or quickly discontinue treatment when recovery begins due to a fear of the tse-tin label, simply reflects an ignorance of modern medical progress and deprives you of the opportunity to manage the health of your most important organ. The brain is your most valuable organ. Go for an emotion and mood analysis at least once of year!