

Why more needs to be done to help LGBTQ youth

Studies show they are at greater risk of poorer mental well-being and suicides

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For *The Straits Times*

News broke recently about a Hwa Chong Institution (HCI) counsellor who presented anti-LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) content to students and was subsequently reprimanded and suspended from sexuality education at the school.

HCI said the staff member had "incorporated content outside the scope of the Ministry of Education's sexuality education curriculum into his slides".

While this may have been true, is this the only cause for concern in this incident?

More could have been said or done to recognise the harm that such anti-LGBTQ content can do to students who may identify as being LGBTQ, or are struggling to come to terms with their sexual orientation.

Such content may also perpetuate and/or encourage discrimination and bullying.

The HCI incident presents an opportunity to discuss, as a society aspiring to be inclusive, why vulnerable groups like LGBTQ youth need targeted interventions within the broader framework to address mental well-being in Singapore.

SUICIDE AND MENTAL HEALTH RISKS

How and why are LGBTQ youth considered a "vulnerable" group in the context of suicide?

The Trevor Project's 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth

Mental Health polled 34,000 LGBTQ youth in the United States and found that about 50 per cent of LGBTQ teens (aged 13 to 17) surveyed seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year.

About 18 per cent had attempted suicide in the past year, which is about twice the rate of suicide attempts among all American teens.

These findings are not just a "Western" phenomenon.

Studies in China, South Korea and among university students in Asean have also found that LGBTQ youth were more likely to report depression and suicide-related behaviours as compared with their non-LGBTQ peers.

Indeed, suicide is a highly complex issue with multiple contributing factors, but research has shown that LGBTQ youth are more susceptible than the general population to suicide, which can in turn be attributable to stressors associated with their sexual identities.

A recent study among 469 LGB young adults published by the National University of Singapore Social Service Research Centre found that past experiences of discrimination, microaggressions, internalised homophobia (that is, negative attitudes towards oneself due to one's sexual orientation) and rejection anticipation were associated with higher levels of psychological distress.

Another recent study among 570 sexual minority men aged 18 to 25 by researchers from the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health found that 59 per cent reported contemplating suicide, whereas 14 per cent had attempted suicide.

Those who reported higher levels of experienced homophobia were more vulnerable.



Suicide is a highly complex issue with multiple contributing factors, but research has shown that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth are more susceptible than the general population to suicide, which can be attributable to stressors associated with their sexual identities, say the writers. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

LGBTQ community groups such as Sayoni and Oogachaga have also led important research in this area.

Deaths by suicide in Singapore may have recorded a decrease last year. It is also not known how many among them were of youth who identify as LGBTQ, but the fact remains that the increase in the proportion and absolute number of deaths by suicide among youth is a growing and disturbing trend, one that merits greater preventive action.

In the #AreWeOkay public consultation among 561 participants conducted by SG Mental Health Matters last year, about 74 per cent of respondents agreed that LGBTQ individuals are at greater mental health risk, and that they should be given additional support.

PREVENTION AND POLICIES

What then can be done? Studies have found that supportive environments such as more family support and feeling a sense of belonging in school are helpful.

In the light of the HCI incident, sexuality education in schools, including on LGBTQ-related topics, should be reviewed and updated to ensure the students'

self-development and self-identity are achieved.

As stated by then Education Minister Ong Ye Kung in response to a parliamentary question in 2020: "Sexuality education in our schools focuses on imparting knowledge and social and emotional skills for positive self-development and self-identity, and developing healthy and rewarding relationships."

There should be appropriate and competent support readily available for youth and their parents.

A whole-of-government approach is needed to ensure that mental healthcare personnel across all sectors, including school counsellors and teachers, are trained and competent in LGBTQ-related vulnerabilities.

One way is by engaging LGBTQ community groups such as Oogachaga and The T Project, which supports the transgender community, as professional training vendors to conduct capacity building and sensitivity training for those working with LGBTQ youth.

Diversity officers supporting minorities is a common practice in the business sector.

By having them within respective agencies, across healthcare, education and social service sectors, they can serve as a resource for professionals to better understand LGBTQ-related issues, help to develop competencies in serving LGBTQ individuals and ensure dissemination of LGBTQ-specific resources.

Given our whole-of-society mental health effort with the recent launch of SG Mental Well-being Network, public funding programmes should include initiatives to address LGBTQ youth mental health and well-being in Singapore.

The recent budget debate brought up the potential formation of a permanent mental well-being agency and hopefully, the agency will be placed under the Prime Minister's Office as a whole-of-government priority, which was one of the 2021 #AreWeOkay recommendations. Such a dedicated national coordinating body will ensure that targeted strategies, such as those suggested above, are implemented for vulnerable groups across the population, including the LGBTQ community.

Mental health is not merely a health issue. How we treat one

another contributes a large part to our mental well-being as individuals, especially and most significantly in our formative years. There cannot be an honest and complete conversation on youth mental well-being without addressing LGBTQ stigma and discrimination.

Law Minister K. Shanmugam put it best when he said: "LGBTQ persons, non-LGBTQ persons, we are all equal. We are not any lesser by reason of our sexual preferences."

We should all do our part to make sure that our children, family, friends and colleagues who identify as LGBTQ are not made to feel less in the diverse and inclusive society that we want to become.

- Anthea Ong is a former Nominated Member of Parliament, social entrepreneur, leadership/life coach and author of *50 Shades of Love*. She is also a mental health advocate and founder of SG Mental Health Matters, Hush TeaBar and WorkWell Leaders.
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HELPLINES

National Care Hotline:
1800-202-6868 (8am to 8pm)
IMH Mental Health Helpline:
6389-2222 (24 hours)
Samaritans of Singapore:
1800-221-4444/1-767 (24 hours)
Singapore Association for Mental Health: 1800-283-7019
Silver Ribbon Singapore:
6386-1928
Tinkle Friend: 1800-274-4788,
www.tinklefriend.sg
Community Health Assessment Team: 6493-6500/1,
www.chat.mentalhealth.sg
TOUCHline (Counselling):
1800-377-2252
TOUCH Care Line (for seniors, caregivers): 6804-6555
Care Corner Counselling Centre:
1800-353-5800