

Suicide bids by teens: Study highlights vital role of family in mental well-being

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Apart from facing more stress, teenagers in Singapore who have attempted suicide are more likely than their peers to perceive their parents as aggressive, neglectful and cold, a recent study has found.

Their parents, however, were less likely than their children to think that they had been neglectful parents, according to the study, which compared the perceptions

of 60 teenagers who have attempted suicide with those of their parents or main caregivers.

The gap in perception could come from parents being unaware of how their own behaviour is perceived by their child, the researchers said, but could also be for other reasons. Parents may have modified their own practices following their child's suicide attempt, or a bias towards themselves could have resulted in inaccurate questionnaire responses.

Whatever the reasons, the study

showed that family plays a very important role in the mental well-being of children, said National University Health System (NUHS) Mind Science Centre director John Wong, the study's first author. Parents, especially, can make a huge difference in how their children behave and respond to stresses, added Associate Professor Wong.

The study, which was published in the *Frontiers In Psychiatry* journal on Sept 29, found that teenagers who have tried to kill themselves face significantly more

stress, especially from life at home, peer pressure and romantic relationships, than their peers.

Those who attempted suicide also tend to avoid new situations, be less adaptable to changes, have a negative outlook and irregular sleep cycle, among other factors that put them at risk.

Prof Wong said the study indicates what strategies could be taken for suicide prevention.

"We need to move beyond approaching mental illness by reacting to incidents and crisis like fighting fires. Instead, we need to move towards building healthy resilience in youth," he told *The Straits Times* ahead of World Mental Health Day on Monday.

"From time to time, many of us will suffer setbacks and that's the whole idea of resilience, that we

can learn from setbacks, which prepare us for overwhelming events in the future."

To help parents and the community better gauge the mental well-being and strength of young people here, the NUHS Mind Science Centre and the National University of Singapore department of psychological medicine developed the Singapore Youth Resilience Scale (Syress), said Prof Wong.

The assessment framework helps to identify areas of mental strength and areas where young people can improve their resilience.

Since the tool was rolled out internally in NUHS two years ago, it has helped create clearer assessments for the group's healthcare services including Reach West zone, a community-based mental healthcare service for students

with emotional, social or behavioural issues.

"Knowing such information helps us in our treatment planning. This helps our parents and stakeholders understand the students' needs and how they can better support them," said Ms Stephanie Seow, NUHS team lead for Reach West zone, which oversees 83 schools in the area.

Currently, people can use the Syress assessment tool at this website (medicine.nus.edu.sg/nmsc/syress) and in hard copy at the Teens & Kin exhibition at Alexandra Hospital, which ends in November.

Going forward, the NUHS Mind Science Centre plans to introduce Syress to social service agencies as well, said Prof Wong.

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