

## How social media, technology can boost mental wellness efforts



Ms Elaine Lek with Zen's skate boards and hockey sticks, which she still keeps in his room. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

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What does it mean to "like" an image of self-harm online?

Ms Elaine Lek, 54, was distressed to find that a few followers had "liked" her son Zen Dylan Koh's self-harm posts on an Instagram account that he kept private. He had more than 30 followers, some of whom even commented that they hoped to join him.

Zen, 17, killed himself last year.

But a friend of Zen's, 18-year-old Aurelia (not her real name) defends her decision to "like" his posts. "I wanted him to know I had seen what he posted and that I acknowledged the struggles he was going through. It wasn't as if I was approving what he did," she says.

After seeing such images on his Instagram account, she would text or call him to find out how he was doing.

Such conflicting interpretations are an example of how social media can be a double-edged sword when it comes to mental health challenges.

ADVERTISING

ADVERTISING

Early this month, photo-sharing platform Instagram announced it would ban all graphic self-harm images in response to the suicide of a British teenager. Some critics hailed the move, but said it was years overdue.

After the 14-year-old's death, her family found material on her account relating to depression and suicide. The girl's father said he believed Instagram was partly to blame for her suicide, which sparked public anger.

Conversely, the popularity of social media makes it a feasible platform for mental health campaigns targeting the young. In September, suicide prevention agency Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) launched an Instagram campaign, #ThroughTheNight, to encourage people to send messages of hope to those feeling low between the hours of midnight and 3am.

Over the last few years, SOS has seen an increase in the number of calls during those hours from adolescents aged between 10 and 19, says Ms Wong Lai Chun, its senior assistant director. SOS statistics show that those in this age range made 261 such calls in the year from April 2017 to March 2018, a rise of nearly 80 per cent from 147 in the previous corresponding period.

Ms Wong says #ThroughTheNight saw hundreds of posts using the hashtag. The campaign was part of Suicide Prevention Awareness Week from Sept 10 to 16 last year.



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The use of social media for mental wellness extends to mental health chatbot apps such as Wysa and Woebot. Powered by artificial intelligence (AI), these apps incorporate tools such as cognitive behavioural therapy, which is used to treat anxiety and depression.

At a psychiatry conference here in January, Wysa co-founder Ramakant Vempati said the app, released in 2016, had one million users worldwide. He attributed its rapid growth to a strong demand of mental health needs and the anonymity granted by the app.

Clinical psychologist Lilian Ing, who works at Fernhill Consultancy, says the confluence of technology and anonymity is attractive to young people seeking help for mental health issues. "In my experience, young people seek anonymity in Singapore due to the stigma attached to mental illness... Because of the influence of social media, I believe young people are more likely to seek technological support if they do not have a friend whom they trust to turn to."

However, she cautions against wholesale reliance on AI, suggesting that a "blended approach" is best.

"Technology provides the screening and self-help learning and people can provide the more complex support that AI cannot. There is no substitute for a warm, caring voice or presence. Let machines do what they do best and people do what they do best. We can work together," she says.

# SUICIDE IS PREVENTABLE: EXPERTS

Most teenagers who kill themselves are male, says psychiatrist John Wong of National University Hospital (NUH).

"The demography of teen suicide is recognised as male preponderance," says Associate Professor Wong, head and senior consultant at NUH's department of psychological medicine.

Other characteristics of this demographic include an association with underlying depression or an anxiety disorder, he adds.

While more males die by suicide in this age group in general, more females than males approach suicide prevention agency Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) for support.

SOS' senior assistant director Wong Lai Chun says: "We see more females coming forward to seek emotional support through our 24-hour hotline or e-mail befriending services. However, this trend is not specific to youth and can be observed across most age groups for both services."

She attributes the differences to different coping strategies.

- Samaritans of Singapore:  
1800- 221- 4444 (24 hours)

- Mental Health Helpline:  
6389- 2222 (24 hours)

- Singapore Association for Mental Health:  
1800- 283 -7019

- Tinkle Friend (for primary school-aged children):  
1800 -274-4788

- Care Corner Counselling Hotline (Mandarin):  
1800-353-5800

"Women tend to communicate with their family and friends when they are in distress. They are also becoming more aware of the avenues to seek help over the past decade," she says.

"Men, however, often find it difficult to talk about their struggles or express the pain they are feeling inside."

In Singapore, adolescent suicide reached a peak of 27 such deaths in 2015, the highest in 15 years.

This figure, which refers to persons aged between 10 and 19, has declined in recent years. In 2016, adolescent suicides numbered 22, and the latest figure was 12 in 2017.

"Singaporean adolescents who attempted suicide, with the intent of ending their lives, reported significantly higher stressors in the domains of social, family, academic and financial matters, compared with matched controls," says Prof Wong.

Suicide is preventable, mental health professionals say.

Dr Ong Say How, senior consultant and chief at the department of developmental psychiatry at the Institute of Mental Health, says most people contemplating suicide tend to be "ambivalent" about their thoughts.

He says: "Most people have mixed feelings about committing suicide. Certain thoughts may trigger the idea of ending their life while they also have a list of reasons to stay alive.

"Therefore, very often, the support of friends and family can help reel the person back in by constantly reminding him about the reasons for living while the other problems are being sorted out."

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