Mental health professionals: Who they are, what they do, whom to approach

From counsellors to therapists, Singapore's mental health practitioners play different roles and use tailored



approaches to tackle everything from addiction and disorders to everyday life challenges. As part of a new series on mental health, The Straits Times looks at the professionals in the sector.

Hazel Tang HW Correspondent

When a teenager battling gaming addiction was referred to counsel lor Daniel Wong, it was clear to him that the problem went beyond ex-

Showing signs of anxiety and de pression, the teenager struggled to cope in school. He shut himself off

addiction or his personal relation-

The counsellor decided to coning games together, the teenager from others in the ecosystem. began to open up and revealed the real issue – his tumultuous rela- THE COUNSELLOR tionship with his father.

were heated. But gradually over devise strategies for coping or periences on the job, such as failing selling and recovery journey. Mr ally return to their daily routines. ney to recovery may take a long the next nine months, the father moving forward. learnt that he needed to change Mr Wong says he works with clicases involving vulnerable groups the serviceman's need to convince rates with patients' spouses, family "I have worked with patients how he communicated with his ents to achieve their counselling like minors or the elderly. These in- his family, although such situations members or other mental health who had gone through very adson so he did not come across as goals. "It could be anything. People cidents may leave them grappling are uncommon. nagging or reprimanding, while can simply say they want to live with guilt or experiencing flash- He emphasised that healing is a hensive care. This may involve co- to take something away from and the teenager was encouraged to happier and we can work towards backs. find ways to appreciate his father's that.

As the teenager's relationship seeing Touch Community Servic- psychological debriefings, offer can lead to frustration or doubt Describing recovery as a journey, tivating." with his father started to mend, his es' Live On, an intervention pro-support to those affected and help about treatment. "They should Dr Ho notes that patients typically depressive symptoms lessened, his gramme designed for youth aged 12 them process their trauma so they trust and work with mental health need between 12 and 16 hour-long THE CORRECTIONAL anxiety attacks stopped and his to 18 who have been hospitalised can return to their normal rou- professionals to overcome the dif- sessions to overcome their trau- PSYCHOLOGIST gaming addiction faded. He came for self-harm or suicide attempts, tines. out of his shell and started making supporting their transition back. As stress symptoms can last up ing that patience and commitment "It can be quite daunting for pa- Some may think Ms Georgina Tay Mental health professionals like charge. The programme's objective with affected personnel about a ery.

Mr Wong work behind the scenes, is to lower the youth's overall suimonth after a debriefing. Any offiunravelling the complexities of in- cide risk. dividual struggles.

port and guidance to individuals day and Friday. comes a national priority.

couch and being psychoanalysed breaking down."

proaches, such as medication, talk counselling session if there is a help.

therapy, cognitive behavioural need. therapy and mindfulness techbetter understand their thoughts the call," he says. "Often, that call and feelings, develop coping strat- and the listening ear we provide egies and work through their con- are all that the person needs."

derstand how they assist those in

from the outside world, only im- A cornerstone of mental health mersing himself in his games. treatment in Singapore, psychia- ing clients address immediate Mr Wong, who is with Touch trists study, diagnose, prevent and mental health concerns. Community Services, says: "It was treat mental, behavioural and pertricky and I was a little taken sonality-related disorders. Their and psychological assessments inaback, because what do we focus approach can include medication, clude cognitive behavioural theron here? His mental well-being, psychotherapy and psychosocial apy, psychometric testing and oth-

trained doctors, can dispense med- conditions, including trauma and nect with the teen in the gaming icine and are regulated under the personality disorders. world. After a few sessions of play- Medical Registration Act, different

ments. The teen turned to gaming tries where the distinctions be"Many believe that only those He wanted to show it to his family, have gone through trauma related hoods." teractions with his father; the fa- pore, counsellors are often con- require psychological support; it's tal health struggles.

into the community after their distribution to four weeks, Mr Chng follows up to the process are crucial for recovitients to embark on this journey has a dangerous job.

These practitioners, who include TOUCHline, a counselling hotline vidual counselling.

interventions.

Despite initial hesitation from to misconceptions."

Let us dive into their world to un-

volve the family in his counselling therapy to help clients through challenges, during their national page, to reassure the family that related symptoms. their communication and reducing Besides providing a listening ear, encounter challenges during their in-house psychologist. misunderstandings, Mr Wong ex- they empathetically guide individ- careers. uals in exploring their feelings or Front-line personnel can be family to eventually come round to ma-focused interventions to help are vulnerable to trauma, they are The first few family sessions thought patterns and help them to deeply affected by distressing ex-supporting his subsequent counthem manage the issues and graduequally resilient – even if the jour-

Mr Wong also handles calls on emotional reactions is offered indi-

particularly as mental health be- calls nowadays. From anxiety to driven by social stigma surround- distress. is often associated with lying on a distress. They could be crying and their struggles or reach out for sup-torate in psychology, which equips ing outreach mental health sup-leagues or the prison officers.

Mr Wong's priority is to help call- Mr Chng says it can also be chalpsychological assessment and towns of Queensland. But, in reality, mental health ers calm down and identify their lenging to convince clients' fampractitioners use various ap- concerns, and offer a follow-up ilies of the importance of seeking Dr Ho Yiling, a senior principal suffering from long-term mental with them."

"You may be surprised – someniques, to help individuals in need times there is no follow-up after

> Counselling psychologists typically have more advanced training than counsellors and are equipped to assess and treat a wider range of psychological issues, besides help-

Psychiatrists, who are medically treat more complex mental health

cer still struggling with intense THE CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

psychiatrists, counsellors, psychol- for the public operated by the so- Mr Chng has encountered many individuals experiencing mental and the impact of their stress ents who are mostly high-risk ofogists and therapists, provide sup- cial service agency between Mon- clients who delay seeking help un- disorders, including depression, symptoms. Thus, it's crucial to fenders. Some were involved in vitil their problems become too seanxiety or post-traumatic stress build a good rapport and ensure olent and sexual crimes. facing emotional or psychological He says: "We have observed an vere or overwhelming to handle on disorder, and provide support durthey feel physically and psychological "To be honest, I rarely feel unchallenges. Their work is critical, increase in mental health-related their own. This hesitation is often ing episodes of severe emotional ically safe." panic attacks or depression – so- ing mental health, making it diffi- While they are not medical doc- psychology doctorate in Australia, and there is an alarm in the room. The notion of seeing a therapist metimes, the caller is in obvious cult for people to acknowledge tors, they often hold a PhD or doc- Dr Ho worked for a service provid- We can press it to alert our col-

psychologist at the Psychosocial health difficulties were socially Ms Tay's main role there is to ad-

er evidence-based approaches to

At the Singapore Civil Defence Force's (SCDF) Emergency Behavioural Sciences and CARE Unit

When this happens, EBSC psy- may not see immediate improve- helping to improve communica- takes a long time, when I see them He is one of the counsellors over- chologists are called in to conduct ments in their symptoms, which tion within families. ficulties they face," he says, stress- matic stress symptoms.

Clinical psychologists work with tuate based on life circumstances Prison Service, she works with cli-

them with specialised training in port to people in the regional

While she was training for her closely monitored on the CCTVs

(EBSC), psychologist Cyrus Chng He recalls a case in which a na- Trauma Support Service at KK isolated, with severe mood disprovides counselling support and tional serviceman asked to take a Women's and Children's Hospital turbances, involved in substance The two had frequent argu- Mr Wong says: "Unlike other coun- intervention to personnel in need. copy of his counselling form home. (KKH), works with patients who abuse and had very rough childto manage his anger and avoid in- tween roles are clearer, in Singa- with mental health issues would who were sceptical about his men- to pregnancy, childbirth or rela- "I witnessed first-hand the pro-

found impact of safe and trusting ther blamed gaming for his son's fused with social workers, psychol- really beyond that," he says. For in- This was not a typical request, She performs psycho-emotional relationships, as well as the potenogists or mentors, which can lead stance, he steps in to offer guid-but Mr Chng agreed to provide him assessments on patients referred tially devastating consequences ance to national servicemen facing with his business card and a pic- by KKH doctors to better under- when those relationships are lackthe teen, Mr Wong decided to in- Counsellors often employ talk adjustment issues, among other ture of the counselling form's cover stand their struggles and trauma- ing in these adults," she says, adding that she came to appreciate specific challenges, like work-re- service at SCDF, as well as to uni- their son's mental well-being was If a bereaved patient struggles that people have a fundamental The focus was on enhancing lated stress or personal difficulties. formed and civilian officers who being cared for by a professional with sleep difficulties, she may use need to be seen, valued and loved. relaxation techniques, cognitive At the same time, she also grew

> This helped the serviceman's behavioural therapy or other trautorealise that while human beings to resuscitate a victim or managing Chng says he was not surprised by Dr Ho also frequently collabotime. professionals to provide compre- verse circumstances but managed gradual process, and some clients ordinating support networks or live through it," she says. "Even if it

tionship violence.

safe," Ms Tay emphasises. "We are

because they are learning new As a correctional rehabilitation skills and discussing difficult top- senior psychologist in the Psychoics," she explains. "Their engage- logical and Correctional Rehabilment and motivation may fluc- itation Division of the Singapore

functioning better, it's always mo-

"But really, the inmates trust us a lot. They are respectful and know "I noticed that many adult clients we come in to help and empathise

dress inmates' negative thinking each inmate.

proaches, depending on the cir- so those who require more inten- ferent. "It supports people whose stand its impact on their current volves only the parents, to under- These mental health professionals cumstances and objective.

apy approach, turning the offen- mates' suitability for various reha-

past experiences and struggles. Part of the song goes: "Young and their families and communities, tions or relationships. They can aling," says Dr Vinita Sajan Tahilrapush an agenda. The child chooses Mental health issues can range could turn to. Bullied in school. I based programmes. myself. nobody will."

potential change.

werful. These inmates had never change or mindset shift is definite- an elderly person who has lost a sity Children's Medical Institute, separation. heard their stories reflected back ly challenging for them." to them in such a way," Ms Tay says. Many inmates said it gave them **THE ART THERAPIST** hope and helped them understand nearly a decade ago, it still reso- ous methods to help individuals nates with her.

one-size-fits-all, she says. Ms Tay psychological concerns. explains that correctional rehabilitation psychologists do not enter a individuals to express themselves Despite its open and creative na- such as frequent family moves, can ask if their children had 'fun', but stigma associated with it, among prison with the assumption they and communicate, helping to im-ture, art therapy is not a random have a profound impact on a child's like counselling, play therapy in-other reasons. can rehabilitate everyone. Instead, prove their mental health. they rely on "RNR", assessing the Ms Yoko Choi from the Institute in structuring sessions effectively Play therapy provides a space for asks if someone had 'fun' after a risks, needs and responsivity of of Mental Health employs art ther- by setting up the space and using children to process these experi- counselling session," she points CONTINUED ON PAGE A6

sive psychological interventions. experiences are difficult to put into lives. She once used a narrative ther- Ms Tay also helps evaluate in- words," she says.

develop coping strategies, build re- something meaningful."

patterns that led to their offences, Some inmates may already be retients with mood disorders, such typically lasting an hour, can be diemotional distress. encouraging them to reflect on flecting on their actions upon sen- as major depressive and bipolar rected, with a specific topic, or Dr Tahilramani's therapy room is therapy have had multiple adverse their actions and internalise positions and internalise position tencing, while others may not be disorders, and assist them in their non-directed, allowing spontane-filled with toys like building life experiences. It helps if we look ready for such introspection. Many healing journey. Instead of typical private, one- inmates come from marginalised People may believe using art Regardless of the approach, the characters from popular animated ate way." on-one sessions that psychologists backgrounds with a whole spectherapeutically requires good goals are consistent. Ms Choi helps series like Inside Out and Paw Pahave with clients, Ms Tay likes to trum of needs, from financial assis- drawing skills. However, Ms Choi her clients process their emotions, trol, as well as sand trays. experiment with different ap- tance to family issues. There are al- says that art therapy is totally dif- unpack past trauma and under- The first play therapy session in-

ders' stories into a song. She and bilitation programmes, taking bines hands-on art-making with building connections to the self, formed, meaning she takes into ac- tal health professionals play, they her colleagues crafted lyrics using their overall behaviour, recent propersonal reflection to help individant work towards change and count all the early difficulties and will be clearer on who they can apthe offenders' words, composed a gress in rehabilitation and reinte- uals understand, process and ex- transformation," she says. melody and performed the song gration plans into consideration. press their feelings and experienc-These include community-based es. The lyrics reflected the inmates' programmes that aid inmates in re-

alone. There was no one whom I and other in-care psychology- so leverage breaking, pounding or mani, a senior play therapist. was teased and being beaten. I felt Ms Tay emphasises that effective illustrate what they have been be old enough to speak but strug- and safety, they'll want to come derlying biological or neurological sad, I felt angry. Violence was all rehabilitation involves not just fo-through. Either way, art therapists gle to articulate their feelings. back," she explains. around me. I saw it all, I lived it all. cusing on the individuals but also guide them to raise self-awareness Through play therapy, these chil-Then I learnt. If I don't stand up for helping them access support with- and cultivate self-compassion. dren can express their emotions come the child's language. Dr Ta- thoughts, feelings, behaviours and in the community. "Some of them "These actions stimulate inner and experiences in a safe and sup- hilramani follows the child's lead overall functioning in daily life. The impact was clear. Some in- are very used to a particular lifes- dialogues, allowing individuals to portive environment. mates went silent, others appeared tyle – resorting to violence or get- go deeper into very complex expe- Dr Tahilramani, who is with the ing they attach to toys, which can such individuals, misconceptions, contemplative. It was a moment of ting into trouble, or being in pris-riences," Ms Choi explains. on, where everything is structured Art therapists tailor art materials National University Hospital's a child might use a doll house to ex-challenges that can hinder their

Art therapists use art as a way for death and fear.

joining society with support from colours to symbolise their emo- "Play is natural and non-threatenthrowing art materials like clay to Her clients are children who may experience the non-directedness orders to conditions that have un-

"For me, this was profoundly po- and controlled - so any form of to their clients' needs and ages. For Khoo Teck Puat - National Univer- press feelings about their parents' ability to provide effective care for an activity like making flowers. cians.

spiring them to build new identiapists are another group of mental says. "This can be empowering for pain and refuse to go to school, and world. "We are trained to play with mental health crisis, we should reties. Although this event happened health professionals who use varithe seniors, letting them know that when doctors find nothing physithat flow and work with them in ach out for help too. It just involves while they grieve, they can create cally wrong, they refer the child to that manner," she adds. Offering psychological support silience, enhance overall well-be- For younger clients, Ms Choi may anxiety or coping struggles. While Dr Tahilramani shares gen- Sometimes, patients' families is inherently complex and never ing and prevent the escalation of create a doll and play and tell stories with them to explore ideas of parent involved in a serious accier discloses specific details of the to generational differences in un-

process. Art therapists are skilled sense of stability and security. volves a lot of hard work. Nobody Mr Wong, the counsellor, says:

ous expression.

THE PLAY THERAPIST

apy interventions to support parelevant materials. These sessions, ences that may have contributed to out.

and how they play a part impacting sues.

their emotions and behaviours. "Our focus is to help children feel ple with effective support and safe. We don't rush into therapy or care.

Department of Paediatrics at the reveal deep feelings. For example, stigma and scepticism are some

play therapy to explore possible Play therapy is confidential. the bone, but the brain."

Georgina Tay art therapist Yoko Choi and play therapis Vinita Sajan Tahilramani. These menta health professionals sav that if more people understand the distinct but complementary professionals play, they will be clearer of people they can approach for help with specific issues ST PHOTOS: ARIFFIN JAMAR GIN TAY, KEVIN LIM, NG SOR LUAN, BRIAN

Clockwise fron

Counsellor **Daniel Wong** psvchologis Cyrus Chng,

clinical psychologis Ho Yilina. correctiona psychologis



"Many children that come to play blocks, doll houses, puppets and at this child in a more compassion-

FINDING THE RIGHT SUPPORT

stand the child's developmental tell The Straits Times that if more "Guided by their creative prochistory and temperament. Dr Tapeople understand the distinct but Specifically, art therapy com- ess, they gain a sense of safety, hilramani's approach is trauma-in- complementary roles various menchallenges a child might have faced proach for help with specific is-

This will be key to providing peo-

what to play with, and once they from emotional and cognitive disfactors. These play out in various

and interprets the symbolic mean- For the practitioners helping

and interventions. child, she might use materials that works with children aged three to "It looks simple, but there are "I often tell my patients, when they are familiar with, like paper, 10. Many are referred by paediatrisome really difficult feelings coming out," she says. Over time, the cover on our own – we see a doc-"As we do so, we can talk about For instance, a child may repeat child might attribute new mean-tor," Dr Ho, the clinical psycholotheir destructive behaviours, in- Apart from psychologists, ther- flowers as a metaphor of life," she edly complain about abdominal ings to toys and express their inner gist, says. "Similarly, if we have a a different organ in our body – not

dent, or significant life transitions, sessions. "It's natural for parents to derstanding mental health or the

Misconceptions that mental health practitioners fight to correct

FROM A5

"Take depression, for example. Some parents I work with do not believe in a diagnosis, or they may say things like 'this didn't exist in my time."

These reactions can lead to conflict and impede effective support, and getting everyone on the same page to help those in need may be as difficult as the issues themselves.

Another myth that mental health professionals fight to correct is the idea of quick fixes.

Many people, they tell ST, expect immediate results from therapy or counselling, but real change takes time.

Mr Chng, the counselling psychologist, says patience and trust in the process are crucial. "You won't see overnight miracles, but working with a mental health professional can help you navigate your challenges."

Another widespread misconception is that psychological trauma is rare and confined only to catastrophic events like wars or natural disasters.

In reality, it lurks in the shadows of everyday experiences.

"Trauma is more common than people think, and the experience of trauma can be highly subjective," Dr Ho explains. "Harassment, bullying or emotional abuse can be just as damaging as physical threats."

The practitioners tell ST that real progress in mental healthcare requires a collective shift in perspective here – one that acknowledges the intricate nature of mental health struggles and the necessity for sustained, compassionate support.

MORE RECOGNITION FOR THE PROFESSIONALS

Mental health professionals play a crucial role as psychological well-being becomes an increasingly important focus in society, and the Government is looking to grow their numbers as well as take steps to ensure standards in the quality of care provided.

Nearly half, or 49 per cent, of adults surveyed said they felt depressed to the point of hopelessness for extended periods, according to an Ipsos World Mental Health Day survey published in October 2023.

The survey of 1,001 people aged 21 to 74 also found that 27 per cent have seriously contemplated suicide or self-harm.

And in a recently released nationwide survey on youth mental health by the Institute of Mental Health, one in four youth reported having severe or extremely severe symptoms of anxiety.

Singapore aims to increase the number of public-sector psychologists by 40 per cent by 2030. Additionally, 28,000 front-line personnel and volunteers serving at community and social service touchpoints will be trained to help identify those struggling with mental health issues.

While psychiatrists, who are medically trained doctors, are regulated under the Medical Registration Act, counsellors and psychologists are currently self-regulated and do not require licences to practise.

MPs and professional associations, including the Singapore Psychological Society (SPS) and Singapore Association for Counselling (SAC), have called for a regulatory



Correctional rehabilitation senior psychologist Georgina Tay says she seldom feels unsafe even though her clients are mostly high-risk offenders.
ST PHOTO:
KEVIN LIM

framework that would raise the standards and safeguards of the profession, which involves working with vulnerable individuals.

SPS president Adrian Toh said there are currently 692 psychologists registered with the society. They are governed by its code of professional ethics.

Registration is not mandatory, but requirements include a post-graduate degree in applied psychology with coursework in psychological assessment, intervention and ethics, as well as 1,000 practicum hours, including 400 hours of supervised practical training.

Practitioners registered or licensed in other recognised countries can also be SPS-registered.

SAC-registered counsellors must hold a postgraduate degree in counselling from an institution recognised by the association, and need to clock 600 hours of face-toface counselling and 60 hours of clinical supervision.

The association has more than 1,900 members, of whom over 620 are registered counsellors and 731 are working towards full registration.

The Association of Psychotherapists and Counsellors Singapore recognises practitioners' qualifications and experience on a five-level framework, which are published in the members directory alongside each practitioner's professional specialities.

This starts with certified professionals holding a relevant degree or postgraduate degree, and having at least 150 hours of supervised practicum.

The highest level, Certified Master Practitioner or Supervisor, requires a relevant master's degree, 500 hours of supervised practicum, and supervisor certification from approved institutions.

A regulatory framework that recognises mental health professionals' qualifications and expertise could help demystify the field, and provide clarity on who one should approach for specific issues, practitioners say.

Ms Tay, the correctional rehabilitation senior psychologist, supports the call for better regulation and recognition of mental health professionals, but says it is equally important to have standardised training and development in place, and to ensure that rates are affordable and access to care is increased.

"In a way, this also ensures mental health practitioners receive proper training and are equipped with the necessary skills for the job," she says, adding that the main ethical consideration is to "do no harm to the clients".

Helplines

MENTAL WELL-BEING

- Institute of Mental Health's Mental Health Helpline: 6389-2222 (24 hours)
- Samaritans of Singapore: 1767 (24 hours)/ 9151-1767 (24-hour CareText via WhatsApp)
- Singapore Association for Mental Health: 1800-283-7019
- Silver Ribbon Singapore: 6386-1928
- Tinkle Friend: 1800-274-4788
- Chat, Centre of Excellence for Youth Mental Health: 6493-6500/1
- Women's Helpline (Aware): 1800-777-5555 (weekdays, 10am to 6pm)

COUNSELLING

- TOUCHline (Counselling): 1800-377-2252
- TOUCH Care Line (for caregivers): 6804-6555
- Care Corner Counselling Centre: 6353-1180
- Counselling and Care Centre: 6536-6366
- We Care Community Services: 3165-8017

ONLINE RESOURCES

- mindline.sg
- eC2.sg
- tinklefriend.sg
- chat.mentalhealth.sg
- carey.carecorner.org.sg (for those aged 13 to 25)
- limitless.sg/talk (for those aged 12 to 25)

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