



CMHA HK MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING BULLETIN Q&A:

DR. PAUL WONG

Dr. Paul Wong, D.Psyc.(Clinical), is a clinical psychologist and an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at The University of Hong Kong. His expertise is in suicide prevention and mental health promotion and he has published more than 90 academic articles and book chapters on several suicide-related and social-inclusive-related issues.

His recent research interests include social withdrawal behaviour (also known as Hikikomori) among the Asian population and animal-assisted interventions. He is also working on collaborative project with the World Health Organisation about caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders and/or developmental delay.

Welcome Paul. As you know, World Suicide Prevention Day is in September. Please tell us about your work view and work in the community?

This year's theme is "Working Together to Prevent Suicide" which is a very timely theme because, in fact, the whole world is working together to combat with COVID-19. The sense of working together for self-care and altruistic reasons has been strong and widely promoted. I really hope that people around the world can learn from this year's experience and care for other less discussed issues, like suicide. It was reported a few days ago that more than 800,000 people died from COVID-19. However, many people may not realise that for each year, about 800,000 died by suicide and this number is very likely to be

underreported due to its stigmatised nature.

As the Psychological Consultant of the Samaritans Hong Kong, we will be broadcasting a live-streaming talk to promote a newly developed project initiated by Facebook Hong Kong named the #HearForYou Campaign on World Suicide Prevention Day to advocate to our society to pay more attention to mental health issues.

Can you share a bit more information about suicide as it relates to Hong Kong?

According to the Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention, HKU, 910 people died by suicide (rate=12.2/100,000) in 2018. International and local psychological autopsy studies have found that more than 80-90% of people who died by suicide suffered from some form of psychological disorders, i.e.,

depression, and schizophrenia. The unique picture in Hong Kong is that pathological gambling was found to be one of the most prevalent psychological disorders among the suicides we studied. Hence, mental health awareness is an important element of suicide prevention.

The 2019 suicide data is not available yet because all unnatural deaths have to be examined by the Coroner's Court and therefore, there is a time gap between the dates of death and the release of the cause of death.

Besides people with psychological disorders, another unique phenomenon about the suicide pattern in Hong Kong is that among the suicides we studied in our psychological autopsy study, those who were unemployed

and had debt issues were at very high risk of completing suicide. Hence, with the social-economic negative impact of COVID-19 starting to worsen exponentially, I am very worried that the suicide situation will worsen as compared to previous years. Having said that, since we are living in a 'new normal' era, those who are lonely and suffering from some form of mental issues may be more likely to be engaged than the post-SARS period.

People bereaved by suicide and unnatural deaths seem to face similar grieving patterns with other forms of natural death. However, since all unnatural deaths happen suddenly, it is very often that people bereaved by suicide would feel guilty for what had happened and ruminate over what more could have been done to prevent the tragedies.

It can understandably be a difficult subject to talk about. Do you think awareness/understanding is changing? Why is that?

Many people think suicide is a difficult topic to be discussed in Chinese societies. This is an interesting issue. In fact, it seems that suicide is not openly discussed in any society. However, it is not as challenging as we think. Maybe this is a topic that I focus on, I feel that as soon as I initiate a conversation about suicide, people will start to discuss it, either they have known someone who have thought of or attempted or about celebrity suicides. I guess the impression about suicide as a difficult subject to talk about is mostly because many people think that they have nothing to do with this issue. But I think the situation has changed, especially for those who use social media frequently because information about mental health and suicide is not uncommon in social media platforms. Hence, the Facebook's #HearForYou Campaign is a great programme to advocate mental health awareness and self-help with Information and Communication Technologies.

Your expertise is in suicide prevention. What can people do to be aware of suicide prevention in their family, friends, colleagues and community? What are some of the signs that we might be looking out for?

If we see sudden emotional, i.e., being irritable and depressed and impulsive, and behavioural changes, i.e., sleeping or eating patterns, we should be alert. But first things first, we need to have the time and patience to observe and be sensitive to our loved ones.

What can we do if we think someone may be at risk/ in need of help and support?

Probably for the older ones, the general practitioners are their best gatekeepers for psychological issues. For the middle-aged ones, colleagues at work will be the best gatekeepers and they can encourage the ones at risk to use their “Employee Assistance Programme”. For the younger ones, their friends and teachers will be the best gatekeepers and seeking help from web-based support from NGOs will be a good choice. Of course, for imminent risks, calling the hotlines would be an option.

How can the corporate world make a difference in this area and what can employers be doing?

Since many people spend a lot of time at work, promoting a well-being friendly working environment for the employees will help a lot. For instance, helping employees build a sense of holistic well-being, i.e., social, psychological, financial, and physical awareness within the working environment is very important. Also, having a trusting relationship with employees will make things a lot better for both the corporate and employees. Many studies have demonstrated that when employees have some autonomy at work, their productivity level will also increase.

WORLD SUICIDE PREVENTION DAY

is an initiative from the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) and takes place on 10 September. The theme for 2020 is **Working Together to Prevent Suicide #WSPD2020**

For further information on Suicide Prevention in Hong Kong, please visit:

Suicide Prevention Services

<https://www.sps.org.hk/>

Samaritans Hong Kong

<https://samaritans.org.hk/>

Mind HK

<https://www.mind.org.hk/find-help-now/>

CONTACT

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City Mental Health Alliance HK

The City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong is a collaborative venture founded by city businesses. Championed by senior leaders, the Alliance is business led and expert guided and aims to create a culture of good mental health for workers in the city of Hong Kong, share best practice and increase mental health understanding.