

## SUNDAYSPOTLIGHT

# When the young can't cope with life

**TRAGEDY:** Recent suicides have highlighted the crying need for teenagers and young adults to be equipped with coping skills so that they will not take their lives because of unrequited love, bad exam results or career disappointments. Audrey Vijandren talks to experts, parents and young adults about the urgency to foster resilient youngsters

**"T**O give me all your love, is all I ever asked, cause what you don't understand is, I'd catch a grenade for you. Throw my hand on a blade for you. I'd jump in front of a train for you. You know I'd do anything for you. I would go through all this pain. Take a bullet straight through my brain. Yes, I would die for you, baby. But you won't do the same."

With lyrics like that which glorify self-harm and suicide when facing the stress of a relationship, and at school and work, is it any wonder that young adults see no option but to take their own lives to end the misery or prove their love?

Steven Ko, 24, son of renowned skin specialist Dr Ko Chung Beng, recently plunged to his death following his involvement in a love triangle.

Shortly after Steven's death, Dr Ko was quoted in a newspaper report as saying that he blamed himself for not spending enough time with his son while he was going through an emotional phase.

He went on to advise parents to spend time with their children, and not to pamper them too much by giving them all they wanted for fear that they might not be able to take rejection, as there were some things that money could not buy.

Aida Suhaimi, a clinical psychologist with non-profit organisation Protect and Save the Children, also warned parents against pampering and overindulging their children.

She said children wouldn't be able to develop their own strength and discover their weaknesses.

"Why do parents pamper their kids?

"Well, it's difficult for parents to see their child being upset or face discomfort; many avoid this by indulging in their child's every fancy.

"Parents who may have had difficult childhoods also want to spare their children the hardship.

"So, they try to protect their children from all kinds of harm. Many spend their entire lives shielding their children from challenges and disappointments.

"Today, Malaysian families are small with an average of two to three children, so parents are able to pay more attention to the kids."

She said contrary to what people might think, studies had found that growing up in affluent families could have negative effects on children.

"Compared to children from low-income families, children from affluent backgrounds are found to have lower levels of happiness, and experience high levels of emotional problems."

A build-up of events, or risk factors, could also increase the

chances of adopting extreme maladaptive behaviour, she said.

"Some risk factors include negative life events, family conflict, child abuse and neglect, and bullying. Without the skills and resilience, these stresses can overwhelm a child's coping ability.

"When opportunities for self-learning are not there, and their own resources are not developed and left undiscovered, they may feel entirely overwhelmed in trying times. This may lead to unhealthy coping habits and even suicide.

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Parents, Aida stressed, could not afford to miss the behavioural changes shown by their children.

"Sometimes, when children are highly stressed or find difficulty coping in life, they can become withdrawn, anxious, irritable, angry and miserable.

"At times, this can even be seen through physical changes such as sudden weight loss or gain. Unfortunately, the changes in behaviour can be very subtle at times because it can also be just part of the child's development or self-discovery.

"It's important that people around these children or young adults provide a safe platform for them to voice their concerns.

"Their issues need to be discussed



*Consultant psychiatrist Vincent Wong says parents who rely on domestic help to care and guide their kids will end up having children with bad coping skills*

openly and calmly.

Mahsa University College associate professor and head of psychiatry department Dr Xavier Pereira believed that the media also played an important role.

"Social media, like Facebook, can influence a child, teenager or young adult. Tragic events resulting from cyber-bullying is a concern.

"Media coverage from celebrity suicides can also trigger suicide among the young. For instance, there were copycat suicides following the death of a famous Hong Kong pop singer who jumped from a building."

Consultant psychiatrist Vincent Wong believed that kids whose parents were too liberal, or relied on domestic help to care for them, often displayed bad coping skills.

"Most parents know that they're responsible to lovingly discipline their children. However, these days, both parents are required to work in order to make ends meet.

"Therefore, the training and skills needed to cope in life are not passed down to their kids.

"The lack of survival skills when facing hardships or social rejections, results in them being unable to demonstrate emotional resilience."

Many early signs of emotional breakdown could be seen in children and young adults, Wong said.

"For kids who are introverts, some of the signs include isolating themselves from friends, refusing to talk to parents because they believe that their parents are judgmental or don't truly listen, insomnia, skipping school, occasional anger outbursts, feelings of excessive guilt or shame and suicidal thoughts.

"An extrovert may have frequent outbursts, play truant or get involved with alcohol or drugs."

Wong advised parents to equip their children with necessary coping skills before it's too late.

"First and foremost, parents must ensure they have a healthy marriage. They should sharpen their parenting skills by attending courses, and spend time with their kids because in a child's eyes, love is time, and time is love.

"They should also learn to communicate with their kids, allow their children the chance to experience life with clear boundaries, and be a mentor and best friend to them."

## What do you think?

Send your views to  
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