

Two mental health charities supporting youth and caregivers merge



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Two mental health charities – one focused on youth, the other on caregivers – are joining forces in an ambitious bid to reach out to more people and journey with them as their needs change over time.

Resilience Collective (RC), which has been around since 2018, focuses on facilitating peer-to-peer support groups for youth in mental health recovery. Meanwhile, Caregivers Alliance (CAL), which was set up in 2011, focuses on supporting caregivers.

While they may seem like odd bedfellows, integrating RC into CAL will bring together the young and the old to help deepen the understanding of mental health issues across generations. The merged entity's new brand is slated to be unveiled by July.

With the merger, more than 10,000 caregivers from CAL and approximately 2,000 individuals with mental health conditions from RC will gain access to an expanded range of services, including training and self-care tools. After welcoming RC's nine staff, CAL's staff strength will rise to 59.

The idea is to now add cross-age and cross-needs programmes, including peer support groups, to the existing services, to better support recovery. For instance, an individual will be able to attend such a support group with a parent or caregiver. But that is not all.

Mr Tim Oei, who became CAL's chief executive on Feb 1, said the new CAL wants to be a one-stop shop for community wellness for all – and not just people with mental health struggles.

To grow its suite of services, it is looking to collaborate with other social service agencies and even welcome others to merge with it.

The aim is to help individuals and families journey through their mental health challenges and find ways to resume everyday life, said finance industry veteran Hsieh Fu Hua, who co-founded both charities and chairs CAL's board.

Given Singapore's fragmented mental health landscape, having a bigger entity will allow them to provide broader community support for people at different points of their journey, the mental health advocate added.

Mr Hsieh shared that when he took his daughter to a psychiatrist to treat her depression in 2000, the specialist asked him: "So what do you want me to do for her? What is your objective?"

"A stupid parent like me said: 'I wanted her to go back to school,'" he said. The psychiatrist replied, saying, okay, he would fix that for him.



Mr Tim Oei (left), chief executive of Caregivers Alliance (CAL), and Mr Hsieh Fu Hua, who co-founded Resilience Collective and CAL. The merged entity's new brand is slated to be unveiled by July. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN



The session did not end well, and Mr Hsieh's daughter said she never wanted to see the specialist again.

The second psychiatrist she saw had fallen asleep on her, he told ST.

"I began to realise this about community care – because with mental health, the condition is long term – and how do you encourage people (to see) that there's

hope, that you can care for them and that there's always a silver lining," said Mr Hsieh, who was formerly president of the National Council of Social Service.

"A lot of parents I know, they give up... or they think there's no answer. In fact, there's an answer – it's that you learn how to live with mental health (challenges)."

This is why he is so supportive of CAL. "The journey of recovery is actually in the community, at home and how you live day to day, and that's why the family or whoever is caring for them has to be really able to journey with them," he said.

Armed with the understanding that mental health is a part of one's life, community support has to be wider than it is today, and not just

limited to a condition or a person's role, he added.

"You can look at (mental health) as a condition, or you can look at it as a state of mind," said Mr Hsieh.

"Conditions are binary; a state of mind is evolving. So, hopefully, you are able to help people with whatever state of mind that traps them, to be more free, to evolve."

He was reminded recently that no matter what is going on in a person's life, "if you can still talk to one another, that means it isn't too bad", for no family is without its challenges.

For those who face mental health challenges, he said: "I come back to the same phrase: We've got to resume everyday life... You still have to get out of the house... connect with nature, connect with people."

Mr Oei, who was most recently CEO of the National Kidney Foundation, said the merged entity wants to work with the secondary student population, teachers and parent networks on preventive care, and has just started reaching out to some schools.

CAL now has a booth – or what it calls an outpost – at the Institute of Mental Health, and another five at the National University Hospital, Alexandra Hospital, the Community Wellness Clinic at Queenstown Polyclinic, Admiralty Medical Centre, and Changi General Hospital.

The aim is to have more physical presence at various places, including polyclinics and social service agencies, to make it easier for people to find help if they need it.

In line with its ambitions to be a hub for "all", the new CAL will have counselling services and psychotherapy. It also plans to help people who have been full-time caregivers get jobs.

People can approach the charity if they feel they have mental health challenges, need caregiver support, or want to learn about what they can do for a family member or friend in mental health distress.

"You come to us, there's no wrong door – we can help you... If your issue is financial, for instance, I can connect you to a family service centre," said Mr Oei.

The CAL team wants to eventually be able to also support general practitioners looking after those with mental health challenges, and even psychiatrists and psychologists in the private sector who may want to refer their clients for community support to help them resume their everyday life.

With RC focusing on youth aged 18 to 35, and CAL serving caregivers mostly between 40 years old and 60 years old, the merged entity will also find ways to foster a common language to help them better understand one another's mental health challenges, said Mr Oei.

"We don't have the same understanding when someone says, 'I've got an issue,'" Mr Oei said.

"The older generation might say you're mad, you're *xiao* (crazy), the younger generation might say, 'I am just going through a phase'"