Help for the stressed-out

Frustrated? Lonely? Don’t shoot – campuses here are ready to help students

When funny French student Juliette (not her real name) came to Singapore last August, she fell in love with the country. She was here for one semester as an international exchange student at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

But the 20-something still felt miserable and lonely as “there was nobody for me”.

What made it worse was that before she left France, she ran into some financial and family problems and these issues were weighing heavily on her mind.

Juliette, who completed her exchange programme in December, tells LifeStyle on the phone from France that she felt “frustrated and helpless” then as there was no one she could talk to.

Although she was aware from the first day that SMU provides counselling services for students, it took her a month before she sought help.

She immediately felt at ease talking about her pain with the counsellor, and found herself looking forward to the once-a-week hourly sessions.

“The counsellor didn’t give me the answers, but by listening to me talk about my feelings, she helped me to find the answers myself,” she recalls.

Juliette admits she had hoped to forget what had happened back home by coming to Singapore. “I realised you can travel anywhere in the world but you have to solve your problems first,” she says.

As the recent Virginia Tech shootings have shown, there is an established support system in the United States for students in distress.

Within hours of the brutal massacre, where gunman Cho Seung Hui killed 32 people, university counsellors provided help to disturbed students and staff. Tertiary institutions here also have comprehensive counselling facilities.

All universities and polytechnics here have full-time counsellors on campus to help students with emotional or academic difficulties. Services are free.

The exception is the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM), which refers its students to a family service centre for counselling.

Most institutions also have a mentor scheme where every student is assigned a lecturer as his personal mentor whom he can consult.

Common problems include academic stress, relationship issues and financial difficulties.

Many schools, like Nanyang Technological University, Nanyang Polytechnic and Ngee Ann Polytechnic, also adopt a preventive approach by organising regular workshops and talks.

Most institutions LifeStyle spoke to declined to reveal the number of students who seek help, but SIM and Republic Polytechnic say they see about 10 cases a year.

“The need for counselling tends to be higher at the start of academic term and closer to the examination period,” says Ms Pamela Tan, SIM’s director of student care and academic services.

Over at SMU, the university introduced a Peer Helper Programme in 2004 which involves undergraduates trained to provide informal counselling to fellow students.

They look out for students who are showing signs of anxiety and offer a listening ear. The counselling can be done over a cup of coffee and via instant messaging.

The latter helps identify those crying out for help. “I always look out for strange nicknames which might give a clue of who are feeling stressed out,” says accountancy student Jasmin Neo, 23, who has been a peer helper for three years.

Another peer helper Leung Chi Ching, 22, says providing counselling to her friends helps her to cope with her own problems better.

“After every counselling session, we have to write journals and it is a good time for self-reflection,” she says.

Mak Mun San

PHOTO: ALAN LIM

ALL FOR ONE, ONE FOR ALL: SMU undergraduates (from left) Jourdan Soh, Zeenath Jaleel, Zheng Renjie, Leung Chi Ching, Jasmin Neo and Hamidah Aidillah Mustafa are trained to provide informal peer counselling.