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Explainer | How can Hongkongers seek help for depression, and what treatment is available?

Expert says depressed person cannot be 'cured' by hike or meal to make them 'happy again', following suspected murder-suicide case involving family

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Hong Kong was shocked on Sunday by a suspected murder-suicide case in which a father with a history of mental health issues was believed to have taken his own life after killing his wife and two children at a Tsuen Wan hotel.

No suicide note was found, but the 37-year-old man had posted on social media before the incident that he was struggling mentally and was very worried about not being able to take care of his family. A source said he had suffered from depression.

Police psychologist Michael Fung Ho-kin explained that emotional illnesses could not be "cured" by a hike or a meal after which the sufferer could "go home and become happy again".

The Post looks at the prevalence of depression in the city and the different treatments available.

1. What is depression?

Depression is a common mood disorder affecting 5 per cent of men and 10 per cent of women in developed countries. It is characterised by symptoms such as a persistently low mood, loss of interest and energy, and negative thoughts.

It disrupts people's daily lives, such as their work and social lives.

Depression risk increases 1.5 to three times when there is a family history of the condition. Biological factors such as neurotransmitter imbalances, hypothyroidism and substance use can also be factors.

Anxious, inflexible or perfectionist traits, as well as environmental factors such as unmanaged stress from work and family, also play a role in developing depression.

2. How common is it in Hong Kong?

The government last conducted a citywide study on mental health disorders between 2010 and 2013.

Although the data was collected over a decade ago, the study found that one in seven people aged 16 to 75 experienced common mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression.

It is unknown whether the city has since fared better or worse following the political turmoil in 2014 and 2019, and the public health crisis of Covid-19 between 2020 and 2023.

Police inspect the hotel room where the family in the suspected murder-suicide case was staying. Photo: May Tse

3. Is there any link between depression and suicide or homicide?

Psychiatrist May Lam Mei-ling, president of the Hong Kong Mental Wellness Association, said 90 per cent of suicide cases were linked to psychiatric disorders, of which two-thirds were mood-related ones such as anxiety and depression.

"People with severe depression have negative cognition, feeling a strong sense of hopelessness, helplessness and worthlessness ... It's just like sitting in a dark room wearing sunglasses," Lam said.

"Some see no way out, developing suicidal thoughts and even considering killing their family, believing it would end the suffering of those who depended on them."

However, their risk of committing homicide was not higher than that of people without mental health disorders, if no drug abuse was involved, Lam stressed.

"Among those committing homicide, psychiatric patients do not outnumber those without mental health problems," she said.

"We must bear this message in mind – the more we marginalise people with mental health issues, the harder it is for them to seek help and recover."

Lam also urged the public to focus more on understanding and preventing future harm, instead of blaming and criticising the father in the latest case.

4. How can you seek help?

Lam said depression could be treated and did not always require medication, but people who developed depressive symptoms should seek help.

If the symptoms are mild and do not affect their daily lives, they may consider talking to others or seeing a counsellor.

But if the symptoms persist and severely affect their functioning, such as with negative thoughts, insomnia and low concentration, they should see a psychiatrist for an evidence-based diagnosis and treatment.

"There is a wide range of treatment options, even for medications; find one that suits you and truly helps you," Lam said.

5. What should friends and family do?

Friends and family members of people with depression can play an important role, according to mental health charity Mind HK.

They can encourage their loved ones to seek professional assistance, reassuring them that it is OK to ask for help.

Being open about depression and difficult emotions can also help create a safe space for sufferers to share their feelings.

The charity said listening without judgment was more helpful than offering solutions.

Family members should avoid being critical or telling sufferers to "snap out of it" because they are likely to already be hard on themselves.

It is also important for carers to look after their own mental well-being while supporting their emotionally disturbed friend or family member.

If you have suicidal thoughts, or you know someone who is, help is available. For Hong Kong, dial +852 18111 for the government-run "Mental Health Support Hotline" or *+852 2896 0000 for The Samaritans and +852 2382 0000 for Suicide Prevention Services.*

In the US, call or text 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org for the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. For a list of other nations' helplines, see this page.