The Change I Want to Make:
Opening the conversation about mental health
(Original)

Cynthia Tze Keng Ko
(Age 23, The Netherlands)

They: "How are you?"

Me: "I'm fine, how about you?"

An almost automatic response. After all, what's not to be fine about? I was born and raised in a 1st world country, the Netherlands, a place where my studies and healthcare are mostly funded. I have a warm bed to come home to every day, and hunger is not a problem to me. During the past 6 years, I have risen like a phoenix in terms of academics: at the age of 23 I have travelled the world more than my parents ever did, while studying at highly reputed universities across the world. There seems to be a bright future ahead of me.

Except: I'm not fine. Every day I doubt whether I will be alive to see my own future unfold, or whether that future will be a happy one for me. All for one reason: chronic depression. It's been there for more than half of my life, and the last 6 years were spent hoping to survive every new day while going through countless therapy sessions. Yet I barely speak out about this because, who wants to be negative in an age where optimism is trending? But this is not just about me. The most concerning thing of all is: I'm not the only one.

In 2016, about 15.5% of the global population had any mental disorder [1]. Mental disorders also contribute to 47-74% of the population's risk of suicide [2]. Yet how many people talk about this? Even when we do, mental disorders are a difficult concept to grasp. Expressing empathy towards physical health issues, such as cancer, is much easier than doing the same for mental health issues. Those who suffer mentally seem fine from the outside, but it is their repressed voices that take them down even further into a dark pit. What if people were more aware about mental health issues, and what if it became less taboo to talk about it?

That is the change I want to make, but as Mahatma Gandhi used to say: "You must be the change you want to see in the world". This change started with me being honest in this essay: exposing my vulnerabilities to you. This change continues as I take my story to the stage, by performing at various poetry slams or publishing my poetry online to expose my own experiences. Somehow, we as human beings acknowledge struggle, but only the struggle that meets our standards of 'true suffering'. By speaking up, I aim to open up a dialogue about this 'right' to feel sadness, and hopefully encourage others to do the same.

But that's not everything. Coming September I will be studying the postgraduate diploma course 'Behaviour Change' at University College London. This will equip me with the knowledge on how to change behaviour, and therefore perception. Together with my degree in Industrial Design, I aim to create the interventions needed to make perception change towards mental health a reality.

In my future career, I want to help local communities understand mental health better and stimulate them to support those who suffer through open conversations. Community care is more efficient than institutional care [3]. One of the ways to do this is by starting a project that encourages the mentally ill to speak up and connect with their community, since a helping hand, listening ear and someone to do activities with is already of tremendous help.

Acknowledging the right to speak up about struggles will make the world a healthier and happier place. I myself am living proof that it is possible to thrive despite my mental health condition: it is because I dared to open up about my problems and seek help. Wouldn't it be beautiful if everyone who suffered in silence was also stimulated to reach out for help, without the fear of being judged about their 'right' to feel sad or not? I did not give a reason for my depression in this essay: but I shouldn't have to in order to gain understanding. Mental illnesses are just as valid as any other physical illness.

That is the change I want to make: opening the conversation about mental health.

References

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[3] World Health Organisation. (2001) The World health report 2001. Mental health: new understanding, new hope. Retrieved from: http://www.who.int/whr/2001/en/