

“It might have been...!”

Chrys Ong, Senior Social Worker, HELP FSC

Like every Singaporean, it is natural for us to feel fearful at the height of the SARS outbreak. But we were able to take the precautionary measures and to face the issues courageously.

At HELP FSC, some of our single parents, their family members and friends are working in the health sector. They could have had close encounter with people suspected of SARS. Members of our staff at HELP FSC would also have occasion to meet clients who might have contracted SARS. Some might have fever and some suspected of having SARS. Whether or not it is SARS, it is a great awakening for each of them.

I would like to take this opportunity to share with you my own personal experience and feelings on SARS. On the 12th of May 2003, when every Singaporean was waiting for the World Health Organisation (WHO) to remove Singapore from the list in the SARS Infected Countries, news broke out that 20 to 30 patients and staff from the Institute of Mental Health were down with SARS symptom-like illness. I was then having dinner with my friends and when I heard this, my mind went blank. The night before, I had met up with one of the single parents who was working at the institute. This meant that I might have been exposed to SARS too.

After dinner, I went home feeling worried for the single parent, myself, my family members whom I am staying with and my colleagues whom I had been in contact with. I contacted the Ministry of Health to report my contact with the suspected SARS patient for contact tracing purpose. I also informed my colleagues of the situation and everybody was put on alert in monitoring the situation. With that, I started to self-quarantine myself even though I did not receive any official letter from the Ministry of Health.

The first three days at home were torturing and filled with fear and anxiety. Increase in temperature caused panic in me. By the fourth day, things seemed stable. I continued with my temperature taking, slept well, ate a balanced diet and was on alert, looking out for any symptoms of SARS. As for work, everybody in my agency was well prepared to handle this crisis. We started the “working from home” concept since April as a way of handling the crisis. This was to ensure that in the event that one of the staff came in contact with the suspected SARS case, those who worked at home at the time, were able to resume work at the office while others had to be quarantined. This would ensure that the service to the single-parent families would not be disrupted.

At the end of the self-quarantined period, we realised that it was a false alarm. It was a great relief for everybody, especially me! Not until the day when I thought that I might face death right at my doorstep, I realised that I had been taking things for granted. There are a lot of unfinished business with a lot of people in my life. Words that had yet to be said, appreciations that had yet to be told, and things yet to be done. It would be such a great regret for me if all these were left undone and I had to leave this world. I don't get to change how I am going to die, or when. I can only decide how I am going to live now.

SARS has indeed brought much pain and disruption in our life. At the same time, it has also helped us to build our resilience in difficult times. Together as a nation, we have clearly shown our tenacity that each one of us has in monitoring our temperature daily, by serving our quarantine order and refraining from travelling unnecessarily. We have shown that we can overcome difficult times with the support and encouragement from one another.

The paradox in life is that we always look for happiness in other people, our family, career or activities, but never learn, till a crisis occurs, that we must look to our inner self, to be contented in ourselves, before we can find happiness with others. The witnessing of others who have lost their loved ones or experiencing the loss of a loved one in the battle against SARS reminds us of the need to appreciate our loved ones, to reflect and review on our life and learn more about it, instead of having regrets of “It might have been...!”

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