

TUF Special Speakers Series – Summary Note

Date: 7th – 8th July 2011

Speaker: Dr. Kathy Chan

Objective: From Psychology of Teaching to Special Education

About the Speaker

Dr. Kathy Chan Po Man is a Specialist in Psychiatry. She read medicine at The Chinese University of Hong Kong and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Chan is currently in private practice and also serves as Part Time Lecturer of the Centre of Research and Promotion of Women's Health at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She is a Fellow of the Centre of Suicide Research and Prevention at the University of Hong Kong and has extensive experience working with children and adolescents with mental health problems.

Case Discussion – Self-harm and Sexual Abuse

Case 1: A Form 2 girl with the habit of wrist slashing

Wrist slashing is very common among teenagers. However, right or wrong is not the way to look at self-harm behaviour. Try not to give judgmental feedback and criticise her because it will be no different from her parents. Teachers are suggested to assess the possible risks of the girl. If injury is mild and there is no suicidal intent, teachers are advised to build trustful relationship with the girl through counseling. If there is suicidal intent, teachers should seek help from professionals such as social workers.

Case 2: The Form 2 girl revealed that she was molested by her brother

The case is highly sensitive. Sexual abuse means that one does not give consent or is not able to give consent to an advance of sexual behaviour. The Social Welfare Department (SWD) has a clear definition on sexual abuse. If the case is considered as sexual abuse, teachers should notify social workers at once.

Teachers are not advised to ask leading questions and details for clarifications when listening to student's testimony. The case should be referred to social workers immediately for further actions.

It is not uncommon that the girl and her parents will blame the teacher once the case is being reported. Nevertheless, the role of teacher is to protect the girl and act in the best interest of the girl.

Teachers are suggested to pay attention to those who are above 16 years of age but having early sexual relationships. Although these are not considered sexual abuse, the girls may be prone to the risks on drug abuse and other psychosocial problems.

Self-harm, Suicide and Suicide Attempt

Suicide rate of adolescents is not very high in Hong Kong when compared to other countries. But suicide as a cause of death among adolescent in Hong Kong is significant. Causes of suicide among adolescent include acute reaction to stress, psychiatric disorders, substance abuse, and impulsive or emotionally unstable personality.

When a student discloses suicidal thought, teachers should exercise both risk management and long-term management. If the situation is urgent, the student may need to be sent to casualty. If the situation is less urgent, teachers can refer the case to mental health professionals. In the long-run, teachers are suggested to counsel the student and try to offer help. Parents should be notified as soon as possible.

Depression

Biological symptoms of depression include insomnia, decreased appetite, lack of energy and so forth. Cognitive symptoms include guilt feelings and sense of uselessness. Female youngsters are twice more than male having emotional problems. Environmental, neurochemical factors and genetics are the causes of depression.

Teachers can help to modifying stress of depressed students by cutting down workload, offering support to the families, and giving psycho-education to families and students. Psychological treatment and drug treatment are also feasible and offered by specialists.

Anxiety, Social Anxiety, and Eating Disorder

Anxiety and social anxiety are common among adolescents. The majority of the cases come with depression. Teachers are strongly advised to pay attention to students who are trying to escape from classes. The physical outlook of youngsters with the problem of eating disorder may not be skinny. Psychological and pharmacological treatment is effective for curing the disorders.

Teachers can consider educating students on the issue of body image and raising students' self-esteem.

Psychosis

About 70% of cases of psychosis are caused by genetic loading. 80% of onset is in adolescence. Symptoms include hallucination, delusion, and formal thought disorder.

Case Discussion – Drug Abuse

A Form 3 male student was found falling behind in class, as well as stealing money from a classmate to spend at night.

Teachers should pay attention to students' suspicious behaviours such as frequently going to toilet and losing weight. Try to talk to the boy and understand the reason of

stealing money. The teacher may also consider conducting home visit and talk to his parents in order to learn more about the case. If the student has genuine financial needs, social workers are able to offer assistance.

Drug Abuse and Drug Dependence

Causes of drug abuse include depression, stress, emotional problems, genetic and environment factors. Peer influence accounts for 50% of drug usage among youngsters aged under 21. Other reasons include relief of boredom and curiosity.

Different types of drugs have different degree of dependency. Heroin has the strongest physical and psychological dependency while Cannabis is least addictive.

Types of Drugs and their Effects

Common types of drugs of abuse in Hong Kong include Cocaine, Heroin, Opium, MDMA, Amphetamine, Ketamine, Cannabis, and Inhalant/Cough mixture. Fatigue, irritability, appetite change, insomnia, depression, and increased suicidal behaviours are some of the withdrawal effects of drugs.

Managing Drug Abuse

There are five levels in managing drug abuse. They are:

1. Harm reduction – e.g. avoid driving, not to share needles;
2. Drug education – e.g. harmful effects of drug abuse;
3. Counseling on psychosocial difficulties;
4. Occupational rehabilitation; and
5. Relapse prevention.

Teacher's roles when dealing with drug abuse cases

Drug abuse cases are usually under-reported. The mean age of drug-use among boys is 15 years old while among girls is 14 years old. Teachers are expected to assess the risk of each drug abuse case and provide counseling to students.

The legal system in Hong Kong is not of much help to young drug users. In most cases, social workers will report to the police when the case is serious or is linked with drug trafficking. However, teachers should be aware of school policies when handling drug problems.

**Remark: The seminar was conducted mainly in Chinese. The synopsis is summarised by TUF who is responsible for the accuracy of the content.*