

[*'Lianhe Zaobao' article—written by Chen Yu Xin. English copy— translated by Nicole's friend, Rin Lim*]



Stepping Out of the Shadows, Starting a Website to Bid Farewell to Depression

32-year-old Nicole Kay was diagnosed with depression when she was 23. After multiple suicide attempts, she took nearly a decade to emerge from the shadows of depression. A freelance writer now, she helps people who face depression through stories. She set up a website last year and shares her personal stories online. In addition, she calls upon netizens to share their stories and from there, to encourage one another.

Depression is, in fact, not scary.

Do not limit yourself. If possible, find someone to talk to and seek help. You will find the support you need to step out of depression.

32-year-old Nicole Kay was diagnosed with depression when she was 23. There were several suicide attempts. She spent nearly 10 years to emerge from the shadows of depression. A freelance writer, she now helps people who face depression through written text and stories.

In January last year, she started a website '*The Tapestry Project*' (thetapestryprojects.sg/) and wrote about her personal stories on mental illness, the process of finding treatment and the route to recovery. In addition, she calls upon netizens to share their stories online and from there, encourages and supports them.

Nicole's story began gaining traction. The website hit 15,000 views within a year. She said that there have been various mental health-related volunteer groups who had contacted her for collaboration to discuss ways on helping even more people.

As of this year, she has a team of five volunteers helping her with different segments of the website, such as a readers' question-and-answer segment and book reviews pertaining to mental health.

In the first year, the website has published 52 stories, with Nicole penning half of them. The other half was contributed by guest writers.

Nicole said that during those 10 years of suffering from depression, she was unable to work and couldn't even leave the house at one point. Then, there was one day when she was watching a video channel by a lady in the States, who decided to talk about her depression through video.

"Her story made me feel I was not alone."

Then, Nicole asked herself, why not share my story online too?

"Someone once suggested to me to write a book (actually I am in the midst of writing one). But I find that an online platform would reach and help even more people who were like me, who may be trapped at home."

Unable to cope with high-pressured bank job

At 23 years old, Nicole graduated from university and joined the workforce. Although not from finance related course, she accepted a job position in the banking sector. Within a short period of commencing work, Nicole found herself often working overtime and faced intense pressure. Her body was unable to cope with the stressful demands and hence, she fell sick frequently and also faced difficulty in sleeping.

Recurring symptoms like flu, cough, weariness, insomnia set in.

"One day, I finally had enough. I broke down and cried in a clinic. The doctor then referred me to see a psychiatrist."

However, in the psychiatrist's clinic, Nicole's experience was not a pleasant one. "I felt that I was like a lab rat, being observed by more than 10 trainee doctors and interns."

Nicole stopped her treatment at the clinic, and her condition continued to worsen until 2011.

In 2011, Nicole wandered near the edge of suicide.

In her article, which was published in May last year, she described what it was like at that time: frustrated that her condition had not improved, her self-harming behaviour soon escalated into suicidal attempts, which happened every now and

then for months. In her darkest moments, she felt that she was weak and powerless; that the world would still be the same without her.

One day, in the wee hours of morning, at 5am, Nicole's husband called the hospital to seek help and Nicole was arranged to meet a psychiatrist. It was then that Nicole saw a light at the end of the tunnel.

During this interview, Nicole shares that this time around, the psychiatrist was different from the first one. This psychiatrist was experienced and did not treat Nicole like a test subject. He treated her professionally and prescribed suitable medication for her. She is currently still undergoing Cognitive Behavioural therapy and she is progressing well in her recovery.

Friends avoided her due to their ignorance

One needs great courage to write about self-mutilation and attempted suicide.

Nicole said, "With regards to self-mutilation and suicide, there is always a sense of shame. There are many misconceptions surrounding it. These misconceptions are mainly based on ignorance, and I wish to eradicate such ignorance. This gives me courage and a voice.

I believe that if we wish to see social change, it needs to start with us."

When an expectant friend found out that Nicole has depression, she was worried that this might affect her growing fetus, and therefore started to avoid her. This hurt Nicole a lot.

Indeed, humans tend to create misunderstanding and stigma due to ignorance. And it is time we addressed these misconceptions.

To those who suffer from depression, seeking professional help is important and essential. Nicole usually lists helplines on her website, and hopes that these contact numbers would aid readers directly.

Today, Nicole has regained her smile. She now tries not to overwork herself, does some painting, goes for walks and reads. She also has two cats and a dog, and relishes her time together with her pets.

Social media--a good platform for mental health discussions

Through *Tapestry*, Nicole has gained many positives. She is very thankful for the readers who have believed in her and helped share her stories through word of mouth, reaching their friends who are in need of help.

She is also very touched by the generosity and kindness of many 'strangers' through *Tapestry*. She said that in Singapore there are many passionate people who wish to make a difference in society; to make the world a better place.

She also found that, with regards to mental health topics, through social media, she is able to have open conversations without facing any barriers of stigma, making such a website even more valuable.

She hopes that in future she could continue gathering more stories and eventually publish them independently. Nicole also hopes to conduct workshops and give talks to help more people.

Early last month, she took part in a mental health campaign '*Embrace(D)*' by Nanyang Technological University - Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, and shared her experiences via that platform.

Embrace(D) was a thesis project initiated by Fourth year students Chen Wei Qing, Wu Yi Lei, Chen De Yong and Shahirah.

The group interviewed 400 people between 18 and 25 years old, and discovered that one in every four persons has symptoms of depressions. In addition, 30% of the interviewees said that if they were diagnosed with depression, they would not tell anyone about it. 33% of the interviewees were unsure if they would tell others about their condition. These results are very worrying.

Embrace(D) found Nicole through her website, and invited her to take part in their campaign to share her experiences. They hope to use Nicole's story to encourage people suffering from depression, to courageously face their mental health struggles, and to bravely step out of the shadows.

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