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Overcome the stigma

DR TING JOE HANG

I REMEMBER watching, a long time ago, a 1950s American sci-fi-horror classic called simply and aptly as *The Blob*.

The film had a simple storyline — a bad amoeba fell from the sky, developed a palate for human meat and consumed it voraciously.

The blob preferred the meat raw, with a dash of funky acidic ooze.

Of course, the townfolk then took their metaphorical pitchforks and torches to fight this evil blob.

To make a long story short, the good (meaning, humans, dubious though it may be) ultimately triumphed over evil (clearly the blob).

The blob was defeated and put in cold storage (a story which a lot of corporate workers can relate to, I'm sure, especially after a merger).

This leads me to ponder about the whole stigma issue surrounding mental illness.

Stigma is defined as "a mark of disgrace or infamy, a stain or reproach, as on one's reputation".

Stigma grows like a blob. It seeps into the psyche of the community and grows even more.

In the movie, as voracious and seemingly indestructible as the blob seemed, it had a weakness and it was the cold.

Unfortunately stigma doesn't seem to have any obvious vulnerability and is tricky to overcome. Therefore, it grows, festers and occasionally erupts.

Most medical diseases are accepted as an inevitable fact of life and they don't usually carry any stigma.

But certain medical diseases do carry a stigma such as cancer, HIV/AIDS and mental illness.

Cancer appears to carry some stigma because of a lack of understanding and fear.

For HIV/AIDS, most people think that those who contract HIV "deserve" it while some may view it as a punishment from above.

What they don't understand is that many people with HIV are innocent victims including children.

However, the stigma surrounding cancer and HIV has been greatly reduced by increased awareness and the active participation of various non-governmental organisations to teach the public about the two diseases.

Celebrities also lent their weight, allowing some of their shining aura or fame to fall on these illnesses.

I remember attending an oncology (cancer) conference a few years ago in London which was attended by Cherie Booth, the wife of the then Prime Minister of United Kingdom. She was not only a celebrity but a powerful figure.

Even HIV awareness had increased by leaps and bounds in the past decade or so.

Billions of dollars were poured into the research of this illness and now most people have a better understanding about it.

Celebrities openly came forward to condemn discrimination and the stereotyping of HIV patients. The public then began to find it easier to accept people with this illness.

I mean, if Paul McCartney and the gorgeous Carla Bruni tell us to understand HIV, hey who are we not to listen, right?

A huge cloud of stigma surrounds mental health

issues as well. Pretty much like *The Blob*.

Unfortunately, not many prominent people have

stepped forward to defend mental illness. Instead, they sometimes cause more harm.

For instance, Tom Cruise didn't help matters by putting down mental health professionals and patients openly.

He pretty much said he didn't believe mental illness existed.

He probably believes the old adage "it's all in the head".

Unfortunately, this helps to add prejudice to the public's perception of psychiatry.

Stigma weighs heavily on the world of psychiatry.

Various organisations held anti-psychiatry rallies during important world psychiatric conferences.

Insurance agencies excluded psychiatry in their policies and even films depicted psychiatric patients as psychotic killers or village idiots.

Almost always after a consultation, patients ask me, "Doctor, am I crazy or mad?"

Questions like this depress me, as they indicate a lack of understanding about the services and consultations offered by mental health professionals.

Mental health professionals have been trying to let the public know that their clients are regular individuals who suffer overwhelming stress and/or personal difficulties.

In the past, psychiatrists were not taken as seriously, unlike their other medical brethren.

Younger, less experienced doctors even asked me if they'd be inflicted by mental illness if they were to take up psychiatry. As recently

as 10 years ago, not many doctors wanted to specialise in psychiatry.

A decade ago, not many people would venture into psychology or a similar course as well.

Now however, many private colleges offer psychology courses and the response has been overwhelming.

In the past five years, applications to specialise in psychiatry has been growing.

This is a very good indication of the changing trend with regards to mental health.

First, the mindset of the professionals has changed. The younger generation is now interested in taking courses in psychology.

With this increased interest in mental health-related issues, it can only lead to the breakdown of the stigma surrounding mental illness.

With the increasing number of mental health workers, more can be done for the people.

Even the media has been writing positive articles about mental illness.

There have even been films that depicted the positive side of mental illness.

A Beautiful Mind, starring Russell Crowe, is one example.

There's still a long way to go to overcome the stigma but things have improved.

I guess when you're not far from the bottom, "the only way is up". Trust a psychiatrist to always try to think in a positive light.

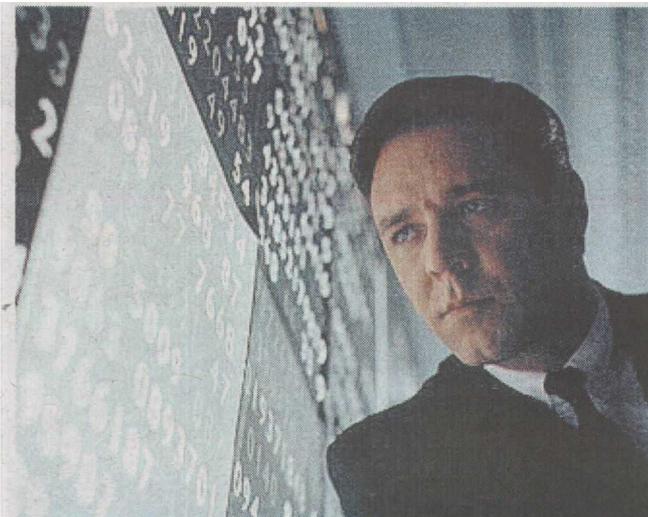
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Celebrity Tom Cruise (pictured here with co-star Cameron Diaz in his latest movie *Knight And Day*) didn't help matters when he said he didn't believe in mental illness



Actor Russell Crowe starred in director Ron Howard's *A Beautiful Mind* which portrayed mental illness positively