

Parents' desperation to avoid the *gila* ward causes their children to be denied timely psychiatric treatment. In some cases, this delay condemns their children to certain death, writes TAN CHOE CHOE

HER mind went blank when she found her daughter lying unconscious on the damp white bathroom floor, which was rapidly turning red.
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Someone was screaming, but Angie (not her real name) couldn't take her eyes off the horrific sight in front of her - her pale daughter, with her right wrist slit open.

Belatedly, she realised she was the one howling away, and she was trembling with fear for her daughter's life.

My husband came running in and everything else was a blur after that. I thank God every minute that my Jeanne (not her real name) survived that night, says the 42-year-old beautician, sobbing as she recounts the incident.

Her daughter attempted suicide almost two years ago, when the girl was only 15.

The signs were there, the doctors tell us, but I thought she was just acting out her normal teenage angst, says Angie.

It is all about listening to your children, says child psychiatrist Dr Zasmani Shafiee.

Listening is not the same as hearing. Many times, parents hear what their child says, but they're not really listening, says the consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist with Gleneagles Medical Centre in Penang.

She is also the chairperson of the Chapter of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry of the Malaysian Psychiatric Association.

Not listening to children can be dangerous, especially if it involves children who are feeling desperately alone, hopeless, and suicidal.

They try to tell their parents what is wrong through their words or actions.

They give warning signs, but parents often fail to pick up on them. Symptoms vary from child to child, but the main ones include the child becoming withdrawn, irritable for no apparent reason, sensitive over petty issues, or not wanting to eat with the family anymore.

In retrospect, Angie says that deep down, she always suspected something more than adolescence rage was going on inside her daughter.

A year or so before the incident, she became very quiet and always appeared tired.

Most of all she was very secretive.

It's like she was no longer the little girl I knew. There were also some cuts that mysteriously appeared on Jeanne, which worried Angie.

But she didn't think too much of them when Jeanne said she was careless when using the knife or that she had been clumsy during sports at school.

And then Jeanne started wearing long sleeve tees and track-bottoms at home to cover those self-inflicted cuts.

We didn't want to think our child was... weird. We hated her crazy behaviour. My husband and I, we didn't want to understand, Angie admits with a heavy sigh.

So instead of getting help for their girl, they got angry and shut her away in her world, constantly telling her to behave.

Some experts think this is a classic case of parental denial of their children's sickness.

Parents automatically think that if their child has mental illness, then he or she is *gila*, says Dr Zasmani.

So they reject the child's illness because they think it's not possible that their child is a Tanjung Rambutan (mental hospital) case. They are also afraid that society will think that the child's illness comes from them, that their *baka* (gene) is not good, because studies have shown that mental illness can be hereditary.

It's all about saving face because they (the parents) desperately want to avoid

the stigma that is still associated with mental illness. ♦ Some parents also delay seeking help from psychiatrists or psychologists because they prefer to think their children's strange behaviour is caused by ♦ spirit possession ♦.

♦ A bomoh is all right. But getting their child to see a psychiatrist or psychologist is the last resort because it is tantamount to admitting that their child is ♦ psycho ♦.

♦ And in Dr Zasmani's clinical practice, it has been shown that one's level of education has nothing to do with the inclination to believe such superstitious nonsense.

Parents also delay seeking help for their children because they fail to understand that mental illness encompasses so much more than ♦ crazy ♦ for ms like chronic schizophrenia, where the patients have to be institutionalised.

Many people also still cling to the myth that children can't suffer from mental illnesses ♦ because children have no problems or burdens.

♦ There's such high expectation on our children today and they struggle to keep up with our demands. They get stressed out like we do too, ♦ says Dr Zasmani.

More often than not, children come home exhausted not just from school, but the numerous tuition and ballet or music classes.

More and more children also sleep late to finish off their homework and get migraines and aches like adults do.

Dr Zasmani points out that society's attitude towards children have changed as we become more achievement-oriented.

Little do we realise that to the young ones, it seems as if we are making our love conditional.

♦ The need to achieve has become so great.

♦ Parents fail to prepare their children to cope with adversity and more importantly, failure.

We are killing our children! ♦

♦ Jeanne's suicide attempt coincided with her PMR examination that year.

She was later diagnosed with severe depression and during treatment, she told her doctors that she hated her life and hated going to school.

♦ What's the point? I'm not clever enough and I don't know how I can be good enough so that Mama stops shouting at me. ♦

♦ Angie sobs openly as she recounts this.

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