

# The Befrienders Talks on Counseling Suicidal Individuals



Richard Ng speaking at the event

On June 1, 2006, members of the Social Science & Liberal Arts Association (SSLA), along with the School's lecturers, attended a talk by The Befrienders. The event, organized by Mass Communications lecturer Ken Choong for SSLA, was held at the Lounge of Menara Gading. Richard Ng, the Executive Administrator of The Befrienders, was the guest speaker of the event. The one and a half hour talk on suicide, which began at 2:30 pm, was an eye-opener.

The Befrienders is a global network that provides confidential emotional support for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those that may lead to suicide. The establishment of The Befrienders came by as a coincidence in the United Kingdom when Dr. Chad Varah opened a centre to assist his suicidal clients. He discovered that his clients, while waiting for him, poured their pain and sorrows to his secretary. From there, Dr. Varah learned the importance of the role of a listener. Thus, The Befrienders was introduced with this concept in mind, to provide emotional support for the suicidal.

In Malaysia alone, the Ministry of Health recorded that an average of seven people commit suicide daily and some 140 others attempt suicide. Ng stressed the fact that suicides can be committed by anyone, regardless of the person's lineage, creed, race, or religion. Those who have attempted suicide before are a hundred times more likely to commit the crime again during their first year.



Members of the SSLA s listening intently to Ng at the event

Suicide is closely linked with a person's family history, psychiatric illness, or serious physical illness. An important division of suicide is called "copy-cat suicide" where a vulnerable person is readily influenced through graphics, motion, and verbal words to commit suicide. The bereaved members of the suicidal person not only suffer from self-blame and despair, but from socio-economic burden as well. Ng also explained some of the myths of suicide perceived by society. It should be noted that if a person stops having suicidal thoughts, it does not mean the end of the nightmare since problems come and go like the rain.

Lecture participants learned the risks of, and help and support suicidal persons. They are told The Befrienders are constantly in need of volunteers to assist their suicidal clients. However, only those aged 21 and above are eligible to participate. Volunteers applying as helpers are carefully selected based on their personalities, awareness, trustworthiness, and ethics. Selected candidates would then undergo nine weeks of intensive listening and coping skills training to provide them with better mental and intellectual preparations. Helpers should possess an excellent sense of awareness and full knowledge on the listening sessions. However, empathy is the vital criteria for a volunteer to possess. They need to acquire listening skills to gain a better understanding of the clients. Some of the main highlights of the event were the warning signs of suicide, risk factors, and various forms of assistance provided.

Towards the end of the talk, participants learnt that suicide is a temporary urge that can be erased through proper support and guidance. All that is needed by a suicidal person is a shoulder to cry on, and an ear to listen to their woes.

By Hasinah Abdul Halim for the SSLA Association