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ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

While saving face, mental health suffers

One issue hits home, over and over, as the Virginia Tech tragedy unfolds - mental illness.

Though significant numbers of Asians experience it, our reluctance to get help, seek counseling, even admit to the problem is gaining urgency after the massacre in which Seung-Hui Cho, 23, killed 32 people and then turned the gun on himself.

"There's no simple reason why we ignore this in public," says DJ Ida, who heads the National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association in Denver. "On the one hand, if somebody decides 'I really want to talk,' we lack another

al understanding to deal with it. On the other hand, we are from a community where you avoid bringing shame to your

family. You don't air your dirty laundry. You must save face. ... You hold it in."

That's it - hold it in.

In the course of my work, I've met plenty of people whose child, sibling or spouse shows signs of depression or isolation - similar signs apparent to Cho's college professors through his writing - yet who refuse to recognize it or react to it. The general result is there's no mention of suicide, or of schizophrenia, as each household rallies to protect its name while lacking



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understanding, resources and a crucial education on the nature of mental illness.

In Cho's case, his mother had told relatives in her homeland - the family lived in South Korea until her son was 8 - that he suffered from autism. We do not know if medical professionals ever evaluated him. In a statement his sister released to the public, she says she was not aware of his social alienation.

What is clear, to me, is when you mention mental illness among Asians, many turn away.

People struggling with those symptoms - they have trouble eating, sleeping, committing to a job - are often confined to the home, keeping them and their desperate pleas for aid silent.

"Parents think, 'It's a shame if my child goes to see a psychiatrist.' It's an embarrassment. There's nothing wrong. Some doubt that this type of illness can exist, or they think they won't deal with it and it will go away," notes Dr. Michael Wu, who runs a private practice in Brea and who's also on staff at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange. While younger Asians raised in the West may be more open-minded, older ones cling to cultural values that prevent them from "accepting, acknowledging failure."

"Asians have a strong sense of keeping the family structure intact," Wu says. Americans push the ideal of being an individual as compared to Asians who support the collective. And with this notion, as they struggle to please their elders, the pressure within the group is to keep a positive outward appearance.

"Asians are very honorable to their names," says Nicole Chang, senior staff writer for the Korea Daily News. "If others know their stories that affects their status or reputation."

In her experience, tragedies such as drug or alcohol addictions aren't usually enough to prompt parents to go to a clinic for advice. "It's not uncommon for a child to be hidden for years before it becomes so serious the person needs to be hospitalized," Wu adds. And in his experience, once treatment is offered, the family - with an emergency under control - refuses to continue with necessary medication.

Wu, who works with students via Cal State Fullerton's counseling and psychological services, tries a practical approach. He tells folks, "If you have high blood pressure, you need treatment. If you have depression, you need treatment. How can this be flawed?"

"People with grave mental illness can recover," Ida stresses. Society - including Asian society - can offer support by erasing the stigma, by not pegging it as a sign of weakness, and moreover, by broadcasting the message that mental health affects "all of us, from every little kid who felt crummy to an adult being bullied in his or her own environment," she said. Mental illness "comes with life. If you live it, breathe it, you're going to have feelings."

CONTACT THE WRITER:

This column on Asian cultures and communities appears twice a month in the Local section. Please contact Do at:
nvdailynews@gmail.com.