

Downside Up

Depression might have interrupted his life, but Mr Ivan Lim took the pause in positive stride to rebuild a better life. Interview KOH YUEN LIN Photos KELVIN CHIA

MR IVAN LIM

54, Author and musician

About 20 years ago, I had a great career as an entertainment journalist and was becoming increasingly well-known as a writer. On the personal front, I was doing well too. I was living in a three-storey home, owned a car, and was in a happy marriage. Yet there was an emptiness within me and I was getting increasingly unhappy and reckless. I was drinking heavily, and even got into a car crash while in a drunken state. Things spiralled to the point where my wife and I decided to get a divorce. One day, in the wee hours of the morning,

my mother found me alone in the study, in a stupor. I was so deep in the situation that I didn't recognise what was happening to me, but she saw the signs and made arrangements for me to see a psychiatrist the next day. The psychiatrist had a long chat with me. He later diagnosed me with depression and put me on medication.

Through the discussions with my psychiatrist, I came to realise that alcohol actually made me feel lousy. I had to remove myself from situations that required me to drink, including

visiting bars and clubs — which was what I needed to do for my work at that point. The psychiatrist said to me point-blank: "Then maybe you should change your job." So I did that. It prevented me from going down the road of alcohol abuse, and it made it easier for me to recover from depression.

I told one of my closest friends about my diagnosis. His response was: "Wow, you are so Hollywood!" as though depression was something trendy and something only celebrities would have. In reality, when I went to

seek help, I was in the least glamorous state ever, and the incongruity of it made me chuckle. However, my friend was trying to lighten things up, as the topic was probably too serious for him to take. This was in 2001, and though there was some level of mental health awareness among the general public at that point, most people were still not entirely comfortable talking about it, especially if it struck too close to home. Having an incomplete knowledge of mental health issues makes it an uncertainty that is frightening — like ghosts! So some of my friends stopped hanging out with me out of this fear of the unknown. They might have thought: "Oh this person has mental health issues, he might flip on me and go completely crazy."

"Wah, you actually went (to get diagnosed)? It's going to be on your records permanently!" some said. But while seeking psychiatric help seemed like my first recourse, it was also my last resort. It was something I had to do, and I cannot imagine what might have become of me otherwise. My mother — an educator who is quite in tune with mental health issues and now a very progressive grandmother to my son — helped me find the right help. And the diagnosis was a realisation of what was happening. I accepted it for what it was, processed it, and did what was necessary to get better — I took my medicine daily, managed my feelings and quit my job to avoid clubs and bars.

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Music has always been a part of my life. It allows me to express my emotions and makes me feel comfortable with my own feelings, be they positive or negative. Even before my diagnosis, I always listened to Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor whenever I was feeling down. It starts off grandly and then goes into a very heart-wrenching second movement, before ending with a triumphant third movement — I always feel like I am going through all the emotions that I need to express while I am listening to it. Incidentally, he wrote the piece after he came out of clinical depression and dedicated it to the physician who helped him get back on his feet. I don't know if he wrote the piece to help people with depression, but it certainly speaks to me.

Surrounding myself with people who have a positive effect on me — mentors, friends, family — is important. Conversations with my wife and just sharing a laugh with her, talking to friends who know what I am going through and can sense if I am not in a good state of mind, or even just receiving a text message from a friend asking how I am... all these help to keep my state of well-being in check. When you have a big enough support network, they will look out for you. You don't have to be ashamed about needing this network either, for you are part of somebody else's network too, and can serve as a pillar of strength as well.

My advice to those going through depression is to know that it's okay to not be okay. I have lost a number of friends through suicide as a result of depression, and every incident came as such a shock. I have met exuberant personalities with so much to look forward to and live for, yet they ended up killing themselves — perhaps because they

felt they couldn't speak to anybody about their condition due to the stigma that surrounds it. But there are many ways you can get help. If you're not comfortable talking to someone about your feelings, try apps like Wysa* on mindline.sg. It's a chatbot that takes the form of a friendly little penguin and helps you process your feelings. I tried it and thought it would be useful to someone who is a bit shy or embarrassed to talk to another person about his or her mental health condition. Help is available and accessible — and you are never alone, even if you think you are.



**Wysa: An emotionally intelligent AI chatbot that individuals can chat with and use to access a wide range of self-management and cognitive behavioural therapy exercises. Wysa can be found on mindline.sg, a Singapore-developed stress management and coping website that consolidates access to many carefully-selected local resources, including a clinically validated self-assessment tool for emotional well-being.*



Ivan is now re-married and runs an independent art and editorial business with his wife, with whom he has a teenage son. He is also a classical guitarist, and performs with Jam Music Collective, a local music group that writes and produces songs to raise awareness and promote acceptance of mental health issues.

