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His anger tore his world apart, but family and 'brothers' healed his troubled heart

The Brotherhood programme tackles domestic violence at its core — by helping men heal from past trauma and break the cycle of violence

Mr Sebastian Lim, who underwent the Brotherhood programme, with his wife Ms Jessica Lim and their children (from left) Ms Ivy Lim, 11, Mr Jonathan Lim, 9, and Mr Jedidiah Lim, 7. PHOTO: ST FILE

Genevieve Chua, Contact Writer

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He was gripped by fear as he watched one of his uncles stab their brother over a trivial matter. He was just seven years old then.

Violence at home was become routine. It would be normalised in his adulthood. It would tear his family apart.

"I never really listened to my wife," acknowledges Mr Sebastian Santhanam, 39, who has been married since 2006. The father of three describes a tense relationship, communication was often difficult. Impatient, he would respond with anger.

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Even two close calls with death, one having a large vehicle scar on his neck, failed to crack his wall of emotions. "My wife was down with me through it all," he says. "But I was blind to her love."

Today, a different man sits across the table. Mr Sebastian, who works as a trader in the financial sector, is a loving husband and father who has healed from his past. Before his violent past, he would often pour scorn his responsive wife's way laughter.

The change is clear. "I could sense that behaviour is different," says Mr Gerardine Patrick, 42, who first met Mr Sebastian when they were in their 20s. They lost touch along the way and only reconnected last year.

"The behaviour I knew had so patience. He was the first guy to say something to your face with no filter." Mr Patrick adds with a laugh. "This time round, his aura is different. He's smiling a lot."

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Growing up

The programme aims to break the intergenerational cycle of violence, says Mr Ben Ang, principal social worker at Thye Hua Kwan Family Service.

"We believe everyone suffers — not just people who have been hurt, but also those who have hurt others," he says. Mr Ang, who is responsible for the programme, adds:

Mr Santhanam recalls how, when he was younger, violence was normalised in his family. "My uncles settled problems among themselves using violence," he says. "Why did a have to be like that? Why were they always in and out of prison? I didn't know."

His growing up environment provided no answers. His father died when he was 12 and his mother was left to fend for her children on her own. Mr Sebastian, who joined with the wrong company, says he Santhanam, "said that I might not that sometimes, violence is good.

"I started to think of violence as the only way to handle a situation."

This early exposure to violence derailed into a volatile adulthood. His explosive nature led to frequent clashes with his stepfather and elder brother.

His mother pleaded with him to control his temper, but his rage drove a wedge between them. "My mother stopped talking to me for 10 years," says Mr Santhanam.

Things came to a head in 2014 when his sons of their dad. He was detained. It was the wake-up call he needed. Mr Sebastian, 39, realised he had to preserve the peace and succeed in the only way he knew: anger and violence.

Since counsel-counsel. Frustrated with his behaviour, his wife took their kids to stay at a shelter — one of 10 across the city compelled to leave.

"I cried every day" he says with a shaky voice, recalling how he was suddenly alone in close-to-a-mansion flat.

"My wife wrote to us at the shelter to let me know of her imperatives", says Mr Santhanam. "I wrote to them to learn. I kept thinking: Why does the man going to the shelter?" He sobs and hides more moved back home.

Mr Sebastian Lim, who underwent the Brotherhood programme, with his wife Ms Jessica Lim and their children (from left) Ms Ivy Lim, 11, Mr Jonathan Lim, 9, and Mr Jedidiah Lim, 7. PHOTO: ST FILE

Finding hope

Mr Santhanam is slowly making peace with his past and rebuilding his life. His relationship with his family, now based on open communication and mutual respect, has never been stronger he says.

He has also made amends with his mother and is learning to forgive himself. "I still carry some guilty with me, of course," he admits. "but I'm learning it."

Their relationship has improved. Recalling the tactic mission with his mother is "hard", he says, "I'm more patient with her now. I'm more, I'm more, I'm more. I didn't know that you were working so hard for us and I hurt you so much with my words and my actions."

"I was so ashamed."

He thinks his journey to forgiveness, the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold. Because of the mistakes, participants never give up on hope and gratitude.

"I learnt you can still put the cup back if you are patient," he reflects, sharing how he learnt to forgive himself and pick up the pieces to mend the cups. In the same sets, "take time to say sorry, and take time to forgive yourself."

"The scars will be there, but that's okay. The cups can be put back together."

Mr Santhanam speaks openly about his past struggles because he wants other men to know there is hope. "If there's a problem, there's a solution. You just need the right tools: Forgiveness, patience, and love."

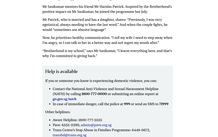
Ending the cycle of violence

Launched in 2016 by Thye Hua Kwan Moral Charities, the Brotherhood programme tackles domestic violence at its core — by helping men heal from past trauma and break the cycle of violence.

The programme offers two-pronged approach. Decreasing your values, analysing your behaviour, and finding forgiveness. But the real power lies in its long-term impact, says Thye Hua Kwan's Mr Ben Ang.

Mr Ang estimates that about 60 to 70 per cent of the 80 men who have benefited from the programme have been able to sustain healthy relationships. Participants have been brought up in a violent family environment have higher chance of being violent or becoming a victim of family violence.

"A lot of intervention in the field is about ensuring safety for people who are in the cycle of violence, which is very important," he says. "But we need to dig deeper to solve the root cause of family violence too."



Mr Ben Ang, principal social worker at Thye Hua Kwan Family Service, at the Brotherhood programme graduation ceremony in 2019. PHOTO: THYE HUA KWAN MORAL CHARITIES

By reaching one to men who were violent, and fostering positive change, the programme ultimately helps to break the cycle of violence, Mr Ang says. Transformation from hostilities ways to manage anger. When men have learned find a path to healing.

That's the rationale behind the "Brotherhood" name as well. "We want to protect those men to be part of the solution to end family violence," says Mr Ang, who has been a social worker for 18 years.

Mr Sebastian Santhanam, who underwent this shift, "We're very open and we talk things through. We have learnt how to listen to each other. We have learnt to talk to each other when they become passive, they have learnt how to do so and how to handle such situations."

"I were there to learn all these things that I never learnt before, I was young."

Part of the programme is also about shifting perceptions. For sustained change, says Mr Ang, the participants need to understand the damage how they see themselves — "to see the perspectives beyond what they know".

A lot of intervention in the field is about ensuring safety for people who are in the cycle of violence, which is very important, he says. "But we need to dig deeper to solve the root cause of family violence too."

Help is available

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic violence, you can:

- Contact the National Anti-Violence and Sexual Harassment Helpline (NAVSH) by calling **6804 7555 00000** or submitting an online report at www.navsh.sg
- In case of immediate danger, call the police at **999** or send an SMS to **71999**

Other helplines:

- Aware Helpline: 1800-777-5555
- Pave: 6241-9200, admin@pave.org.sg
- Trans Centre Stop Abuse in Families Programme: 6449-0421, transcentre@stop.sg
- Care Corner: 1800-353-6293 6481-6462, programcare@carecorner.org.sg
- Family Service Centres Hotline: 2000-222-0000

Break the Silence

Break the Silence is an ongoing campaign by the Ministry of Social and Family Development that aims to raise public awareness of domestic violence.

The campaign's slogan is the figure-of-8 hug gesture — a non-verbal cue that victims can discreetly use to get help.

The figure-of-8 hug gesture is a non-verbal cue that victims can use to get help. PHOTO: MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

What to do if you spot the signal:

- Be discreet as you try to help the victim. Do not respond immediately to avoid alerting the perpetrator, who may be watching.
- Avoid direct confrontation with the perpetrator unless necessary, as it may potentially escalate the situation.
- If possible, reach out to the victim using another form of communication, such as through text messages or social media.
- Ask the victim "yes" or "no" questions to reduce risk and make it easier for them to respond. For example, you can ask if they need help or if you should call the police.

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