

## **Circle of Friends (CoF) and Facing Your Fears (FYF) Intervention Programmes**

### **Peer support for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN)**

Peer support efforts in schools promote an inclusive culture where peers actively look out for one another. Students are taught strategies to provide practical help for peers who may require social and/or emotional support, promote positive mindsets and pro-social behaviours, and advocate for peers' well-being.

Students with SEN, in particular, benefit from having a network of peers who help support and journey with them through their challenges. The Circle of Friends (CoF) and Facing Your Fears (FYF) intervention programmes build on and extend these existing peer support efforts.

### **Circle of Friends (CoF)**

The CoF is a school-based structured peer support intervention for students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Students with SEN under CoF meet weekly with their Form Teacher or Allied Educator in Learning and Behavioural Support [AED(LBS)] and CoF peers, to identify their specific difficulties and devise strategies to address them.

CoF is conducted over five to eight sessions with the support of six to eight friends who have volunteered to be in the Circle. CoF has been offered to schools over the past few years on a request basis, with an MOE psychologist providing on-the-job coaching for the AED(LBS) or the Form Teacher facilitating the Circle.

CoF peers are identified by school personnel (e.g. Form Teacher) who are familiar with the student with SEN and his peers. Peers selected are usually schoolmates whom the student with SEN is comfortable with, are mature, helpful, and keen to be part of the Circle.

At the start of CoF, the school personnel facilitates the first few sessions to set ground rules and provide basic knowledge of the CoF process and the challenges that a student with SEN faces. Through the subsequent CoF sessions, peers will be able to acquire deeper understanding of how best to support their friend and hone soft skills such as active listening and problem solving. The facilitator plays an important role in guiding the Circle to come up with practical solutions collectively and helping to ensure that discussions and responses (which can often be emotional) are addressed tactfully and constructively.

## **Facing Your Fears (FYF)**

The FYF is a school-based intervention to help students with SEN who struggle with emerging anxiety<sup>1</sup>. It consists of 10 weekly sessions after school, with a group of two to four students with SEN who meet with a facilitator who helps them become more aware of their anxiety triggers and symptoms. They learn self-management strategies such as thinking helpful thoughts, deep breathing and taking concrete steps to face their specific fears through incremental exposure.

The group setting allows the students with SEN to offer mutual support and encouragement to apply the self-management strategies during the sessions and beyond. FYF is conducted by AEDs (LBS) who are trained by MOE Psychologists and Specialists.

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<sup>1</sup> Students with more severe anxiety issues or mental health conditions would be referred to professionals such as REACH from the Institute of Mental Health (IMH). REACH stands for Response, Early intervention and Assessment in Community mental Health - a mental healthcare service set up to work closely with schools, social service agencies and general practitioners (GPs) to help students with emotional, social, and/or behavioural issues within the community.