

Chapter 2

A Professional Dialogue with Professor Samuel Ho: The Development of PSY GYM

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Introduction of our Honorary Advisor and PSY GYM



Prof. Samuel Ho is a registered clinical psychologist and Professor of Psychology at the City University of Hong Kong. He is also the fellow of Hong Kong Psychological Society (HKPS) and the member of Division of Clinical Psychology, HKPS. He has been an honorary

advisor since we set-up the Personal Growth and Emotion Treatment Centre for Women, also known as Psychological Gymnasium, or PSY GYM. He is an expert in traumatology, resilience, and clinical positive psychology, and has many years experience in teaching and conducting research studies in these areas. Acknowledging the different rehabilitation needs of male and female persons-in-custody (PICs), PSY GYM was developed in 2011 to provide gender-specific assessment and treatment for PICs. Covering a broad range of therapies, including mood management, mindfulness practices, re-offending prevention and cognitions of hope, the programme consists of individual coaching and group treatment guided by clinical psychologists, adjusted to the needs and learning progress of individual offenders. We have been working closely with Prof. Ho since the opening of PSY GYM. In this interview, Prof. Ho shares his experience with clinical positive psychology and thoughts about PSY GYM's development and success over the years.

The Budding of PSY GYM: Bringing New to Old

PSY GYM was initially set-up because we realized traditional cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) alone was inadequate to improve the psychological health of female PICs. Positive psychology interventions (PPI) allow PICs to flourish, build to their strengths, and enhance positive emotions. Prof. Ho expressed his passion for applying positive psychology to clinical settings. He recalled, "I still remember my enthusiasm when I knew that a new treatment programme was being developed using positive psychology, which is an innovative and relatively new approach in psychological treatments. Compared to traditional psychological treatment approaches developed in the west, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and psychoanalysis, positive psychology emerged in the era of globalization. It assimilated ideas from different cultures and, therefore, allowed better generalizability across populations. In addition, it supplemented the long-established pathological model with new change agents such as hope. Combining the two models allows us

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to understand a person in a more comprehensive way." With Prof. Ho's encouragement, the PSY GYM treatment model was developed with core elements of PPI, including cognitions of hope, positive mindfulness, gratitude, and personal strengths. This programme is proud to be one of the first of a handful of treatment programmes around the world to adopt both PPI and CBT in correctional settings.





The Flowering of PSY GYM: Achievements and Challenges

“PSY GYM was an innovative programme putting contemporary psychology theories into rehabilitative practices,” Prof. Ho explained, “and I’m sure the process was undoubtedly challenging.” The development of PSY GYM faced many hurdles of which the motivation of PIC’s was the most pressing. . It is particularly hard for PICs to adjust to prison life given their history of clinical psychological issues, such as personality disorders, depression, suicidal thoughts, and self-harm tendencies. Once they have adjusted to a prison routine, they are reluctant to accept new changes, including joining PSY GYM where they must meet new friends and live together in an unfamiliar dormitory.

During the programme’s early days, due to limited resources and manpower, many offenders were sceptical about the programme’s effectiveness.. Prof Ho appreciates the hard work of the PSY GYM team, “I am impressed to see how you tackled the challenges. You have successfully created a therapeutic environment in which PICs live together, support and learn from each other. You encourage and prepare offenders to confront their problems by using role-plays and practicing problem-solving skills. This has built their confidence and consolidated transferrable life skills allowing them to be put into practice in the future.” Prof. Ho observed that, “The key is never ignore or avoid issue,

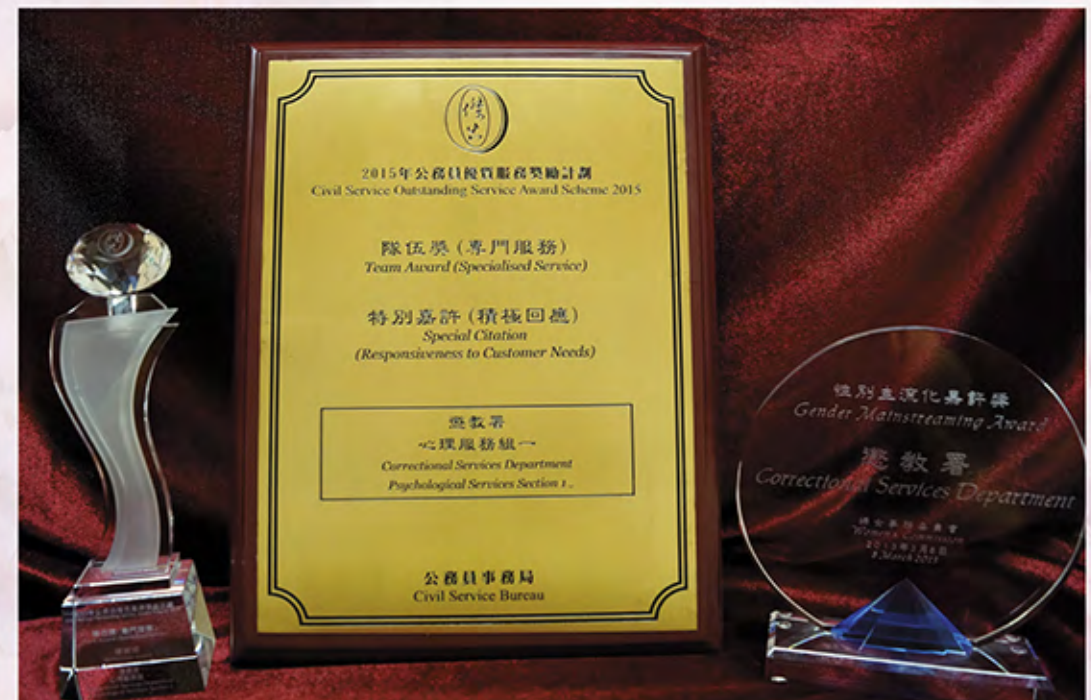
When evaluating the programme’s effectiveness, we collaborated with Prof. Ho to conduct evidence-based research on PSY GYM (Mak, Ho, Kwong, & Li, 2018). The results were promising: the combined implementation of CBT and PPI in PSY GYM was shown to significantly reduce the psychological distress symptoms in female PICs. With this background, we explored with Prof. Ho the possibility of extending PPI to other PIC populations, “PPI would likely work for offenders whose psychological distress is core to their criminal behaviours. In contrast, those with more deep-rooted criminality might need more help on their criminal attitudes.” This explained why PSY GYM participants, who have moderate to high levels of emotional needs, are responsive to PPI. The initial success of the programme has encouraged its modification over the last decade to include more positive psychology components.

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but to face and solve them upfront.” The PSY GYM team is motivated to continuously improve: seeing offenders use the acquired knowledge and skills in the real world is the most rewarding aspect of the programme.

PSY GYM’s work has been recognized, being awarded the Women’s Commission with Gender Mainstreaming Award in 2013 and the Meritorious Award and Special Citation (Responsiveness to Customer Needs) under Team Award (Specialised Service) in the Civil Service Outstanding Service Awards Scheme in 2015. Prof. Ho further added that, “Over the years, it has

been exciting to witness the success of PSY GYM and the recognition it has received, including in international journals, and at local and international conferences,” He was especially impressed with the programme’s originality and persistence. “Unlike other short-term projects which only focus on immediate outcomes, PSY GYM has a long-term commitment, that has been running for more than 10 years and continues to produce rich data and encouraging results. I think it is definitely a significant achievement.”



The Ripening of PSY GYM: The Road Forward

Moving towards the future, Prof. Ho agreed that the effective elements of PSY GYM can be extended to psychological services in other settings. Prof. Ho remarked on PSY GYM's success, "It is now a well-established, evidence-based service of the Hong Kong Correctional Services (HKCS). With advanced technology, PSY GYM's next step could be digitalizing the programme, making its content more interactive and appealing to young offenders. It can then be easily adopted in other settings."

We share a similar vision as Prof. Ho and are currently developing e-programmes for tablets.

We also continue to incorporate different elements into PSY GYM to better accommodate offender's needs. Prof. Ho has suggested another concept – trauma-informed care (TIC), a relatively recent development in the rehabilitation field to help people who encounter traumatic events or illnesses. On its suitability for female PICs, Prof. Ho believed that, "Detention in jail or other institutions is



considered the fourth most stressful significant life event on the classical Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory. It is understandable that some offenders might experience stress symptoms and adjustment problem during prison life. More importantly, incarcerated women often reported experiences of abuse and trauma prior to their incarceration, as reported in both literature and clinical observations. I believe TIC is a helpful framework that can be adopted by psychological services in correctional settings." PSY GYM has been working on this new development and incorporating trauma-informed principles into its programmes, these will include creating a safer environment and engaging participants in the planning and treatment process.

Prof. Ho has been our mentor and has suggested a variety of research directions, including our most recent research on community and family support and offering further insight on improving our existing services. Prof. Ho commented, "As we can see from the research results, building a strong community is essential for reducing recidivism. Different network building programmes should be considered to be added into PSY GYM



to support PICs to form new friendships and improve familial ties." The research introduced comprehensive community-integration programmes, for instance, peer-matching community re-entry programmes and family-focused interventions to strengthen offenders' bonds with their peers and families, in the hope of reducing re-offending rates of female offenders in Hong Kong.

PSY GYM is one of the most significant achievements of of HKCS's psychological

services. We have taken an innovative and evidence-based treatment approach using PPI and CBT, as well as taking new directions for gender-specific interventions in correctional settings. Our path has had its ups and downs, but looking back, we have been immensely fortunate to receive much helpful advice from Prof. Ho. We endeavour to improve PSY GYM with continuing research and development. We humbly thank Prof. Ho for his valuable advice and support in the development and work of PSY GYM.

Reference

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