

17 (Sunday Times 21 Mar 2010)

New programme to deal with stress

Don't be surprised if the new maid rubs the area under her collarbone every morning or sits occasionally with two fingers on her forehead.

She may just be relieving stress using techniques taught by a new settling-in programme for maids.

From May, employers can send their maids for lessons covering topics like personal hygiene, money management and Singapore's culture and norms, said the non-profit Foreign Domestic Worker Association for Skills Training (Fast).

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) said this month it had engaged Fast to run the programme on weekends at selected community centres.

The target is new maids and those who have been here for less than a year, said Fast secretary William Chew. It plans to promote the programme through employment agents and newsletters that MOM sends to employers of maids.

But will employers bite?

Mr Chew said it has designed the programme to be conducted over four half-days, so it should not take up a lot of the maid's time. Employers will ultimately benefit from having their maids know the expectations of Singaporeans, he said.

"A happier, better adjusted maid is a better worker," he added.

A source of stress for maids is the need to multitask, from cooking and cleaning to caring for a baby, said the trainer for the stress management session, Mrs Khiryati Kairi.

"We've heard of maids always taking Panadol, or always having a headache or a tummy ache. These are signs of stress," said Mrs Kairi, the chief executive officer of

I-Skills Learning.

Her Brain Gym techniques will involve body movements to keep maids positive, clear minded and energetic – with exercises like lifting the left knee to the right elbow, and vice versa.

She will also cover work ethic, emphasising values such as honesty and responsibility. The personal hygiene session will teach maids to care for their hair, hands and body, said trainer Allen Joey Chng, a former nurse.

He will drive home the difficulty of keeping long hair given the housework they must do. They also need to trim their nails to avoid contaminating food, said Mr Chng, the director of training at Grace Management & Consultancy who has trained maids for over six years.

Maids will learn to set their own goals as well and start saving, said Ms Veronica Gamez, executive director of Aidha, a non-profit group that runs finance and entrepreneurship courses for maids.

It could be to buy a cow, invest in land back home to grow vegetables or set up a new business like a bakery, hairdressing salon or a *sari-sari* convenience store, she said.

It also means teaching maids to talk to their family about controlling expenses to reach their goal, and to refrain from simply remitting all their earnings home.

Employers can sign up their maids from next month online at OnePA.gov.sg with the Foreign Identification Number, or at any community club with the work permit.

Fast will absorb the course fees during the four-month pilot run.

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- Sunday Times

21 March 2010