



# GOOD MENTAL HEALTH IS IN THE STARS

STORY: **YVONNE BOHWONGPRASERT**

Pilot project trains fortune tellers as mental health counsellors

**A** mother of two, Nan\* reached out to her family fortune teller, Ananwam Monritthitru, for guidance after falling into depression following a family crisis.

Her beloved ageing father had decided to marry a woman half his age without consulting anyone. The young mother had become emotionally distraught fearing that this would drive a wedge between her and her father, which led to insomnia and later suicidal thoughts.

Ananwam spent hours on the phone counselling her on how to manage her feelings at this vulnerable point. By looking into her past, he helped by navigating the

conversation in a manner that helped her to sort out her emotions without entertaining ways to harm herself any longer.

Ananwam said the case is one of many that individuals in the fortune-telling industry are accustomed to dealing with periodically by making projects such as “Developing the Potential of Fortune-tellers to be Mental Health Care Counsellors”, which was initiated by the School of Global Studies (SGS), Thammasat University, and funded by the National Research Council of Thailand, 2018-2020. It is a golden opportunity for them to up their game when it comes to bringing their clients solace from mental anguish.

Ananwam, who was one of 40 fortune tellers from the Royal Thai Astrological Association (RTAA) to participate in the project, said the 18 hours certificate course benefited him immensely because his profession deals with addressing human vulnerability.

“Thai society feels more comfortable asking their family astrologer for help in times of crisis than a psychiatrist, who is a better-learned person than us. I think it is just a cultural thing and there is probably not one Thai that can say he or she has never hired the services of a fortune teller, gypsy card reader, palm reader, and others. It is just that common.

“We know very well that going to see a

mental health specialist is still considered taboo among Thais even though this mindset is gradually changing. The bottom line is that Thais still opt to visit fortune tellers in order to pour their heart out to them."

Ananwam said he was one of many in his profession that felt glad the Ministry of Public Health has seen the importance of developing fortune tellers in Thailand to become mental health counsellors.

Two trainers from the Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health, were brought in to conduct the intensive three-day workshop and began teaching them the definition of mental health and the causes of mental health failure.

In the sessions, they learned about common mental health and psychiatric problems in Thai society and were introduced to screening methods for mental health issues using assessments under the topics: stress, depression, and suicide risk.

They were also taught how to use mental evaluation and guidance guidelines as standard screening practices.

Other areas covered during the training included developing the right attitude towards oneself, basic communication skills, and listening and observation skills. They also received know-how on questioning and listening, counselling, processing, reading, and inference skills.

At the conclusion of the course, they were taught to summarise the principles of counselling and told to apply various guidelines taught during the training while working with clients.

The Developing the Potential of Fortune-tellers to be Mental Health Care Counsellors project is the brainchild of a former faculty member at the SGS, Russian-born Ksenia Kubasova, who was involved in the inception of the project and the first stage of it.

While walking *Life* through the initial setup of the project, Kubasova said since she is a foreigner the first thing she did was to form a local team. After penning the proposal and getting it translated into

Thai, it was submitted to the university as a request for funding and underwent the approval of the ethical committee.

She also collaborated with professor Pimpanit Condee from the Faculty of Learning Science — who has a background in counselling, and who played a pivotal role in helping her coordinate with the Thai Astrological Association (TAA). They also took a course in Thai astrology to better understand the subject.

Much of the interviews conducted for data purposes were translated from Thai into English by Kubasova's students and were later analysed by her.



Besides the language barrier, Kubasova said gaining the trust of the TAA, who had already had a negative experience with collaborating with researchers in the past, became a challenge at first as they were hesitant to work with them. Luckily, they changed their stance after realising that they would equally benefit from the project and it was worth supporting.

"Initially most of the fortune tellers were of the opinion that their expertise was being threatened by attending our courses because they had been in this profession for years. In retrospect, I believe this mindset could have arisen due to their lack of knowledge about the nature of counselling. Their hesitation also came from their belief that mental health and fortune-telling are two separate spheres, thus their reluctance.

"As there is still a certain amount of stigma involved in counselling and psychotherapy, which requires medical treatment for severe mental health conditions, we had to address their fears on the subject," remarked Kubasova, who has a professional background in education/public health/project management.

A couple of her long-term goals include reducing the stigma the public has towards using mental health/counselling and fortune-telling in preventing depression. Educating fortune tellers and clients about counselling and access to other mental health services is also a goal. Moreover, she believes there is potential in seeing the project expand in the country.

Kubasova, who has since returned to Russia, hopes to see this endeavour grow from strength to strength as she believes fortune-telling is more a part of life in Thai society than anything else. Seeing it widely available at every nook and cranny of the country signifies just how much a part of Thai society it has become through

the centuries.

"What I love about Thailand is the open-mindedness people have towards traditional healing and astrology, from people in the higher echelons of society to the lower. Most families make major decisions only after consulting astrologists. The services of astrologers are needed for everything from bringing good luck to celebrating a special occasion. This is so unique to Thailand."

Piya Pangsapa, assistant dean for research and international affairs at the School of Global Studies, Thammasat University, said she is hopeful that the working relationship between the Department of Mental Health and fortune tellers will continue.

Piya said they had conducted a full-day follow-up session last month, called Lessons Learned, with fortune tellers that participated in this project, creating an opportunity for them to exchange experiences and share with them how they applied the skills and techniques they learned from the training.

"The general consensus was that the fortune tellers would like to see a more advanced training workshop to further develop their skills which would also increase trust in their clients. They strongly suggest and encourage that this kind of training by the Department of Mental Health become available for all practising fortune tellers across the country as it will help improve and maintain the quality of their fortune telling service.

"[However] the regular provision of basic, intermediate and advanced training workshops to train fortune tellers in mental health counselling all depends on whether the Ministry of Public Health will be able to support such an initiative."

\*Not her real name.