



I've learnt to think positive and look ahead.

Mr Tan Chai Tiam

Mr Tan is upbeat about his new job as a freelance salesman in the finance industry. He was unemployed for more than a year.

CLICK! start

A new support group for unemployed professionals is proving an inspiration. SY LEE reports.

THESE nights, Mr Tan Chai Tiam sleeps a little easier. Six months ago though, the 58-year-old father of three children, aged 15, 23 and 28, would toss and turn in bed, fretting over his financial situation.

"I kept thinking about money – where to get it, how to get it," said the former sales manager in the construction industry. "I thought, 'Why nobody wants me?' I felt useless."

Mr Tan was given a golden handshake three years ago, after 29 years with his company. He lost all his payoff – and 5 kg – trying to set up his own food stall.

"Money lost, health lost," lamented the man, who still owes \$10,000 in rent.

He does not have the cash to rent even a three-room HDB flat, whose rental is now higher than his terrace home in Seletar. To make ends meet, he sold

his car and dumped his mobile phone subscription. His working sons help with expenses.

"In the past, I felt too embarrassed to meet up with my friends. I bottled my feelings up, and I'd no one to share my thoughts with. Now, I've learnt to think positive and look ahead."

Mr Tan, who now works as a commission-based salesman, learnt this simple lesson from eight other people, who, like him, also spent sleepless nights thinking about employment.

He is one of the pioneering participants of CLICK!, a support group for unemployed professionals, managers, executives and technicians (PMETs) organised by Central Singapore Community Development Council.

The acronym stands for Come Learn, Inspire, Connect and Kickstart!

The project was mooted to help this group deal with the emotional turmoil they are undergoing.

Career consultant Lee Hsui Jane, one of the three-man team behind CLICK!, said that many unemployed PMETs, mostly in their 40s, suffer from low self-esteem after losing their jobs.

"Being ex-professionals, and often having held managerial positions, not to mention high-paying ones, they find it difficult to adjust to prolonged unemployment and job expectations."

Through the support group, the CDC hopes to encourage them in their job hunt.

Ms Lee adds: "We want to reassure them not all the doors are closed, as long as they are willing to try different doors. Sometimes, they feel comfort that there are others out there who are just like them, or even worse off, but who haven't given up hope."

Nine candidates, with at least O levels qualifications, were picked from the CDC's database of unemployed job seekers who have asked the CDC for employment assistance. The selected were recommended by their career consultants.

Care Corner Singapore, a non-profit organisation that does counselling work, helped with the programme planning with CDC.

The participants – seven are men – met for four two-hour sessions in May and June.

The first get-together session served as an ice-breaker. At the second, conversation revolved around job search experiences, when each recounted the countless letters of application they had written and the lack of response to these.

Roy Tan, 42, who was a project manager in the IT industry before he

was let go two years ago, recalled: "You send so many letters, but you don't hear from anyone. It's very demoralising."

By the third and fourth sessions, they were comfortable enough with one another to talk about such subjects as their feelings of despair and loss, and their own ways of keeping their spirits high.

One kept rehearsing himself for an interview, to improve his interview skills and build the energy to make it come true.

Another revealed his guilt at not being able to pay for his son's education in Japan.

Ms Lee emphasised that CLICK! is not a job referral project.

"We hope at the end that they feel more confident about their abilities, learn from one another's experiences and network in the process."

Seven have since found jobs.

One is Mr Roy Tan, who holds a business degree and never considered a career in sales as an option, but was encouraged to give it a shot. Now, he works at convincing people to take courses in options trading.

He said: "I used to think I can't do sales, because I'm more of a technical person. But after CLICK!, I realised I just needed a change of mindset. Hearing the others' stories, I tell myself, if they can do it, so can I!"

Although he is still learning the ropes, he said he is enjoying the job.

"I'm not a very eloquent person, but I'm honest, and I realise people will buy from me because of that."

Encouraged by all this, the CDC held a second CLICK! run last month.

Mr Tan Chai Tiam says he would join as "the sessions helped me. I hope I can help others too".



From left, Jonathan Siew, Lee Hsui Jane (CDC), Khiang Whee Fern, Anita Solomon (CDC) and Gilbert Goh (CDC), the team who helped put together the CLICK! programme.