



The lesson of untimely death: No one is immune from depression

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Mental depression, a subject once largely taboo in China, has been catapulted into public discussion by the untimely death of popular Hong Kong-born American singer Coco Lee.

The mental affliction that Winston Churchill described as his “black dog” cut short the singer’s life at age 48, after she attempted to take her own life and fell into a coma.

Lee was one of the most successful singers in Asia. She was the first singer of Chinese origin to release an English-language album in the world and also the first to perform at the Academy Awards, where she wore a red *qipao* and sang the theme song from the film “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.”

Yet behind the sunny demeanor that endeared her to fans lurked a darker side. Her sister said in a statement that

Lee had been suffering from depression for years.

As tributes poured in, the shockwaves of her death rippled across the Chinese-speaking world and beyond, evoking discussion of unaddressed mental health issues.

“There is a common perception that people who have worldly fame, wealth and high social status are happy, and that depression only happens to the less successful. That’s totally wrong,” Dr Feng Qiang, a psychotherapist with Shanghai East Hospital Affiliated to Tongji University, told Shanghai Daily.

There’s certainly abundant evidence to back that up.

In 2003, Hong Kong singer Leslie Cheung committed suicide after battling severe clinical depression for more than a year. In 2017, Chester Bennington, lead vocalist of American rock band Linkin Park, took his own life after struggling with depression almost all his life. A

year later, celebrated American fashion designer Kate Spade committed suicide after suffering from severe depression and anxiety.

Many celebrities around the world, from all different fields, have admitted that they have suffered from depression at some stage of their lives — among them actress Marilyn Monroe, singers Lady Gaga and Bruce Springsteen, US astronaut Buzz Aldrin and author J.K. Rowling. Even Abraham Lincoln admitted to bouts of melancholy.

Depression, along with anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder and addiction, are now the four most commonly diagnosed mental health issues in the world.

According to a report published by British medical journal *The Lancet* last year, more than 280 million people around the world were suffering from depression. Authored by 25 experts from 11 countries, the report sought

to give advice to sufferers and their families about what depression is and how to deal with it.

The report said that the lifetime incidence rate of depression is 10.6 percent on average, meaning that a person has about a one-in-10 chance of being clinically depressed sometime during their lifespan.

The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation. The World Health Organization recently reported that depression and anxiety cases increased by about a quarter in just the first year of the pandemic.

Major depression can appear in many forms: long-term feelings of sadness, hopelessness and emptiness, loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed, sleep pattern changes, weight gain or loss, fatigue, and very low self-esteem. Some patients may also report symptoms such as headaches, dizziness and diarrhea.