

Mental health fallout: How Covid-19 has affected those in Singapore

Covid-19 and its associated circuit breaker measures have exacted a toll on the mental health of people in Singapore. The Straits Times reports on the impact on various groups.



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Numbers tell part of the story of Covid-19 and the country's efforts to contain it. Cases here reached 21,707 yesterday. The number of deaths stands at 20.

But another set of numbers is also emerging, telling of the toll the pandemic and its associated measures have exacted on the mental health of people in Singapore.

Globally, there has been a surge in the number of calls to mental health hotlines.

CNN reported that calls to the United States' federal crisis hotline, Disaster Distress Helpline, spiked 891 per cent in March year on year. In China, hundreds of hotlines have sprung up and are inundated by callers, according to Reuters.

In Singapore, the National Care Hotline set up to offer extra support has seen more than 6,600 calls by the end of the month since its launch on April 10.

About 40 per cent of these calls were channelled to trained volunteers to administer psychological first aid.

Of these, over one-third - some 1,000 people - needed more targeted support and were directed to help services such as counselling centres or specialised helplines.

Ms Vivienne Ng, chief psychologist at the Ministry of Social and Family Development, noted that prolonged circuit breaker measures could have an impact on mental health.

These include the psychological effects that come with social isolation, boredom, resistance to authority and family tensions.

She is particularly concerned about an increase in depression among people over the medium to long term if there was a prolonged period of recession.

Statistics show that those with pre-existing conditions and socially isolated seniors are especially vulnerable. But there is also a discernible impact on those without pre-existing mental illnesses.

Getting help

- National Care Hotline: 1800-202-6868

MENTAL WELL-BEING

- Fei Yue's Online Counselling Service: eC2.sg
- Institute of Mental Health's Mental Health Helpline: 6389-2222
- Samaritans of Singapore: 1800-221-4444
- Silver Ribbon Singapore: 6385-3714
- Tinkle Friend: 1800-274-4788

MARITAL AND PARENTING ISSUES

- Community Psychology Hub's Online Counselling platform: CPHOnlineCounselling.sg

VIOLENCE OR ABUSE

- Big Love Child Protection Specialist Centre: 6445-0400
- HEART @ Fei Yue Child Protection Specialist Centre: 6819-9170
- PAVE Integrated Services for Individual and Family Protection: 6555-0390
- Project StART: 6476-1482
- TRANS SAFE Centre: 6449-9088

COUNSELLING

- TOUCHline (Counselling): 1800-377-2252
- Care Corner Counselling Centre: 1800-353-5800

ELDERLY

- Agency for Integrated Care Hotline: 1800-650-6060

At Whispering Hearts Family Service Centre, for instance, about 23 per cent of new cases last month came with family violence concerns compared with 14 per cent in April last year.

Family violence increases anxiety and distress in victims and witnesses, and can lead to longer-term mental health challenges, said Ms Evelyn Lai, executive director of Viriya Community Services, which oversees Whispering Hearts.

Surveys of the general population have also measured the different impact of the crisis on mental health.

An online survey of 1,000 people here by market research company Ipsos between late April and early May found that one in four respondents said they were not in good mental health.

Its findings are similar to an online poll by mental health charity Silver Ribbon, which found that a quarter of the 577 participants had experienced "more than usual" anxiety and feelings of low moods.

In a Focus on the Family Singapore survey of over 1,000 mothers, three in 10 reported feeling sad most of the time and about half agreed that they did not find the same pleasure in activities they used to enjoy.

Social worker Evangeline Yeh, founder of non-profit organisation Unity Movement, said she has counselled two clients who do not have mental illness but are now showing signs of it.

One is a 45-year-old tutor who is so worried that her parents may get Covid-19 that she has insomnia, difficulty breathing and is experiencing obsessive compulsive behavioural symptoms of repetitive hand washing.

The other is a 40-year-old business owner, who was so distressed over the company's survival and having to lay off staff that she would cry after team meetings.

Said Ms Yeh: "Without intervention, their mental distress is likely to worsen when Covid-19 ends as some of their debts and payments are suspended now but need to be addressed later."

Lack of personal space, family issues bother youth

Last month, a teenager suffering from depression committed suicide. According to her counsellor, the strain of being cooped up at home and a poor relationship with her parents contributed to her emotional turmoil, even though she had been trying to work through it.

The case was one of the most severe seen by the counsellor, Ms Megan Tang, recently.

Anxiety may cause kids to 'misbehave'

In the last month, 200 more children have contacted Tinkle Friend, a helpline for primary school pupils, such that more staff had to be trained to help man it.

The children want to know if they will lose their friends whom they have not seen in weeks, and how to manage their online schoolwork. They also worry if their parents or they themselves will fall ill.

Over 150 seek help from charity HealthServe

Over 150 migrant workers who were feeling distressed have contacted HealthServe in the two weeks after it launched its virtual counselling clinic on April 20.

Among these, three workers displayed more severe mental health symptoms that needed the psychiatrist's attention. Two were distressed from recent deaths of their family members back home and bearing the grief and guilt of not being with their families. The third was agitated because he could not understand why he was being transferred from place to place - from the dorm to Singapore Expo to the hospital and then back to the Expo within a short period of time.

Greater distress due to disruption in routine

Every morning, 81-year-old Peter Lim changes into his favourite polo shirt and pants, wears his shoes and prepares to leave the house.

For the last decade, Mr Lim, who has dementia, has settled into a routine of going to the hawker centre for lunch with his wife. But since the circuit breaker measures kicked in last month, his son Daniel Lim has had to stop him from leaving the house.

Coping without face-to-face therapy, going online for help

The circuit breaker has been a period of extreme isolation for Mr Daniel Ler. He lives alone, works from home, has few friends to talk to, and now even has reduced access to his psychiatrist, who is not seeing patients face to face until June 1.

The 39-year-old, a freelance programmer, was diagnosed three years ago with manic depression, also known as bipolar disorder.