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Date: 23 August 2021

Headline: Half of S'pore youths reported Covid-19 mental health issues in 2020, stressed about anxiety over future

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The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant psychosocial impact on the mental well-being of the Singapore population, leading to increased usage of mental health services.

This was announced by the Covid-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce's (CoMWT) after it completed its review. The taskforce was convened in October last year.

Impact on Singapore's population

An Institute of Mental Health (IMH) study found that, across the board, about 13 per cent of the population reported experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety from May 2020 to June 2021.

The CoMWT also highlighted two distinct groups of people — youths and older adults — who were particularly strained by the pandemic.

Youths

Over half of the youth population, or 52 per cent, reported that mental well-being was a challenge during the second half of 2020.

The top stressors mentioned by youths were anxiety over the future (53 per cent), stress over finances (41 per cent), and worries about academic or work performance (39 per cent).

These results emerged from the National Youth Council's (NYC) polls on the challenges and sentiments of Covid-19 experienced by youths in Singapore, which were conducted between April and Dec. 2020.

The CoMWT said that these findings highlight the importance of identifying ways to support our youth through the pandemic.

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This includes strengthening their ability to cope with anxiety and uncertainty, promoting help-seeking behaviours and peer support efforts, and providing assurances about education prospects and career support.

Older adults

Older adults in Singapore reported a stark increase in feelings of isolation as the circuit breaker began in April 2020, with larger increases reported by those living alone.

This was based on the findings of a Singapore Life Panel study by the Singapore Management University Centre for Research on Successful Ageing, which assessed the attitudes, behaviours and well-being of older Singaporeans during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Feelings of social isolation is often associated with negative mental health outcomes, and so the CoMWT recommended strengthening social and mental well-being effort, especially for those who live alone.

More people called mental health hotlines

IMH also received 50 per cent more callers in 2020, as compared to the same period in 2019.

During this time period, the number of callers peaked in April 2020, which was the start of the circuit breaker, and gradually decreased towards the end of the year.

However, the number of calls increased again between January and May 2021.

Amongst the concerns mentioned by callers were anxiety from having to adjust to working from home or home-based learning, and being socially isolated, which gradually tapered off in June 2020.

On the other hand, concerns such as friction with family members, and job insecurity persisted.

In response to the pandemic, the National CARE Hotline (NCH) was launched in April 2020 to provide support to those facing mental health concerns related to Covid-19. By May 2021, the centre had received 45,000 calls.

During this time, the top concerns mentioned by callers were the need for emotional support, mental health related issues and family-related or social matters.

40 initiatives introduced, or ramped up

Clearly the community and organisations saw the need for mental well-being during the pandemic, and over 40 initiatives were set up to address the psychosocial impact of the disease.

The initiatives range from those that promote mental well-being, and prevent the development of mental health conditions to others which facilitated early detection and treatment of mental health conditions.

Mental health portal and national strategy among recommendations

In its review, the CoMWT identified three key recommendations.

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Firstly, it proposes to develop a National Mental Health and Well-being Strategy, which will provide overarching whole-of-government goals and strategies to improve mental health, which will guide the individual efforts of various agencies.

The government will engage the public through a public consultation next year to develop this strategy.

Second, the taskforce proposes to develop a one-stop online portal for national mental health resources, which will be run by the Health Promotion Board. This portal will feature mental health and well-being content which will be curated by experts.

Work on the portal has already started and the Health Promotion Board expects to roll out the pilot version of it later this year.

Lastly, the CoMWT proposes to develop a National Mental Health Competency Training Framework for professionals and para-professionals who support persons with mental health conditions. This will lay out a common set of training standards and clearly defined degrees of competencies.

The recommendations made in the CoMWT's review will be implemented by the new Interagency Taskforce on Mental Health and Well-being which will be chaired by Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information, Janil Puthucheary. The Minister for Social and Family Development, Masagos Zulkifli will act as advisor.