

Publication: The Straits Times Online

Date: 23 August 2021

Headline: Mental wellness task force offers 3 recommendations to tackle Covid-19's impact on S'poreans

Mental wellness task force offers 3 recommendations to tackle Covid-19's impact on S'poreans



More than half of the young people polled by the National Youth Council in the second half of 2020 said that mental well-being was a challenge for them, with some citing anxiety over the future, stress over finances, and worries about academic or work performance.

The answers reflect some of the ways in which Covid-19 has impacted the mental health of the population here, the Covid-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce said on Monday (Aug 23).

At a virtual briefing, the task force identified issues with Singapore's mental health landscape and offered three recommendations to address them: by developing a national mental health and well-being strategy, through building a one-stop online portal for national mental health resources, and by creating a national mental health competency training framework.

Noting that the pandemic had affected both young and old, the task force pointed to a study by the Singapore Management University Centre for Research on Successful Ageing, which found that older Singaporeans reported a stark increase in feelings of isolation as the circuit breaker began in April 2020.

Another study, by the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) to assess the population's psychological response during the pandemic, found that about 13 per cent of those surveyed experienced symptoms of depression or anxiety between May 2020 and June 2021.

Publication: The Straits Times Online

Date: 23 August 2021

Headline: Mental wellness task force offers 3 recommendations to tackle Covid-19's impact on S'poreans

IMH's Mental Health Helpline also had 50 per cent more callers in 2020 compared with 2019, with a peak in April 2020 coinciding with the start of the circuit breaker period. The number of calls gradually decreased towards the end of 2020, but went up again between January and May 2021.

The task force said: "Covid-19 has brought unprecedented shifts into our lives. The fear of infection, changes in our daily routine and social isolation brought about by safe management measures, as well as economic uncertainty, are stressors that have impacted the mental well-being of many individuals."

Various agencies stepped up to tackle this issue, said the task force. For instance, the National Care Hotline was launched in April 2020 to support those facing mental health concerns related to Covid-19. By the end of May 2021, the hotline had handled over 45,000 calls.

Over 40 initiatives were also introduced to promote mental well-being, help those with mental health needs, and directly address stressors that can impact mental health.

But there is room for improvement in three areas, said the task force.

First, a range of agencies currently play different roles in the mental health and well-being landscape. There is a need for an overarching strategy to help align these groups and track the progress of efforts.

So the task force is recommending that a national mental health and well-being strategy be developed. The Government will carry out a public consultation on this next year.

Second, while there are many online resources on mental health, finding the right information can be confusing and overwhelming.

With this in mind, the Health Promotion Board (HPB) is developing a national portal for mental health resources to be curated by experts. The portal will be hosted on HealthHub, and a pilot version will be rolled out later this year.

Third, multiple agencies currently conduct mental health training for different groups in the community.

The task force said a national mental health competency framework should be developed with a common set of training standards and clearly defined degrees of competencies expected of professionals and para-professionals who support those with mental health conditions.

Asked by The Straits Times why it did not recommend legislative action, such as mandatory mental health days off, the taskforce said: "(Legislative) acts can be potentially coercive. The more important thing we want to do is to co-create a solution that the population - both the professions in the public and private sector - can understand and want to do something together about."

It added that raising awareness, increasing mental health literacy and getting people to participate in mental health initiatives are key to this.

Publication: The Straits Times Online

Date: 23 August 2021

Headline: Mental wellness task force offers 3 recommendations to tackle Covid-19's impact on S'poreans

The implementation of the task force's recommendations will be overseen by the new Interagency Taskforce on Mental Health and Well-being. Set up by the ministries of Health and Social and Family Development, it will oversee mental health efforts beyond Covid-19, focusing on issues that require interagency collaboration.

Chaired by Senior Minister of State for Health, and Communications and Information Janil Puthucheary, the new task force's 21 members include Minister of State for Education, and Social and Family Development Sun Xueling, and representatives from the Institute of Mental Health and the National Trades Union Congress.

The Covid-19 task force said the appointment of Dr Janil as the new task force's chair signals the importance of mental wellness.

"Mental health and well-being of the population are things that will continue to be important beyond Covid-19, and therefore the (new) task force... is going to become something that is more permanent and will look at broader issues," said the Covid-19 task force.

Dr Janil said the new task force has already started work and begun discussing areas of focus in the coming months.

"We look forward to engaging Singaporeans in this national, important effort to enhance our mental health and well-being," he said.