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**Headline: Singapore to develop national portal for mental health resources**

## **Singapore to develop national portal for mental health resources**



Singapore's Ministry of Health through the Health Promotion Board is building an online portal that will serve as a trove of resources for mental health.

The website will feature mental and wellbeing content "curated by experts". The information will be a resource for "individuals who want to find information for themselves or their loved ones". It will be introduced on HealthHub, the ministry's web and mobile app-based platform that hosts a range of health content, rewards and e-services.

According to a press statement, the HPB is planning to launch the pilot web portal in the latter part of this year.

### **WHY IT MATTERS**

The development of an online portal for national mental health resources is one of the key recommendations by the COVID-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce (CoMWT) to address the psychosocial impact of the pandemic on the Singaporean population.

The task force said the existence of numerous online resources on mental health and wellbeing can be "confusing and overwhelming" for those who are seeking information. Based on engagement sessions of the Youth Mental Well-being Network with over 1,500 individuals, there are some concerns with the "currency, legitimacy and credibility" of the information found on various online sites.

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## **THE LARGER CONTEXT**

Aside from the need for a one-stop online repository of resources around mental wellness, the CoMWT, which was set up last year in October, identified two other key issues that must be addressed through a whole-of-government approach: The need for an overarching strategy to guide the alignment and track the progress of efforts around mental health across government agencies; and secondly, a better alignment of mental health training resources and more trained mental health professionals.

Given these issues, the health ministry moved forward with expanding the task force into an interagency platform that will primarily oversee the implementation of the recommended actions on the stated issues.

It will supervise the development of a national mental health and wellbeing strategy, which will be developed through a public consultation for next year. After the national strategy is formed, it will then track the progress of its implementation and impact.

The interagency will also coordinate efforts and monitor outcomes, "focusing on cross-cutting issues that require multi and interagency collaborations". The new body will be led by Dr Janil Puthuchery, senior state minister of the MOH.

Moreover, the task force has recommended setting up a national mental health competency framework with a common set of training standards and degrees of competencies expected of professionals and para-professionals who support persons with mental health conditions.

Based on in-depth research conducted by the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) about 13% of over 1,000 Singaporean adults polled between May 2020 and June 2021 said they experienced symptoms of depression or anxiety.

Over half of youth respondents surveyed by the National Youth Council claimed that the pandemic has challenged their mental wellbeing. Top stressors cited were anxiety over the future, stress over finances and worries about academic or work performance.

Another study conducted by the Singapore Management University's Centre for Research on Successful Ageing found a "stark" increase in feelings of isolation among the elderly since the imposition of a lockdown in April last year.

The IMH has observed a 50% rise in calls made via its Mental Health Helpline last year compared to the previous year. Although it gradually waned by the end of 2020, there was an uptick again between January and May this year. Callers cited concerns such as anxiety from work-from-home adjustments or home-based learning and social isolation.

The National CARE Hotline, another service that was launched to provide psychological first aid and emotional support, has received over 45,000 calls as of May this year. The top three issues heard through the hotline were the need for emotional support, mental health-related issues and family-related or social matters.

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To support Singaporean citizens' mental health, various government agencies and non-profit organisations launched or expanded some 40 initiatives during the pandemic.

One of these is mindline.sg by the MOH Office for Healthcare Transformation. It is a web-based repository of resources and tools to improve mental wellbeing. Users can access a clinically validated self-assessment tool through the portal to understand their state of emotional wellbeing. Based on the assessment, the platform can recommend appropriate intervention and support channels.

### **ON THE RECORD**

"To succeed, we need to internalise the lessons learnt, not only in managing infectious diseases but also in addressing the mental health needs of the population moving forward. This is one of the key reasons why we have evolved the COVID-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce... to look at addressing the population's mental health in the longer term, with a focus on cross-cutting issues across agency lines," Masagos Zulkifli, Singapore's second Minister for Health, said in a speech delivered at the Singapore Mental Health Conference on Tuesday.