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The long working hours and constant changes to Covid-19 protocols have taken a toll on the mental wellbeing of healthcare workers here as Singapore continues to battle the pandemic.

Many of these workers are also afraid of being suddenly redeployed to another role altogether to meet the surge in Covid-19 cases, Dr Tan Weng Mooi, Director of InHealth at Singapore's Ministry of Health Office of Transformation, said at a webinar on mental health on Thursday (Oct 7).

A panel of experts present at the webinar warned the Covid-19 pandemic would exacerbate existing mental health problems.

This is coupled with the stigma, more prevalent in Asian cultures, about revealing one's mental health condition and could lead to fewer people seeking help.

The hour-long virtual webinar titled: The long tail of Covid-19: Global Mental Health Challenges in a Post-Pandemic World was organised by Yale-NUS College, drew several hundred people to attend from around the world.

It was also held in conjunction with World Mental Health Day, which falls on Oct 10. The issue of mental health on healthcare workers was emphasised, given the currency of the pandemic and the increased stress and workload on caregivers and healthcare providers.

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One of the panellists, Dr Cory Nam, who is the Associate Dean of Students at Yale-NUS, said: "Stigmas do contribute to hiding parts of ourselves, and help-seeking behaviours. And we know that when we avoid getting the help and support that we need, it builds up and it can compound already existing issues... And when you add something like Covid-19 into the mix, it just completely takes it to the next level."

Mental disorders are also associated with the loss of productivity and have been costly on the economic front, the panellists said.

A report in 2019, produced by healthcare consultancy firm Asia Care Group on behalf of health insurance and services company Cigna, found that Singapore spends about US\$2.3 billion (S\$3.1 billion), or 18 per cent, of its total healthcare expenditure on stress-related illnesses annually.

This put the nation's proportion of expenditure on stress-related illnesses second-highest out of the nine regions studied in the report, coming just 0.8 per cent behind Australia's 18.8 per cent.

The other seven regions were Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The panellists also stressed the importance of self care, without feeling guilty about it or seeing it as a selfish act.

Some ideas for self care include setting up a routine and going back to these familiar routines as it helps to give a person a sense of control and comfort. People should also take time to recharge and refresh, such as going for a 30 minute walk or having a chat with their family.

Singapore's Covid-19 mental health task force, which was set up in October last year to look into the psycho-social impact of the pandemic on the population, noted in August this year 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.

The taskforce identified issues with Singapore's mental health landscape and offered three recommendations to address them: developing a national mental health and well-being strategy, building a one-stop online portal for national mental health resources, and creating a national mental health competency training framework.