

Coronavirus outbreak

## Charities offer free online counselling to ease fear, anxiety about outbreak



Employees from a cleaning company taking a break after disinfecting a site. Silver Ribbon executive director Porsche Poh said some people have become highly anxious about catching the coronavirus. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

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Psychologists also providing their services pro bono or at lower rates

Theresa Tan Senior Social Affairs Correspondent

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At least two charities have started offering online counselling services for free to help those who are anxious and fearful about the coronavirus outbreak, which shows no signs of abating more than a month after it erupted in Singapore.

Fei Yue Community Services extended its online counselling portal for this purpose on Monday, while Silver Ribbon (Singapore) started providing online emotional support from last Wednesday.

Fei Yue Community Services' counselling is conducted via online chat messaging, while Silver Ribbon's is done via a video call.

Meanwhile, a group of psychologists is providing its services pro bono or at reduced rates for those distressed by the outbreak, after the Singapore Psychological Society rallied its members.

The society's president, Dr Cherie Chan, said: "Now that the nation is facing this issue, we felt we should stand together as a community and do what we can to provide psychological support and defence."

One of those providing their services pro bono is Mr Andy Sim of Hanns Counselling. He is a counsellor and psychotherapist who wants to do his part to help the community during this difficult period.

Silver Ribbon, which provides free counselling for those struggling with mental health woes, started its online counselling initiative after getting queries from the public and some companies, whose staff had been in contact with a coronavirus patient or felt stressed by the outbreak.

Ms Porsche Poh, the charity's executive director, said: "Every day, you get news of the number of people infected and the number of deaths. And you are being constantly reminded to wash your hands. So some people have become highly anxious about catching the virus."

Since its online counselling service was launched, it has counselled a 19-year-old student who had a fever and feared he was going to die even though he was not diagnosed with the coronavirus, and a 35-year-old who washes her hands every 30 minutes as she is so afraid of being infected.

A spokesman for Fei Yue Community Services said online counselling is a good medium now as some people are afraid to leave their homes for fear of catching the virus while others are quarantined and cannot go out.

"It is a convenient and anonymous platform that gives these people a safe space to share their concerns and fears," she said.

Ms Annelise Lai, a clinical psychologist at Resilienz Clinic, said: "During this stressful period, it is not a surprise that people can become more tense, irritable and edgy.

"Furthermore, continuous changes in protocol and routine, such as working from home, are going to increase one's stress level."

Counsellors and psychologists said the sense of fear and uncertainty over a prolonged period due to the outbreak adds to the strain already felt by those facing other woes, such as work stress and family problems.

The economic malaise due to the coronavirus has also precipitated fears of job losses or pay cuts due to shorter working hours.

Hence counsellors expect more people to seek financial and other forms of help.