

COVID-19 SPECIAL

Anxiety and worry amid Covid-19 uncertainty

Many face stress as isolation, job prospects and family woes worsen in pandemic: Experts



Adding to the massive uncertainty is the emerging evidence of asymptomatic transmission. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

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For the past three months, the 55-year-old housewife has barely stepped out of her home.

She was so fearful of contracting Covid-19 that she made her three children maintain a distance of a few metres away from her at all times in their flat.

The woman later called Silver Ribbon (Singapore), a charity that provides free counselling for those with mental health woes, for help.

It turned out that she suffers from generalised anxiety disorder, which is characterised by persistent and excessive worrying, said the charity's executive director Porsche Poh.

Her condition was stable but she suffered a relapse due to the Covid-19 chaos.

Psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors say that while much of the healthcare focus this pandemic has been on those infected with the coronavirus, another key concern is the mental health of the general population, owing to the protracted and uncertain nature of the crisis.

Exacerbating the problem is the social isolation enforced to contain the outbreak.

Mr Gasper Tan, chief executive of Samaritans of Singapore, said: "The fear of being infected, having no control over the situation and the potential financial insecurity over a prolonged period of time can be detrimental to one's mental health. Being exposed to prolonged stress may overwhelm an individual with intense feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness."

Those interviewed say that some of their clients suffering mental illnesses such as depression and obsessive compulsive disorder have suffered a relapse or that their conditions have worsened.

There is also a growing group of those who find themselves going under mentally.

As social services are considered essential, social service offices and residential homes such as those that house destitute seniors will continue to stay open even after the shutdown of most workplaces that will take effect from Tuesday.

On top of this, new counselling services conducted via phone or online are being rolled out to meet the increased need.

Care Singapore, a charity, is launching a free counselling service called HEAR4U tomorrow, joining Fei Yue Community Services and Silver Ribbon which started similar efforts in February.

Care Singapore's head of enterprise division Anthony Chng said: "Our intent is to help Singaporeans cope with negative feelings of fear, anxiety, despair and foster hope for everyone to soldier on as a nation."

Anyone can contact Care Singapore through WhatsApp messages and its counsellors will get in touch with them for counselling, such as through the phone.

Both Silver Ribbon and Fei Yue have seen a steady stream of people, from teenagers to seniors, seeking help in the past month.

Fei Yue's counselling is conducted via online chat messaging, while Silver Ribbon's is done via a video call. This is to cater to those who do not want to leave their homes.

Fei Yue has counselled more than 100 people, while Silver Ribbon has counselled more than 50, in their first month of the initiative.

They include a 40-year-old woman who has been hunting for a job without success for months and fears it would be much harder to land a job now.

Another is a 70-year-old woman who is affected by news of panic buying and is now worried about catching the virus and dying from it.

There are also those affected by separation from their loved ones, when Malaysia closed its borders last month, said Ms Wong Ying Li, head of Fei Yue's Youth Services.

For those with strained family ties, the stress of working from home 24/7 may just make things worse, said those interviewed.

Dr Munidasa Winslow, senior consultant psychiatrist at Promises Healthcare, said: "My patients are already freaking out. They feel their families are the source of their problems and they have to be in close contact with them for a month."

Those interviewed expect more people to seek help as the virus shows no signs of abating and the economic gloom deepens.

Adding to the massive uncertainty is the emerging evidence of asymptomatic transmission.

To get through these trying times, president of the Singapore Psychological Society Cherie Chan encouraged Singaporeans to remain connected to their family and friends through calls and social media, among other things.

Senior principal clinical psychologist at the Institute of Mental Health Clare Yeo said: "As humans, we desire control as it makes us feel content, at ease or even relieved. We can take control of our responses, be it our feelings, thoughts or actions, to counter the uncertainties created by Covid-19.

"When needed, it is all right to turn to family and friends for support or seek professional psychological help."