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Fight against virus turning into mental battle as fatigue sets in

Inevitable that people may let down guard due to mental strain, false sense of security: Experts

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Science and Health Editor
and Clara Chong

Singapore has weathered Covid-19 for over half a year, and the battle against the virus is increasingly becoming a mental one.

Psychological fatigue and a false sense of security are behind the crowds gathering at beaches, restaurants and shops, say experts.

This is particularly since community cases remain low despite many businesses opening again.

After months of facing the strain of Covid-19, it is inevitable that individuals start to let down their guard, become complacent, or simply frustrated, said Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

And this can lead to careless behaviour.

This was clearly the case on Sunday, when crowds gathered to watch Red Lions parachuters land at a grass patch next to Sengkang General Hospital, and some people ended up arguing with safe distancing ambassadors trying desperately to maintain the rules.

While most Singaporeans are rule-abiding, there are always those who push the boundaries and take unnecessary risks, noted sociologist Pauline Straughan. This could be due to either ignorance, or – when enforcement officers are not around – "simply because they can".

She added: "I think in the beginning, most will be cautious when they venture out.

"However, when this is normalised and especially when nothing happens when we resume social activities, many may tend to let their guard down. So what we need is constant reminders, and rule enforcement to guard the boundaries."

Prof Teo said to stem such behaviour, public education is paramount, which means constant reminders of what is risky and what is not.

"By constantly being informed about the situation locally, this can help individuals to decide which activities are now permitted because the necessary precautions are in place to make it safer, which activities remain at a higher risk and therefore controlled, and which activities are strictly disallowed because the possibility of community transmissions in these settings is extremely high."

Equally important is cultivating a sense of restraint and control, he added.

"Forbearance, by individuals as well as by the enforcers of rules and regulations, is important," he said. "If one does forget to wear a mask or abide by safe distancing regulations genuinely, it's important that the public and enforcers do not be too quick to castigate... But, of course, if one is clearly recalcitrant, then penalties and sanctions ought to apply."

Added Professor Dale Fisher, a senior consultant at the division of infectious diseases at National University Hospital: "We need to learn to live with this virus. This requires community behaviour to stay in line with all the guidelines and rules."

Another reason for the spike in cases in several countries is the lifting of lockdowns prematurely.

Indeed, the World Health Organisation has stressed that countries should ease restrictions only when they have put in place adequate systems to track, trace and isolate all cases in the country.

This has been a misstep in some countries. In the United States, for instance, in two-thirds of states, infections were rising when governors started to ease lockdowns, according to a report in The Economist.

Singapore appears to have avoided this with its slow and careful entry into the new normal, carried out in phases and with the riskiest activities still on hold for now.

"The pace of reopening in Singapore is quite reasonable, when you consider what has happened in countries that reopened too soon and too fast," said Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

"This is especially so when you consider that we still have large numbers of cases being identified in the dorms, and the risk of spillover."

Still, a cluster could happen any time and anywhere. The community cluster at the Bukit Panjang integrated transport hub, that was uncovered last Friday, is a case in point.

To protect themselves, Singaporeans should be prudent and maintain a limited number of contacts during this period, Prof Teo said.

He added: "However, if one of your contacts is a social butterfly and continues to maintain a very diverse social circle, then clearly your risk is still amplified.

"This is why we keep emphasising that the success of keeping Covid-19 at bay depends on everyone's cooperation, to keep to the spirit of the regulations around social activities in order to protect the community."

Just because an individual can meet up with four other friends during this period does not mean he should take advantage of this and meet up with many different groups of four others, he stressed. "This is a privilege that can just as easily be rescinded if the Covid-19 situation in the community flares up again."

Ms Lydia Lim, 24, who works in tech supply, has taken this advice to heart. She has been limiting her social interactions to two to three times each week, each time keeping to around two to three people.

"I think the circuit breaker has helped me to rethink my social interactions and prioritise the gatherings which I attend – and I think this will definitely change the way I spend my time in future," she said.

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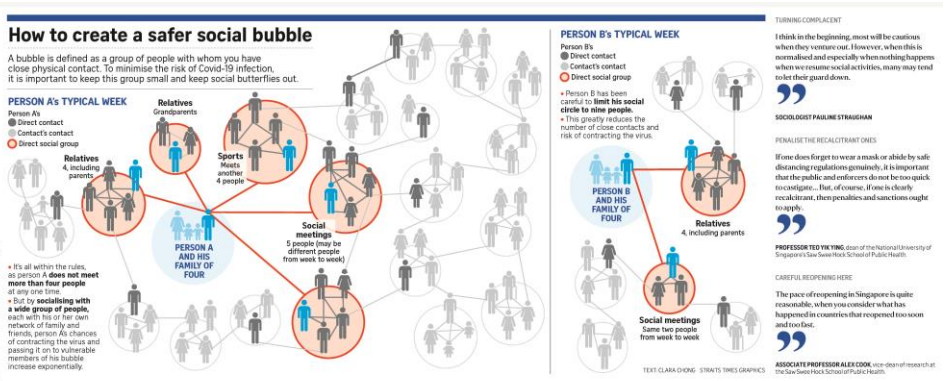

TURNING COMPLACENT

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SOCIOLOGIST PAULINE STRAUGHAN

PENALISE THE RECALCITRANT ONES

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CAREFUL REOPENING HERE

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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR ALEX COOK, vice-dean of research at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health

National Parks Board staff (above) watching out for violations of safe distancing rules as people flocked to the beach at East Coast Park (right) last Saturday. Experts said psychological fatigue and a false sense of security are behind crowds gathering at beaches and shops. ST PHOTOS: KHALID BABA

The scene at Jewel Changi Airport around 6pm on Sunday. While most Singaporeans are rule-abiding, there are always those who push the boundaries and take unnecessary risks, noted sociologist Pauline Straughan. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Psychological fatigue could fuel trend of rule-breaking: Experts

Cheryl Tan and Shabana Begum

As the pandemic draws out, psychological fatigue is setting in, resulting in more people flouting rules such as social distancing – a behavioural trend that encourages others to follow suit, said local experts.

Associate Professor Leong Chan-Hoong, a psychologist at the Singapore University of Social Sciences' Centre for Applied Research, said the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on people's behaviour can be attributed to two main schools of thought.

The first group tends to believe preventative measures like the circuit breaker are key in mitigating the spread of the disease, while the second group is more sceptical, especially as the strategies result in economic fallout, he added.

The second group "tends to follow these rules as they are legally binding, without internalising the norms behind them. So, when psychological fatigue begins to set in, they start to flout the rules".

"Therefore, for rules which are harder to enforce like social distancing, people realise that they are unlikely to get caught and have less impetus to comply," he said.

And over time, those in the middle of the attitude spectrum may feel they are immune to the virus, and begin to follow those who flout the rules, said Prof Leong.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser also noted that at beaches and malls where almost everyone is not practising safe distancing, this could become an informal norm. "In fact, a person who does so may feel like a deviant, (and the) odd one out."

He attributed the general sense of complacency among the public to the fact that "only 1 per cent of the population has been infected, and of these, the majority are from foreign worker dormitories".

In addition, most people feel that everyone is all right, so life can go on normally. Reports of cases on the rise may seem distant, lulling them into thinking this could be happening elsewhere, he added.

Some people may also be selectively hearing only information that seems favourable to them.

Professor Paulin Straughan, a sociologist at the Singapore Management University, said the green light given for local tourism packages may mean that Singaporeans fail to heed the accompanying cautionary alerts.

She said: "While it is impossible for everything to be placed at a standstill for an indefinite period of time, allowing more activities to resume may mean that people tend to focus on the green light given by the Government, momentarily forgetting that Singapore is still in fact in amber mode."

"This underlines the importance on the part of enforcement officers to remind the public to continue taking precautions like adhering to safe distancing measures," she added.

Ms Sylvia Chua, 55, who used to have staycations twice a year with her brother's family and mother, is reluctant to book a local hotel this year, although the Singapore Tourism Board has been encouraging staycations.

"The rest of the world is seeing second and third waves of Covid-19. The situation is still not stable," said the music teacher.

The Straits Times learnt that those up to 30 years old are more comfortable going out, but prefer outdoor venues and shorter outings.

Ms Wendy Neo, 24, has been skipping the malls for cycling and hiking instead.

"Aside from outdoor activities, we also go to each other's homes a lot more, which is safer and more conducive for catching up, unlike crowded areas," said the video editor.

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