The pandemic is a marathon and not a short sprint, as people need to manage their expectations and pace themselves so that they are able to go the distance, says a psychologist. PHOTO:ST/SONY CHONG

Battling pandemic fatigue

Restrictions, news overload amid prolonged crisis can cause burnout and the danger is that people may drop their guard against Covid-19

Amrita Kaur

Freelance writer Song Lej Jun has been doing overtime assignments since March to earn extra money for his family and himself. His 51-year-old mother was retrenched from a part-time job as a food promoter in February and his father, a 59-year-old driver, has been earning less since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

As a result, the 24-year-old, who is doing a communications degree from the University of Buffalo at the Singapore Institute of Management, said he feels “pressured to work harder”.

The worry of finding a stable job after he graduates in December keeps him up at night. “I’m doing unpaid writing work to keep up my resume so if I don’t get a job, I don’t know what I’ll do,” said Mr Song, who is an only child.

So, he feels “pricked by the uncertainty” as he does not know when the economy will improve. “It’s devastating thinking about it and feeling lost at the same time,” he said.

Dr Anabelle Chew, a clinical psychologist at the National University Hospital, said burnout is a person’s experience due to effects brought about by Covid-19.

“Pandemic fatigue describes a mental state where a prolonged, heightened state of fear and anxiety leads to a form of burnout. Although it is not classified as a mental disorder, the effects of pandemic fatigue are nevertheless real and can have an impact on those experiencing it,” she said.

Signs include reduced socialising with others, feeling moody, sad, hopeless, disinterested and inactive, and having low mood and energy, and insomnia.

Long-term worry about a pandemic can take a toll on normal social and emotional health and may result in the worsening of mental health conditions and chronic health problems.

It may also lead to headaches, an inability to focus, digestive issues, insomnia and a weakened immune system, ultimately affecting a person’s quality of life.

Dr Terri Chen, senior clinical psychologist at the National University Hospital’s (NUH) Department of Psychological Medicine, said it is likely that people started feeling these effects in April when the circuit breaker was extended. The restrictions were seen as a “drastic change” to people’s daily routine and day-to-day habits.

“Everyone was required to adapt to a shorter amount of time and many people were accepting of these restrictions as they thought (a) virus control and (b) this was ‘for a good cause’, said NUH psychologist Dr Mel Chen, who is also chief psychologist for NUH.

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“The public is almost at full capacity now. People in Singapore are having a very good time. The government has done a very good job of managing the situation and people are feeling comfortable going out and enjoying themselves,” she said.

Dr Chen cautioned that social distancing and wearing masks can make people feel isolated and lonely, and that people become anxious and burnout.

Dr Chen advised people to seek help from a psychologist if they experience persistent anxiety, burnout or anything else.

This is a marathon and not a short sprint, as people need to manage their expectations and pace themselves so that they are able to go the distance, she said.

It is important to remind ourselves that we are doing the best we can in an unprecedented situation that we are all experiencing for the first time in our lives,” she said.

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How to cope with pandemic fatigue

Ms Terri Chen, head of psychology and senior clinical psychologist at the National University Hospital’s department of psychological medicine, gives some tips.

1. BE AWARE: We cannot make changes if we are not aware of what is going on within us. When we are busy, it is easy to overlook emotions and behaviours that are warning signs from our brain.

   Practise awareness to take care of your mental health. Take some time to check in with yourself daily. This can be as short as one minute a day, to observe and describe to yourself what you are thinking and feeling within.

2. BE CREATIVE: Many of the ways we use to recharge have been thwarted or impacted by pandemic restrictions. Short getaways, for instance, are no longer an option. Neither are large gatherings, which feed our innate social needs.

   Being creative and open to new ideas and experiences can help you cope in the interim. For instance, you can travel vircusously with friends by having a “vote of party” of a travel share and make a fantasy list of future travel plans together.

3. BE KIND AND COMPASSIONATE: There are many things that are not within our control at this moment, which could leave us feeling angry and frustrated. This can lead to criticisms being directed towards ourselves or others, which may worsen our mood.

   Show kindness to yourself or others through one act a day. Research has shown that this can help us feel happier and it also boosts our immune system and energy levels.

4. BE PATIENT: We do not know when the coronavirus pandemic will end and it is hard to be patient with the safety restrictions indefinitely. Make space for emotions, as it is impossible to think logically 100 per cent of the time.

   Try the “five, four, three, two, one” technique to relax. Look around you and name five things you notice. Five things you can see, four things you can feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste.

5. BE EFFECTIVE: There are many tips and suggestions on how to cope with the pandemic, such as practicing mindfulness or working out, and it can be overwhelming and tiring to try many things at once.

   It is more effective to identify what needs physical, emotional, intellectual or spiritual support, and try one technique at a time to gauge if it helps you.

6. TALK TO SOMEONE: Seek help if you notice that you have signs of pandemic fatigue. Talking to a professional or someone you trust, having them listen to what you are going through and getting support can help regulate emotions and reduce stress.

   *AmritaAur

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