

Source: The Straits Times, Page B1 & B2
Date: 14 October 2020

More seek help for mental health issues amid pandemic

Significant increase seen across different age groups; spike in calls to suicide helpline

Timothy Goh

More people in Singapore have been seeking help for mental health issues amid the Covid-19 outbreak.

Ahead of World Mental Health Day today, The Straits Times spoke to more than a dozen mental health clinicians and service providers from the public, private and community sectors.

Most of them said there has been a significant rise in the number of help-seekers across different age groups.

BOTH OLD AND YOUNG AFFECTED

Mr Asher Low, executive director of Limitless, a non-profit organisation that deals with youth mental health, said the organisation has seen over 250 new clients seeking help so far this year – 13 more than the number of new clients for the whole of last year.

“Quite a number of our existing clients deteriorated because they lost access to coping activities and social support, or were stuck at

home in an uncondusive environment, such as (one with) poor family relationships or abusive parents,” he said.

But it is not just the young whose mental well-being has suffered due to the pandemic.

O’Joy, a voluntary welfare organisation looking after the mental health of seniors, saw a 26 per cent increase in the number of clients in August and last month compared with the same period last year.

O’Joy clinical director Teo Puay Leng said seniors who are still working may be anxious about losing their jobs and being unable to find another one in the current economic climate, while others are affected by their loved ones getting retrenched.

Those who are used to taking part in outdoor activities have also become anxious as they have had to stay home on their own, she said.

MORE CALLS TO SUICIDE HELPLINE

Meanwhile, Samaritans of Singapore – which focuses on suicide prevention – received 26,460 calls for

help from January to August this year, up from 21,429 in the same period the year before.

Chief executive Gasper Tan said callers sought help for issues arising from the economic impact of Covid-19, stress from having to adapt to telecommuting and home-based learning, and social relationships affected by the virus situation.

OBSTACLES TO SEEKING HELP

While the number of help-seekers for mental health issues was up at public hospitals such as Alexandra Hospital and Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, polyclinics under SingHealth Polyclinics (SHP) and National University Polyclinics (NUP) saw no significant increase in help-seekers.

The clinical lead for SHP’s Mental Health Workgroup, Dr David Koot, noted that there was an overall drop in patient attendance at SHP during the circuit breaker period, possibly due to the fear of contracting Covid-19 at a polyclinic.

Likewise, Dr Benjamin Cheah, a family physician at NUP’s Jurong Polyclinic, said that safe distancing measures could have led to people

MORE AWARENESS continued on B2

Source: The Straits Times, Page B1 & B2
Date: 14 October 2020

Growing awareness as more avenues for help emerge

FROM B1

seeking help from helplines such as the National Care Hotline instead.

He added that NUP's psychologists conducted teleconsultations, whenever possible.

Teleconsultation was also introduced by the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics, which saw a 10 per cent increase in patients seeking treatment for mental health conditions in the first half of this year.

Dr Wong Mei Yin, principal psychologist at Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic, said that this allowed patients to better manage their conditions "from the safety and convenience of their homes".

While this may be true for some, Ms Lee Yi Ping, senior case manager and team leader at the Institute of Mental Health's (IMH) Community Health Assessment Team, pointed out that for others, home is not a safe space.

She advised those caught in such a situation to step out of their house for a short while to contact their service provider and work out a suitable arrangement.

OLD CONDITIONS WORSENER, NEW ONES EMERGE

Dr Geraldine Tan, director and principal psychologist at The Therapy Room, saw a 15 per cent increase in clients this year. She noted that the pandemic had not only caused mental health issues in people who previously had none, but also exacerbated pre-existing conditions.

A similar mix of old and new help-seekers was observed by Dr Marcus Tan, consultant psychiatrist at Healthway Medical's Nobel Psychological Wellness Centre. He saw a 25 per cent to 30 per cent increase in patients.

AS SILVER LINING

But it is not all doom and gloom.

Ms Joy Hou, principal psychologist at EmpathyWorks Psychological Wellness, who saw an almost 20 per cent increase in clients, said that while the increase may be in part due to Covid-19 taking its toll, it could also point to greater awareness of mental health issues and reduced stigma in seeking professional help.

IMH senior consultant Jimmy Lee echoed the sentiment by saying that the increase in help-seeking behaviour during this period is "a good thing".

Dr Lee said that the crisis has resulted in various mental health organisations coming up with new initiatives such as virtual seminars, new helplines being set up, and people learning to identify and help those in distress.

"I think this is a good opportunity... People are concerned about the mental health needs of various aspects of the population," he said.

timgoh@sph.com.sg