

# Anxiety and worry amid Covid-19 uncertainty

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

**Theresa Tan**  
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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 helplessness and worthlessness." Those interviewed say that some of their clients suffering mental illnesses such as depression and obsessive compulsive disorder had suffered a relapse or that their con-

## Mental health tips

- It is important for people to know they are not alone. Reach out to others through text messages, phone calls or other technology.
- Take a break from the daily barrage of bad news. Find time to rekindle indoor hobbies or learn new skills.
- Seek information from accurate sources. Reading and spreading fake news could worsen unwarranted fears and anxiety.
- Do self-meditation and deep-breathing exercises to calm your mind and body.
- Look out for vulnerable groups such as the elderly. They may be at a higher risk of depression if they have to spend a lot of time alone at home as a result of cancelled social activities.
- Family members who do not live with their elderly relatives can give them calls or send text messages to stay in touch. Seniors who are more tech-savvy can try video-calling tools such as FaceTime.
- Seniors should also continue to pursue their interests at home. For example, they can exercise, watch TV shows or engage in art and craft.

**Make use of resources or support networks that are out there. If you are feeling stressed by the outbreak, you may:**

- Register for online counselling at Fei Yue Community Services at [www.ec2.sg](http://www.ec2.sg) or
- Contact Silver Ribbon on 6385-3714, 6386-1928 or 6509-0271.
- Contact CARE Singapore through WhatsApp on 6978-2728 on weekdays from 10am to 5pm.

SOURCES: FEI YUE COMMUNITY SERVICES, INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH, SUNDAY TIMES GRAPHICS

ditions 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.

# Hospitals ramp up programmes providing support for staff

SENSE OF ANXIETY

Healthcare workers are stressed not just by the question of whether they could get infected. The sheer number of patients coming in is also weighing quite heavily on them... For doctors across the system, there is a sense of anxiety in not knowing if the next patient they see might be infected with Covid-19.

**DR HABEEBUL RAHMAN**, chairman of the executive committee of Tan Tock Seng Hospital's Staff Support Staff programme.

In the aftermath of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) outbreak 17 years ago, Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) turned informal peer support given to staff on the front line into a formal Staff Support Staff (SS) programme. Over the years, the programme has grown, training several hundred hospital staff in areas such as peer support and how to recognise and respond to early signs of mental health issues. So when the coronavirus outbreak became more widespread in February, the programme's executive committee, led by chairman Habeebul Rahman, started to ramp up support measures in anticipation of increased stress, burnout and other mental health issues among staff. "We thought we needed to put in place processes to get the pulse of how staff were feeling and shore up resilience and positive psychology quickly. If the outbreak is not going away any time soon, we need to mitigate burnout," said Dr Habeebul. The pandemic is unlike anything the team has seen since the Sars outbreak, he added. A total of 238 people in Singapore were infected with Sars in 2003, and 33 of them died. The number of coronavirus cases here has crossed 1,100 and is set to rise.

"Healthcare workers are stressed not just by the question of whether they could get infected. The sheer number of patients coming in is also weighing quite heavily on them," he said. "For doctors across the system, there is a sense of anxiety in not knowing if the next patient they see might be infected with Covid-19." The SS programme expected a significant increase in the number of staff requiring mental health support, so it was a pleasant surprise to the team that the rise was not as large as had been expected, said Dr Habeebul, even with the many operational changes that have taken place at TTSH and its neighbouring National Centre for Infectious Diseases over the last three months. "Staff do feel stressed, but they are doing a tremendous job managing as well as they can," he said. Still, the team is prepared if things get worse. "We're not out of the woods yet, and in a lot of ways we are doing what we can and trying not to worry too much about what's coming up," he added. At Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH), a similar Peers Around Lending Support (PALS) programme has seen a slight increase in the number of staff requiring individual help, said the hospital's head of psychological medicine, Dr Goh Kah Hong. "This is largely due to the increased demand at work in terms of fluidity of events and new workflows, as well as in their personal lives." The PALS team has also ramped up efforts by starting outreach groups to educate staff about signs of stress, burnout and anxiety. Six sessions, each involving small groups of eight to 10 at a time, meet once a week to share their struggles and tips. This fosters a sense of community and helps staff feel less alone, Dr Goh said. He added: "With early recognition, we hope they would be able to manage the stressors early and prevent them from escalating." At TTSH, a crowdsourced staff appreciation effort on Workplace, Facebook's platform for businesses, was started to share positive messages, compliments and uplifting content online. Workers who are not front-line healthcare staff, such as housekeeping staff, porters, health attendants and drivers, are also taken care of, with donations of food and care packages going their way as well, said Mr Dominic Tung, TTSH's assistant director of human resource wellness.

**Rei Kurohi**



Dr Ong Pei Yuin wearing personal protective equipment at the Fever Facility extension at the National University Hospital. She says Singapore's Sars experience has helped it to better tackle the current crisis. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

# Sars survivor helps tend to potential Covid-19 patients

As a consultant emergency physician at National University Hospital, Dr Ong Pei Yuin has had to tend to potential Covid-19 patients.



CALL TO DUTY AGAIN

The 42-year-old strives to calm and reassure them as she tests them for the disease. She understands their emotional turbulence: She herself was a Sars patient. When Covid-19 hit Singapore in January, she felt a dreaded sense of deja vu. "Oh, it was like Sars all over again. I don't want to go through it all over again." In 2003, she contracted the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars), never felt sicker in her life and was warded for 14 days in hospital. She was 26 then, a first-year medical officer at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, the designated hospital to treat Sars patients. She was also a bride-to-be. It started with a high fever that refused to break. And she almost blacked out one morning after getting out of bed. She remembers the unremitting fever, the chills and the body aches. She also came down with pneumonia. "It was the worst illness I have had," she said. The physical suffering aside, the isolation she experienced when she was warded was also hard to bear.

**We are trained to do this. The time that we have prepared for is here now.**

**DR ONG PEI YUIN**, a consultant emergency physician at National University Hospital. She was a Sars patient in 2003 and felt a dreaded sense of deja vu when the coronavirus outbreak hit Singapore.

Her parents and two brothers were quarantined at home and she was not allowed visitors. But calls from loved ones and prayers helped her through that dark period. She said: "Not knowing how long the journey is something quite difficult. We need to pace ourselves as it might be a very, very long marathon."

**Theresa Tan**

# Bouncing back from Sars with more love for nursing

During the 15 days she spent in a ward for Sars patients at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) in 2003, Ms Pauline Chong thought often of her mother.

Then a junior nurse in her early 20s, Ms Chong had taken a very ill patient to the coronary care unit at the National University Hospital (NUH) during a night shift. The patient was later found to be infected with the severe acute respiratory syndrome, or Sars. A day later, Ms Chong developed a rapidly rising fever. She was later taken to TTSH where her temperature continued to climb, hitting 39.5 deg C at one point. Anxious thoughts raced through her mind as she fought chills and body aches during her hospitalisation. She worried that she might have inadvertently infected her mother. She would feel depressed at the thought of the many things she had yet to accomplish and wondered if she would even survive. Ms Chong, now 40, is currently a senior nurse clinician in the general and geriatric wards at Alexandra Hospital. Ms Noor Melati Ahmad, 38, another nurse who had been working in the same NUH ward as Ms Chong, also caught the virus from a patient during a night shift. She was also warded at TTSH. Like Ms Chong, she felt very weak and experienced body aches, chills and had difficulty breathing. "A few days after I was admitted, it hit me that I could actually die from it," said Ms Melati, now 38. The nurse clinician still works at NUH looking after immunocompromised patients. "I was very worried and when I called my mum every day, we would cry. There were days when she would check on me but I was too ill to pick up the phone." She added: "It felt very unfair that just two years into my work as a nurse, I would contract this and might leave my loved ones behind." Both Ms Chong, a Catholic, and Ms Melati, a Muslim, sought solace in prayer. Words of support and simple gifts from their loved ones also helped, they said, and they would encourage each other over the phone. They eventually recovered and came away with a stronger passion for nursing. Ms Melati said her grandmother had wanted her to quit, but her mother encouraged her to continue. She added: "I did not fall to Sars and that affirmed that if I want to do good, God would protect me and I should continue on my path as a nurse."

Ms Chong said she never once thought of quitting, but she is more disciplined and vigilant about safety protocols today because of her experience. "I was actually very excited when I went back to work alongside my colleagues," she added. The experience has made her more resilient, but she is not immune to anxiety about Covid-19. Asked how she deals with this stress, Ms Chong said self-care is very important. She added that she has taken to playing the violin after work and also de-stresses by playing with her pet birds and dog. "I trained my parrot to say 'ni hao' ('how are you?' in Mandarin). It gives me satisfaction even though the pronunciation is not very clear at the moment," she said with a laugh. Ms Chong said she has taken to playing the violin after work and also de-stresses by playing with her pet birds and dog. "I trained my parrot to say 'ni hao' ('how are you?' in Mandarin). It gives me satisfaction even though the pronunciation is not very clear at the moment," she said with a laugh.



Ms Pauline Chong, 40, works as a senior nurse clinician in the general and geriatric wards at Alexandra Hospital. She caught the severe acute respiratory syndrome, or Sars, in 2003 when working as a junior nurse at the National University Hospital. PHOTOS: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HEALTH SYSTEM

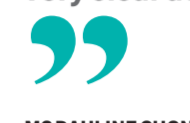


Nurse clinician Noor Melati Ahmad, 38, works at National University Hospital (NUH), looking after patients with a weakened immune system. Ms Melati, who worked in the same NUH ward as Ms Chong in 2003, also caught Sars from a patient during a night shift. Ms Noor Melati Ahmad, a nurse clinician at the National University Hospital (NUH), recalling how she contracted body aches, chills and had difficulty breathing after contracting Sars when working as a nurse at NUH in 2003.



RELIEVING STRESS

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**MS PAULINE CHONG**, a senior nurse clinician in the general and geriatric wards at Alexandra Hospital. The former Sars patient says the experience has made her more resilient, but she is not immune to anxiety about Covid-19. She de-stresses by playing with her pet birds and dog.



REALITY CHECK

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**MS NOOR MELATI AHMAD**, a nurse clinician at the National University Hospital (NUH), recalling how she contracted body aches, chills and had difficulty breathing after contracting Sars when working as a nurse at NUH in 2003.

**From Sars to Covid-19**

SCAN TO WATCH

<https://str.sg/survivingsars>

work alongside my colleagues," she added. The experience has made her more resilient, but she is not immune to anxiety about Covid-19. Asked how she deals with this stress, Ms Chong said self-care is very important. She added that she has taken to playing the violin after work and also de-stresses by playing with her pet birds and dog. "I trained my parrot to say 'ni hao' ('how are you?' in Mandarin). It gives me satisfaction even though the pronunciation is not very clear at the moment," she said with a laugh. Ms Chong said she has taken to playing the violin after work and also de-stresses by playing with her pet birds and dog. "I trained my parrot to say 'ni hao' ('how are you?' in Mandarin). It gives me satisfaction even though the pronunciation is not very clear at the moment," she said with a laugh.

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