

## New task force to tackle mental health needs of Singaporeans amid pandemic

New inter-agency group to take stock of govt initiatives, identify gaps to be addressed



In his speech, PM Lee said that ensuring access to quality mental healthcare for every Singaporean is a major priority. PHOTO: MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION



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A new inter-agency task force has been convened by the Government to provide a coordinated national response to the mental health needs of Singaporeans arising from the coronavirus pandemic.

Speaking yesterday at the World Health Organisation's virtual event, The Big Event for Mental Health, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said it was an example of how Singapore has worked to raise mental health literacy, promote early intervention and improve mental health services.

The Covid-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce was convened by the Ministry of Health and the Institute of Mental Health.

It will review the [psycho-social impact of the Covid-19 pandemic](#) on the population and take stock of the initiatives introduced across the Government to address the impact so far, MOH said yesterday in response to queries.

The task force will also identify gaps that will need to be addressed to better meet the mental health needs of the population during this time.

Its members include representatives from the Ministry of Education; Ministry of Manpower; Ministry of Social and Family Development; Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth; Health Promotion Board; Agency for Integrated Care; People's Association; and the National Council of Social Service.

In his speech, PM Lee said that ensuring access to quality mental healthcare for every Singaporean is a major priority, with one in seven people here suffering from a mental health condition at some point.

He said awareness of the importance of mental health has grown, but people with mental health conditions are still not well understood or fully accepted.

"With Covid-19, more people are facing stresses, pressures and disruptions to their lives and livelihoods.

"Health authorities around the world must not only fight Covid-19, but also manage its impact on the mental health of their populations," said PM Lee.

Protecting mental health takes a collective effort, he said, noting efforts like the National Care Hotline which was set up during the early stage of the coronavirus outbreak here to provide psychological first aid and emotional support.

"Today, on World Mental Health Day, let's resolve to work together to understand mental health better, and to care for one another during these difficult times," said PM Lee.

Several other politicians were involved in mental health-related dialogues and events yesterday, including Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth and Trade and Industry Alvin Tan.

Speaking on a panel hosted by Facebook, Mr Tan said mental health concerns are not a recent phenomenon, with people having lived through events like World War II and past recessions where they would have experienced considerable stress.

But the acceleration of technological advancements in the past 15 to 20 years has implications for mental health, both good and bad.

These include being better able to connect with each other, but also being subject to unhealthy comparisons and cyber bullying.

Mr Tan said big technology companies like Facebook have important roles to play in promoting online safety and mental wellness in a digital age through actions like refining algorithms to ensure the content they host is safe, and by providing resources to those in need.

At a separate event hosted by the Silver Ribbon non-profit organisation, a youth mental health resource kit was launched to promote mental health, reduce suicide rates and build resilience.

The kit contains information on various mental health issues and recommendations by students, parents, teachers and school counsellors on how to manage a list of challenges.

Meanwhile, the Samaritans of Singapore (SOS), a crisis intervention and suicide prevention centre, officially [launched its text messaging service for individuals in distress](#) yesterday.

The service is available through Facebook Messenger or on the SOS website from 6pm to 6am on weekdays, except public holidays.