

Break the negative spiral over the haze

By **DAVID CHAN**
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THE haze from forest fires in Indonesia has caused significant problems to everyone in Singapore. Public health concerns in particular are of paramount importance.

If people have prolonged exposure to pollution in very unhealthy or hazardous circumstances without adequate protection, there will be serious health effects. This applies to everyone but especially to vulnerable groups including the elderly, young children, pregnant women, and those who have pre-existing respiratory and heart problems.

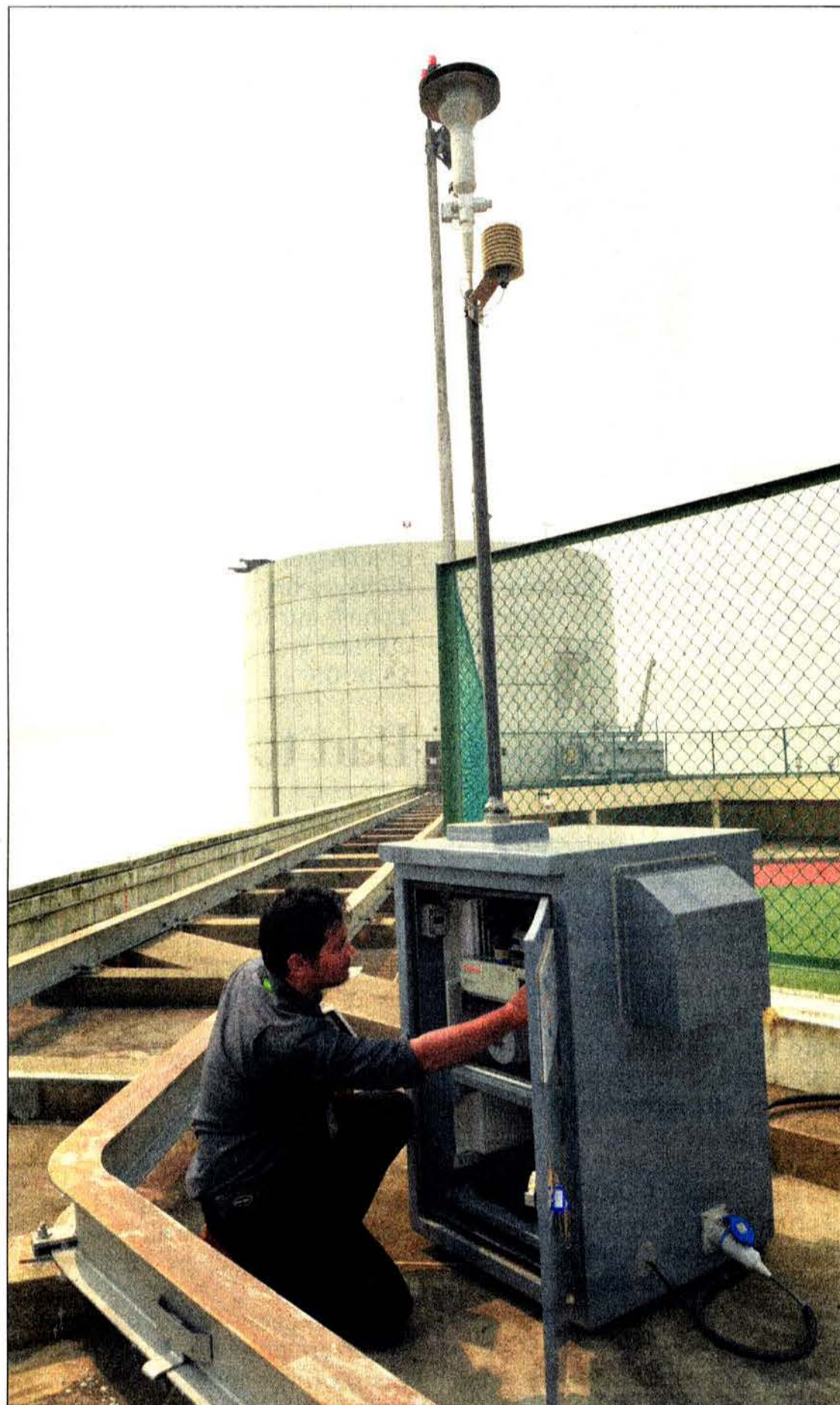
Even if you do not belong to any of these vulnerable groups, you are likely to have loved ones who do. So this is personal, and health, even lives, are at stake.

The responses so far from the Government and from the public raise two important questions. Why were there negative public reactions? Can we cope with this evolving crisis, especially if it gets worse?

Public reactions

IN TIMES of crisis, the Government is expected to provide relevant and reliable information in a timely manner, and present it in a way that the public can understand and act on. Public expectation is especially strong in this haze crisis for several reasons.

The situation involves basic well-being issues such as personal safety and health. There were many important unknowns, particularly in the first few hours or days after the pollution level entered into very unhealthy and hazardous ranges.



A National Environment Agency officer looking at readings from a PM2.5 analyser on the 26th storey of the Environment Building. Prompt, accurate and clear public health advisories are paramount. TNP FILE PHOTO

Many Singaporeans would have asked: What happens when I inhale the polluted air? Is it safe to leave my house to go to work? What is happening to my family who are experiencing physical discomfort caused by the haze?

People's anxiety and fear increased significantly when visibility declined and people experienced a strong smell of the haze and physical discomfort even when they were indoors.

These emotions were magnified as people saw the Pollutant Standards Index (PSI) reading on their television, computer or cell-phone screen rising rapidly, by a huge magnitude, and into the hazardous range.

In these anxious conditions, the public expected the Government to provide information on what was going on, what the effects were, and what protective action to take. To be fair, the Government did respond. But some felt this was not fast enough, or that the responses were not clear, or comprehensive enough. When people's expectations of information and direction were disappointed, negative reactions to the Government resulted.

Human beings find it difficult to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity, and we react to them negatively when the issue is personal or the stakes are high. Studies have shown that negative reaction to an issue will influence reactions to other issues, even if they are logically unrelated to the offending issue.

Negative reactions lead us to doubt or ignore factual information. This may explain the prevalence of comments doubting even the veracity of the Government's PSI readings. We also seek out negative information or interpret information negatively to reinforce our negative perception of the target. Trust in the target's capability, intentions or integrity will get eroded. The distrust will lead to more negative reactions resulting in a negative spiral.

Reversing the spiral

IT IS important to break this spiral.

This requires action from both the Government and people.

On the part of the Government, there is a need for leaders and policymakers to realise that given the severity and uncertainty of the haze situation, the public anxiety and anger are natural, understandable and justified.

The public needs relevant and complete information, accompanied by explanation when it is incomplete. Prompt, accurate and clear public health advisories are paramount.

The information shared and de-

isions made by the Government affect the well-being of the people. So it is important to effectively address doubts and concerns that the people have. Not doing so will create confusion and distrust. These emotions and states of mind, which are affected by the haze but will also affect how we as a society tackle it, should not be trivialised or dismissed as cynicism and troublemaking.

Unlike the rare cases of intentional spread of falsehood, the public's call for information arises from a genuine need for guidance and is motivated by the need to make informed decisions.

If negative emotions are not adequately addressed, they will hinder crisis management efforts and result in adverse consequences for public health and well-being.

Given the way negativity spreads and its influence, there are also medium and long-term effects. It will adversely affect our confidence in the operational capability of the public service, trust in the Government, and social resilience in Singapore.

The erosion of these fundamentals in our social compact is much more difficult to restore than the economic growth numbers, after the haze clears.

The spiral of negativity can be turned into something more positive.

Many behavioural studies have shown that people feel respected when they are provided accurate and clear information and receive adequate explanations for decisions that affect them.

They reciprocate with respect and trust. They are also more likely to cooperate and engage in pro-social behaviours such as helping others, putting up with inconveniences, complying with regulations, and offering constructive suggestions.

We need these public responses in order to cope effectively with the evolving haze crisis.

People power

IF THE State can do better in terms of empathising with the need for information and direction, and improving its communication, citizens too have a critical role to play in helping each other cope.

The haze is expected to be prolonged due to the dry season and monsoon winds. Its severity will fluctuate and sometimes the prediction will be inaccurate. We need to be physically and psychologically prepared, so that we can continue with our daily activities while protecting our health. It is important to work together to tackle the haze crisis, and we can

be cautiously optimistic that we will cope well.

The Government has the primary duty to protect the safety and health of its people. It is expected to anticipate problems and monitor situations. It has to communicate public advisories effectively, which means advisories that are evidence-based, clear and practical. It also needs to adapt to changing circumstances based on facts, evidence, public reactions, and well-informed judgments.

In the workplace, employers and supervisors are expected to ensure the safety and health of employees. They need to make judgment calls, be responsible in their decisions and accountable for their actions. Employees' health and their perception of support from the organisation will influence their job performance and organisational commitment. Thus, ensuring employee health and well-being is also in the business interest of the organisation.

Singaporeans are able and willing to adapt to change. As individuals, we can take care of ourselves and our family by taking appropriate precautions, look out for each other, especially those who are more vulnerable, volunteer our help, and contribute resources to those in need.

We can help communicate accurate and useful information to others in a calm manner.

We can also help by not propagating rumours, and by correcting misinformation. Rumours cause public confusion, hindering timely and effective crisis management. Misinformation leads people to make decisions that are too conservative or risky without them realising so, resulting in behaviours that are maladaptive.

The consequence could be an unnecessary inconvenience; but it could also be an unnecessary depletion of critical resources – public or personal.

The consumed public resources could have been directed to help those in real need. Individuals' consumed personal resources could have been used for their real need, particularly so for individuals and families who could ill afford unnecessary use.

We want the country to keep running – not just to maintain economic growth, but also to maintain essential services and approximate normality for citizen well-being. What is ultimately at stake here is not wealth, but health.

✉ stopinion@sph.com.sg

The writer is director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute, Lee Kuan Yew Fellow and Professor of Psychology at the Singapore Management University.