



People exercising at Bay East Garden in the Marina Bay area on Aug 9. According to a National Youth Council survey, more than half of the young people polled said mental well-being was a challenge for them. Another study found that older Singaporeans reported a stark increase in feelings of isolation when the circuit breaker began in April last year. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

Task force flags pandemic's impact on mental health

Building a one-stop online portal for mental health resources one of 3 recommendations

Timothy Goh

More than half of the young people polled by the National Youth Council in the second half of last year said mental well-being was a challenge for them, with some citing anxiety over the future, stress over finances, and worries about academic or work performance.

The answers reflect some of the ways in which the pandemic has impacted the mental health of the population here, said the Covid-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce yesterday.

At a virtual briefing, the task force identified issues with Singapore's mental health landscape and offered three recommendations to address them: developing a national mental health and well-being strategy, building a one-stop online portal for national mental health resources, and creating a national mental health competency training framework.

Noting that the pandemic had affected both the young and old, the

task force pointed to a study by the Singapore Management University's Centre for Research on Successful Ageing, which found that older Singaporeans reported a stark increase in feelings of isolation when the circuit breaker began in April last year.

Another study by the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) to assess the population's psychological response during the pandemic found that about 13 per cent of those surveyed experienced symptoms of depression or anxiety between May last year and June this year.

IMH's Mental Health Helpline also had 50 per cent more callers last year compared with 2019, with a peak in April last year coinciding with the start of the circuit breaker. The number of calls gradually decreased towards the end of last year, but went up again between January and May this year.

The task force said: "Covid-19 has brought unprecedented shifts in our lives. The fear of infection, changes in our daily routine, and social isolation brought about by safe

management measures, as well as economic uncertainty, are stressors that have impacted the mental well-being of many individuals."

Various agencies stepped up to tackle this issue, said the task force. For instance, the National Care Hotline was launched in April last year to support those facing mental health concerns related to Covid-19. By the end of May this year, the hotline had handled over 45,000 calls.

Over 40 initiatives were also introduced to promote mental well-being, help those with mental health needs, and directly address stressors that can impact mental health.

But there is room for improvement in three areas, said the task force.

First, it is recommending that a national mental health and well-being strategy be developed. The Government will carry out a public consultation on this next year.

Second, the Health Promotion Board is developing a national portal for mental health resources to be curated by experts. The portal will be hosted on HealthHub, and a pilot version will be rolled out later this year.

Third, the task force said a national mental health competency

framework should be developed with a common set of training standards and clearly defined degrees of competencies expected of professionals and para-professionals who support those with mental health conditions.

Asked by The Straits Times why it did not recommend legislative action, such as mandatory mental health days off, the task force said: "(Legislative) acts can be potentially coercive."

45,000

Number of calls received by the National Care Hotline between April 2020 and end-May 2021. The hotline was launched to support those facing mental health concerns related to Covid-19.

40

Number of initiatives introduced to promote mental well-being, help those with mental health needs, and directly address stressors that can impact mental health.

It added that raising awareness, increasing mental health literacy and getting people to participate in mental health initiatives are key to this.

The implementation of the task force's recommendations will be overseen by a new inter-agency task force on mental health and well-being. Set up by the ministries of Health and Social and Family Development, it will oversee mental health efforts beyond Covid-19, focusing on issues that require inter-agency collaboration.

Chaired by Dr Janil Puthucheary, Senior Minister of State for Health, and Communications and Information, the task force's 21 members include Ms Sun Xueling, Minister of State for Education, and Social and Family Development, and representatives from IMH and the National Trades Union Congress.

The Covid-19 task force said the appointment of Dr Janil as the new task force's chair signals the importance of mental wellness.

Dr Janil said: "We look forward to engaging Singaporeans in this national, important effort to enhance our mental health and well-being."

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