

People in 20s and 40s feel mental health declined due to pandemic, elderly report feeling better: IPS study

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SINGAPORE: The COVID-19 pandemic that has dragged on for more than two years has led to a decline in the emotional and mental health of young people, but had the opposite effect on the elderly.

This was among the findings of a working paper by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) that reviewed the well-being of Singaporeans during the past two years, as well as looking at whether respondents trusted the Government's leadership to bring Singapore forward through the pandemic.

Respondents aged 21 to 29 reported declining mental and emotional health.

The pandemic may have driven youths to re-evaluate their life priorities and question their life choices amid an uncertain future, according to the paper.

"The stressors from their fledgling careers and adjusting to workplace dynamics in the face of new workplace arrangements may have further contributed to their lower sense of mental well-being," the paper said.

The pandemic may have also curtailed many activities which had been commonplace for young adults at this stage of their development, such as travel, said Dr Mathew Mathews at a media briefing on the findings of the study.

For instance, it is common for young adults to travel after graduating from university, said Dr Mathews, principal research fellow at the IPS Social Lab.

Other aspects of young adulthood that could have taken a backseat are dating and marriage, he said.

This ultimately took a toll on these younger respondents, the paper found.

THE ELDERLY FEEL BETTER

Respondents aged 60 and above, however, found their mental or emotional health steadily improve through the course of the pandemic.

Earlier in the pandemic, the impact of COVID-19 infection among older persons was known to be much more serious with daily reports showing that a number of older persons had succumbed to the virus, which is "more likely" to have affected the mental and emotional well-being of those who were older, the paper said.

However, as treatment options progressed, especially with the availability of vaccination and with social support provided to this group, the more positive outlook may have bolstered their self-reports of mental and emotional well-being.

Another group that reported a decline similar to those aged 21 to 29 were respondents aged 40 to 49. The authors of the paper attributed the "steady decline" in the rating of their mental

and emotional health to them being sandwiched between attending to the needs of their parents and school-going children over the pandemic period. They noted that this came on top of job disruptions and rising costs of living.

The self-reporting of a decline in mental and emotional health was despite the drop in the proportion of respondents who felt stressed from the pandemic since its earlier stages in 2020.

The proportion of those who felt stressed fell from 50 per cent in the period between Apr 21 and Apr 23, 2020, to 31 per cent in the period between Jun 24 and Jul 4 this year.

"Despite the fact that things have obviously gotten better, the upward positivity hasn't sort of cancelled out all kinds of declines, difficulties, disadvantages that people experience," Dr Mathews said.

More than 2,000 Singaporeans and Permanent Residents were polled online in the fifth edition of the series of papers, which are co-written by Dr Mathews, associate director at IPS Social Lab Mike Hou and their colleague, research assistant Fiona Phoa.

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT'S LEADERSHIP

Given that the COVID-19 outbreak was a test of governance, and "especially important to Singapore at the moment given our leadership transition phase", the researchers assessed if respondents trusted the Government's leadership to bring Singapore forward through the pandemic.

Following Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's announcement that now Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong would lead the fourth generation (4G) team of the People's Action Party, respondents were asked whether they trusted that the Government has the best possible 4G leader.

Around six in 10 (57 to 60 per cent) trusted that the Singapore Government has the best possible 4G leader to navigate divisions within the society, to navigate Singapore's dealing with other countries and to help it navigate post-COVID-19 economic recovery," the paper stated.

Although a "substantial proportion" of respondents generally expressed "healthy levels" of trust and confidence in the 4G leadership, more will need to be done to address Singaporeans' concerns about specific areas of their lives, in particular, their livelihood concerns like the proposed Goods and Services Tax (GST) hike, the paper said.

MOVING FORWARD

Although Singaporeans have in general, demonstrated resilience in the face of COVID-19 and have adapted reasonably well to living with COVID-19, the "insidious effects of the pandemic on individuals' psychological well-being especially in the longer-term must not be neglected", the paper noted.

The paper found that what would help the Government's "ultimate goal" of Singapore being able to live with COVID-19 was encouraging individuals to "keep the end in mind".

This effectively increases readiness towards endemic living especially among the more hesitant, the paper said.

“Keeping the end in mind entails a clear articulation of the national goal of being able to overcome (though not necessarily eradicate) the virus by being able to live life that much more ‘normally’,” the paper said.

“It entails embracing the spirit of resilience, rather than fear, and a vision of possibility – that it is possible to live life as before.”

The researchers added that it also requires people to wean themselves off a “narrowly focused attention on (COVID-19) case numbers”, which is unhelpful in the broader scheme of things.

This is especially since the vast majority of the population, including the more vulnerable, have been sufficiently inoculated against the disease.

It is hoped that this aspect of the study provides useful insights to enhance public communication efforts related to COVID-19, the paper said.

“COVID-19 is a defining moment in our nation’s collective history. Looking back, much may have been lost. But, looking ahead, we hope that more will be gained as we learn from this experience and move forward together through COVID-19,” it added.