

The logo for the Young Singaporeans Conference features a stylized graphic of overlapping orange and grey curved shapes on the right. To the left of this graphic, the words "YOUNG SINGAPOREANS CONFERENCE" are stacked vertically in a bold, sans-serif font. "YOUNG" is in orange, "SINGAPOREANS" is in grey, and "CONFERENCE" is in orange.

YOUNG  
SINGAPOREANS  
CONFERENCE

## Young Singaporeans Conference 2024: Mental Health Opening Remarks & Dialogue Session

By Roslina Yong

### Opening Remarks

In his opening remarks at the Youth Singapore Conference 2024, Senior Minister of State for Ministry of Digital Development and Information, and Ministry of Health, Dr Janil Puthucheary addressed the crucial topic of mental health, reflecting on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and outlining Singapore's ongoing efforts to improve mental well-being. The dialogue was moderated by Dr Clara Lee, Research Fellow at IPS Social Lab.

Dr Puthucheary outlined how the pandemic challenged several assumptions about mental health resilience across different age groups. Contrary to expectations, seniors demonstrated remarkable adaptability, while young people struggled more with online-only interactions. He emphasised the importance of approaching mental health issues with humility and a willingness to challenge preconceptions.

Recent data from the 2023 National Population Health Survey revealed an overall improvement in mental health among the general population. However, young adults aged 18–29 continued to face greater challenges, with about 26 per cent reporting poor mental health. Dr Puthucheary noted the extended transition period from adolescence to adulthood as a contributing factor to these challenges.

He then outlined Singapore's National Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy that focuses on strengthening capabilities across various settings, including schools, workplaces, communities and healthcare institutions. He announced the establishment of a new national mental health office, set to be fully operational by 2025, to better coordinate inter-agency efforts.

Dr Puthucheary elaborated on both upstream and downstream interventions that are being implemented. Upstream efforts include building resilience from a young age through school curricula and co-curricular activities. Workplace initiatives, such as the tripartite advisory on mental health and well-being and the well-being champions network, aim to support employees' mental health. The government is also developing a positive use guide to address concerns about social media's impact on young people.

To improve access to mental health services, he announced plans for designated "first stop" touchpoints. These will include a new National Mental Health Helpline and Textline service, streamlined digital resources, and in-person support through community outreach teams. These services aim to provide early intervention and appropriate triage for those seeking help.

Dr Puthucheary concluded by reaffirming the government's commitment to improving mental health and well-being in Singapore. He stressed the need for continued efforts to increase mental health literacy and reduce stigma, praising ground-up initiatives that have been instrumental in breaking down barriers to mental health support.

His remarks underscored the ongoing importance of addressing mental health issues and building a more resilient and supportive community in Singapore, as the launch of the national strategy marks the beginning of a new phase in the country's approach to mental health.

## Dialogue Session

**Q:** What are the key challenges in advancing youth mental health initiatives?

**A:** In the short term, the most pressing challenge identified by Dr Puthucheary is the need for attitudinal shifts within society regarding mental health. He emphasised that while there are structures in place for channelling resources, changing mindsets and societal perceptions is far more complex. This shift requires extensive engagement beyond policy measures, involving community education and awareness campaigns.

In the medium term, the government will face challenges relating to defining and measuring success in mental health initiatives. Dr Puthucheary noted that many current initiatives are in their pilot stages, making it essential to determine what works effectively. Future discussions will need to focus on evaluating the effectiveness of current programs, allocating resources to successful initiatives, and identifying which programs should be expanded or scaled back.

SMS Dr Janil Puthuchery also highlighted the issue of caring for caregivers — including mental health professionals and those in senior care sectors. He indicated that there are existing programmes within healthcare and educational institutions aimed at creating processes and platforms within workplaces to promote employee mental health. Dr Puthuchery emphasised the importance of closely monitoring the situation and expressed hope that valuable lessons can be learned. He aimed to demonstrate to other employers how implementing supportive practices for employees can be feasible.

**Q:** How can mental health communication be extended to non-English speaking populations?

**A:** Dr Puthuchery recognised that while some attention has been given to this issue, there is a need for more comprehensive efforts. He emphasised that the challenge extends beyond mental health, affecting various outreach initiatives across different communities. He stressed that outreach should not only be conducted in the appropriate language but also in a manner that resonates with the community's cultural context. This requires a nuanced understanding of the communities being served.

He also noted that effective outreach involves mobilising a network of volunteers to engage directly with individuals, particularly individuals who are difficult to reach through conventional means. This approach applies not only to mental health care but also to issues such as digital literacy and access to services for isolated seniors. He also highlighted the importance of collaborating with organisations that already have established connections within specific linguistic communities, such as Mandarin or Tamil speakers. By infusing mental health knowledge into their outreach efforts, these organisations can help broaden the impact of mental health initiatives.

Dr Puthuchery added that one of the specific tasks of the government's inter-agency task force on mental health is to reach out to mother tongue language communities. This effort is aimed at effectively conveying mental health messages and fostering understanding within diverse populations.

**Q:** How can policies adapt to reflect the changing aspirations of Singaporeans in work culture and education?

**A:** Dr Puthuchery highlighted the importance of understanding these aspirations for the nation's progress. If young Singaporeans share the same goals as their parents, it could suggest a stagnation in progress. Recognising that aspirations are changing is crucial for effective policymaking. He referenced the Forward SG initiative, which sought to align

government policies with the aspirations of younger Singaporeans. He encouraged the audience to refer to the Forward SG report for further insights.

Dr Puthucheary also pointed out that while it is easier to implement changes in the education system, modifying workplace culture through policy is more complex. Educational policies can be adjusted to support new aspirations, but workplace dynamics are influenced by competition for talent and market share. He noted that businesses are not only competing for market share but also for skilled manpower. Constraints on local talent may drive companies to rethink their workplace environments to attract and retain employees. If work conditions are unattractive, employees will seek opportunities elsewhere.

He observed that larger companies were increasingly recognising the need for mental health support and establishing healthy workplace boundaries, especially for new hires and younger workers. This focus on mental health needs to extend to smaller employers as well. To facilitate these changes, Dr Puthucheary mentioned the role of the tripartite alliance, which includes unions and the Ministry of Manpower assisting small and medium-sized enterprises. Their goal is to help these companies adopt better practices that enhance the workplace environment.

**Q:** Is it possible to institutionalise a four-day work week to reduce workplace stress and burnout?

**A:** Dr Puthucheary acknowledged that while a four-day work week is possible, it may not necessarily achieve the desired outcomes. He noted that there have been instances where the four-day work week has been tried, but not always with great success.

With a light-hearted tone, he raised the hypothetical question of whether constituents would be comfortable with their Member of Parliament working a four-day week, pointing out that the role requires constant availability. He stressed that many services would have to be adjusted to accommodate such a change, creating potential gaps in service delivery. He highlighted the expectations of consumers and residents, questioning how they would respond if essential services — such as those in healthcare or food and beverage — reduced their operating hours. He also posed a scenario about hawker centres and how consumers might react if they were not open during traditional hours.

In addition, Dr Puthucheary raised concerns about the economic implications of a reduced work week. He questioned how businesses would compensate for potential revenue losses if they had to operate with fewer hours, and whether higher prices would result from fewer working hours.

While he concluded that a four-day work week could be feasible, he expressed scepticism about its effectiveness as a universal solution to workplace stress and burnout.

**Q:** What progress has been made to increase the number of mental health professionals in Singapore?

**A:** Dr Puthuchery confirmed that efforts to increase the number of mental health professionals in Singapore were already underway. He acknowledged the challenges involved in training healthcare professionals, noting that the process is time-consuming and requires both basic and postgraduate education.

He highlighted the specific targets set for the coming years: by 2030, Singapore aims for a 30 per cent increase in the number of psychiatrists and a 40 per cent increase in psychologists. Currently, there are just over 200 psychiatrists and psychologists in the country, making these ambitious targets significant for future capacity. However, he emphasised that simply increasing the number of mental health professionals will not fully address the issues of capacity and waiting times. While this is a crucial component, it is not the sole solution.

A major focus of the strategy involves right-sizing services. This means ensuring that the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) is not the only point of access for mental health care. The aim is to enhance community services and integrate other healthcare professionals who can provide psychiatric and psychological support. This approach is intended to reduce the reliance on IMH for crisis interventions. He noted that for urgent care needs, individuals can receive immediate attention by bypassing the regular queue. However, the broader issue of long waiting times stems from the influx of individuals who could potentially be better served by community resources rather than directly at IMH. Dr Puthuchery concluded that the shift towards community-based care is essential for improving overall access to mental health services and reducing wait times at IMH.

**Q:** How do you maintain positive mental health amidst your busy schedule?

**A:** Dr Puthuchery shared that he finds exercise beneficial for his mental health. Although he is a recovering runner dealing with plantar fasciitis, he emphasised that running allowed him to disconnect from work distractions, such as WhatsApp messages. He noted that having a routine is crucial, particularly in a profession that is often reactive and unpredictable. He makes a conscious effort to include structured elements in his daily life, such as having breakfast with his family. This routine provides a sense of control and stability amidst his busy schedule. Dr Puthuchery also mentioned the importance of setting aside time for reading. He prioritises this activity, especially before bed, as a way to unwind and disconnect from his devices. This practice contributes positively to his mental well-being. He highlighted that having a support

network is essential. Talking to others about challenges and seeking help when needed play a significant role in maintaining his mental health. SMS Dr Janil Puthuchery echoed themes from earlier discussions about mental health, suggesting that simple steps — such as ensuring adequate sleep, exercising, maintaining a balanced diet, and establishing a routine — can significantly enhance personal well-being.

**Q:** Given the relatively crowded mental health landscape in Singapore, how can we improve awareness and literacy on accessing services, and address the perceived duplication of mental health programmes?

**A:** SMS Dr Janil Puthuchery acknowledged the concern about the crowded mental health landscape and the potential for duplication of services. He emphasised the importance of moving beyond simply having numerous programmes to ensuring they are effective and well-coordinated. He highlighted that the strategy launched by the task force focuses on fostering genuine partnerships among service providers. It is not enough to claim partnerships; there must be tangible actions that bring these collaborations to life.

Dr Puthuchery highlighted that the tiered care model is central to understanding what services should be provided within the ecosystem. Each partner must have a clear understanding of their role and what clients can expect when they seek help. He further underscored the need for standardisation in mental health services. Establishing common standards allows clients to understand the quality of care and the expectations associated with various services. This standardisation can help mitigate confusion and enhance trust among users.

A key component of improving the ecosystem is developing clear referral processes. He discussed the importance of ensuring that when a client is referred from IMH to community services, both the client and the new service provider understand what to expect. This clarity is essential for smooth transitions and effective care.

To facilitate better collaboration, Dr Puthuchery mentioned the need for digital platforms that allow mental health professionals to share information and make referrals efficiently. This would help ensure that clients receive the appropriate support tailored to their needs. He also introduced the concept of a national mental health competency framework. This framework aims to establish common standards for what it means to be trained as a therapist or counsellor, ensuring that all professionals share a baseline understanding of competencies.

Dr Puthuchery encouraged organisations within the mental health ecosystem to reflect on their roles and consider the competencies their teams need to develop. He urged them to think

about how they can standardise referral processes and enhance information sharing to improve client care.

**Q:** How can Singapore embed mental health support into built environments, and what role can cross-sector collaborations play?

**A:** Dr Puthuchery emphasised the need for caution when attributing mental health outcomes directly to urban design. Creating environments that promote well-being is essential, but it is also challenging to measure the direct impact of physical spaces on mental health. He advocated for urban design principles that foster positive social interactions. For instance, well-maintained public spaces where people can congregate contribute to community cohesion and resilience, indirectly supporting mental health. The goal should be to create spaces that encourage enjoyment and interaction over time.

Dr Puthuchery highlighted ongoing efforts in urban planning, referencing his work as a grassroots advisor and MP. He pointed to initiatives like the Linear Park in Punggol, where various agencies, including the Ministry of National Development and Housing and Development Board, collaborated with community input to design shared spaces. He discussed the importance of balancing various community needs in the design process. Input from different stakeholders — such as residents, government agencies and community partners — can sometimes come into conflict. Finding a strategic overlay that prioritises social interaction while accommodating diverse uses — like commercial spaces and playgrounds — is crucial. The development of multi-use spaces was highlighted as a beneficial approach. Instead of strictly designating areas for specific purposes (e.g., childcare or senior care), creating flexible spaces encourages community interaction and inclusivity.

Dr Puthuchery expressed appreciation for the willingness of government agencies to engage with communities and integrate their feedback into urban planning. He encouraged multiplying existing efforts and suggested a shift in how the objectives of these initiatives are framed, moving from explicitly labelling mental health outcomes to emphasising well-being through community engagement.

**Q:** What is your message to the community that perceive today's youth to be mentally fragile, and what changes in the Singapore society may have contributed to current perceptions that we are not enough?

**A:** Dr Puthuchery pushed back against the notion that young people lacked confidence. He emphasised their drive and eagerness to make a positive impact on society, indicating a strong sense of self-efficacy. He noted that older generations may have a different perspective, often viewing youth through a lens of anxiety rather than capability. This disconnect highlights the

importance of understanding the broader societal context. The mental health challenges facing youth are not unique to Singapore; they are prevalent in many developed nations, including the US, the UK and Australia. This suggests that the issues are part of a larger global trend rather than isolated problems.

Dr Puthuchery reminded the audience that transitioning to adulthood is inherently uncertain, and feelings of anxiety are a natural part of this process. Each generation faces unique challenges distinct from those of their parents. He also identified various sources of societal pressures that the today's youth are experiencing, such as extended adolescence, over-parenting, fast pace of change, and information overload. Dr Puthuchery also highlighted the impact of social media, where having a social media presence is akin to being a published author, with every young person subject to public scrutiny. This creates additional pressures that can affect mental health.

**Q:** How does suicide prevention fit within the national agenda on mental health, especially considering the separate focus on this issue in international practices? What insights can you share from your experience leading the interagency task force to facilitate effective collaboration across agencies?

**A:** Dr Puthuchery stressed the critical need for an integrated approach to mental health that encompasses suicide prevention. He highlighted that approximately 50 per cent of suicide attempts occur without any identifiable antecedent, meaning that many individuals may not show overt signs of distress. Furthermore, among those with a prior mental health condition, a significant percentage may experience their first episode at the time of their suicide attempt. This unpredictability complicates efforts to identify at-risk individuals.

He further argued that suicide prevention strategies should not exist in isolation. Instead, they should be part of a comprehensive mental health framework that includes education, social support, and community resources. He underscored that mental health challenges are often intertwined with factors such as family dynamics, community engagement, and educational experiences. That said, SMS Dr Janil Puthuchery expressed optimism about recent data showing a decrease in suicide attempts, even as the population grows. This reduction is significant but should not lead to complacency. Each suicide attempt is a tragedy, and he emphasised the ongoing need for preventive measures and community involvement to address the root causes of mental health issues.

With regard to collaboration among various agencies, Dr Puthuchery underscored the importance of establishing a community of practice that fosters cooperation among diverse stakeholders while allowing them to maintain their unique identities. This approach can enhance the sharing of resources and best practices across sectors. He encouraged



organisations to look at successful models from other sectors that have effectively collaborated despite having fragmented landscapes. He emphasised the necessity of adopting and adapting these best practices while also being willing to discard ineffective methods. He also noted that humility is essential in fostering collaboration. Professionals across different agencies must be open to learning from one another, recognising that effective mental health strategies require input from various fields.

**Q:** How can we lower the perceived costs associated with admitting mental health struggles in high-pressure environments? What strategies can be implemented to help managers and educators recognise and support high performers experiencing mental health challenges?

**A:** Addressing the challenges faced by high performers, Dr Puthuchery emphasised the importance of establishing peer support networks within workplaces. High performers often feel isolated due to their responsibilities, so creating environments where informal relationships can flourish is crucial. This could involve regular check-ins or informal gatherings that allow high achievers to share their experiences and challenges. He introduced the concept of “sonder” — the realisation that everyone has a complex inner life that often goes unseen. This understanding can help foster empathy among colleagues and encourage high performers to reach out for help, realising they are not alone in their struggles.

Dr Puthuchery highlighted the need to incorporate mental health discussions into leadership training and professional development programs. He noted that this shift is already occurring in fields like aviation and defence, where mental health is recognised as a critical aspect of leadership. He called for similar recognition in other sectors, emphasising that mental health competency should be seen as a fundamental leadership skill.

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