

Heartland 'well-being circles' to be formed to safeguard mental health of S'poreans

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SINGAPORE - Community volunteers and grassroots leaders, along with social service partners, will soon be mobilised at several neighbourhoods to counsel residents who are struggling with their mental health and run well-being programmes.

These community "well-being circles" will be a key component of a nationwide initiative - the SG Mental Well-Being Network - launched on Saturday (July 16) to safeguard the mental health of people of all ages in Singapore.

It will comprise partners such as social service agencies and mental health advocacy organisations and be chaired by Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth Alvin Tan.

Due to proximity, neighbours and members of the community form the first line of support for residents who are struggling with stress and worry, said the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), which will be overseeing the network.

Therefore, the new network will strengthen peer support within neighbourhoods, create safe spaces and equip participating residents with the skills to identify those who may need help.

Mr Tan added that community support will alleviate the strain on professional services, including those by psychiatrists and psychologists.

The circles will be piloted at several grassroots divisions before being scaled up nationwide.

"We hope to encourage a larger movement on mental health, where everyone has the knowledge and the basic skills on mental well-being, and to grow a pool of passionate citizens who can take action in this area," said Mr Tan.

He was speaking at the launch of the network at the Asian Civilisations Museum on Saturday.

The network also aims to help citizens raise their mental health literacy, make resources and services more accessible, and destigmatise the topic.

Each well-being circle will have programmes catering to the needs of the respective neighbourhood.

Under the pilot, some social service agencies and non-profits will be attached to specific neighbourhoods to help grassroots volunteers run the programmes.

One non-profit is Campus Psy, which trains teenagers and young adults in peer support skills.

Its founder and executive director Cho Ming Xiu said that from October, Campus Psy will work with grassroots organisations in the north-east of Singapore to train secondary school students to become active listeners and be more empathetic. The students will also learn how to respond if any of their friends are suicidal.

Touch Community Services aims to build mental health-friendly neighbourhoods, starting with Tanjong Pagar GRC this month and later Ang Mo Kio.

It will provide first responder training for residents on helping those in distress and build a pool of befrienders to frequently check in on at-risk residents, said Ms Andrea Chan, assistant director of Touch Mental Wellness.

Social enterprise Happiness Initiative, which specialises in running months-long well-being circles of its own, will incorporate its initiative into the network's pilot.

Happiness Initiative's first round of sessions will start in August, involving 400 participants and 150 leaders aged 18 and above who will learn well-being skills in small groups.

The skills - aimed to shield against mental health conditions - include ways to help participants manage and prevent burnout, become more altruistic, and find strategies to realise their passions and goals, said the social enterprise's co-founder Sherman Ho.

The SG Mental Well-Being Network expands from the Youth Mental Well-Being Network, which was started in 2020 to strengthen the resilience of children, teenagers and young people.

Mental health issues have come to the fore with the Covid-19 pandemic.

To develop a national strategy for mental health, the Interagency Taskforce on Mental Health and Well-being was formed last year, and the new network acts as the taskforce's partnership arm.

People in their 20s and 40s have seen their mental and emotional health declining this year, revealed a report by the Institute of Policy Studies released on Thursday (July 14).

The pandemic may have driven the young adults to question their life choices amid an uncertain future, and the older group may be feeling the pressure of supporting their families as the cost of living continues to rise, said the report.

Youth mental health has also been on the radar recently, with the number of suicides among those aged 10 to 29 hitting a record high of 112 last year.

Touching on the need for the new network, Ms Chan said there is a sense of helplessness among many here who are unsure of how to help neighbours or peers with mental health struggles.

"If there is someone screaming in your neighbourhood, you don't want to discriminate against them, lock them out or pretend they don't exist. You want to support them," she added.