

Mental well-being of young people improved but still suffers from pandemic impact: Studies

Syarafana Shafeeq

***The Straits Times*, 22 January 2024**

SINGAPORE – The mental well-being of young people in Singapore has improved since 2020, but it has still not fully recovered from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, a disparity in life satisfaction levels also surfaced between degree holders and non-degree holders, with the former reporting greater satisfaction.

Before the pandemic, there was little variance in life satisfaction scores between the groups.

These findings from two studies were released on Jan 22 during the Singapore Perspectives 2024 online forum.

Data from the National Youth Survey found that 40 per cent of respondents in 2022 said the state of their mental well-being was good or very good, up from 35 per cent in 2020. Pre-pandemic, in 2019, 52 per cent of respondents said the same.

The survey, conducted by the National Youth Council (NYC), studies the major concerns and issues of schooling teens and young workers in Singapore, aged 15 to 34.

The other survey is Singapore's first national-level longitudinal study of young people, which tracked 4,000 respondents born between 1993 and 2000 over six years from 2017 to 2022.

The Youth Study on Transitions and Evolving Pathways in Singapore, or Youth STEPS, by NYC and the Institute of Policy Studies Social Lab at the National University of Singapore (NUS), found that a sizeable drop in life satisfaction was reported among those who were unemployed upon graduation during the pandemic, compared with those in the same situation before the pandemic.

During a panel discussion at the forum, an audience member asked if employers could better help the young as they transition into the workforce.

In response, NYC deputy chief executive Tan Lin Teck, one of the panellists, said corporations have a role to play in addressing the concerns that young people have, as their values and priorities may have changed.

He shared that, in the past, a common question among job seekers during interviews was about the kind of training offered to staff for their improvement. In recent years, however, he often receives questions about the support systems the company has in place for mental well-being.

It is important from a business perspective to not only hire the best talent, but also to support them, and ensure that young people feel supported as they move into a workplace setting, he said.

He added: "It will be a competitive advantage for corporates if they do have a strong support mechanism for mental well-being, given the priority that youth place on that."

The national survey by NYC also found that the issues that most affected the mental well-being of the young differed according to age.

Those aged 15 to 19 were largely affected by their studies, while those between 25 and 29 years old were most affected by finances.

A common area of concern for all respondents was burnout.

Another panellist, Associate Professor Vincent Chua from the department of sociology and anthropology at NUS, said a question to think about was why people were experiencing burnout from such a young age.

He said burnout does not appear out of nowhere and is accumulated, and wondered if it could be due to the hyper-competition that students are exposed to in school.

"(The competition) sort of homes in on a singular definition of success that seems to permeate society," he said.

NYC's Mr Tan added that it is important to have conversations around the definition of success because it determines how young people look at themselves and the people around them – whether as competition or as people they can support and enable.

Fellow panellist Kwan Jin Yao, an assistant professor at the University of Delaware in the United States, said that although he appreciates his education as it is a big part of his success today, he has had to unlearn some of the notions of competition that he learnt in school.

"How do I learn to live a good life on my own terms without having to benchmark and compare against someone else?" he said.

"It is not easy to unlearn decades of trying to compete and be better than someone else... but I think a big part of it for individuals would be to have these conversations among themselves.

"These conversations can shape the way we approach life, and how we pass on certain values and principles to our children if we do choose to start a family."

Prof Chua added: "We need to deconstruct what others have put on us in order to come fully to ourselves – that would be very good for young people."