

## Emotional preparedness key to surviving outbreak: Experts

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Emotional preparedness among individuals and the community is key to ensuring that Singapore does not "fall off a sharp cliff" should the coronavirus outbreak take a turn for the worse.

This was a point made yesterday by Dr Shashi Jayakumar from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) forum on Singapore's response to Covid-19.

Streamed live on Facebook, the discussion moderated by IPS deputy director of research Gillian Koh touched on the economic, medical and social impact of the outbreak, as well as on social resilience.

Dr Jayakumar said government messaging is important in building this resilience, and Singapore struck the right balance when communicating its strategy - that it would contain the virus as much as possible while accepting the possibility of a community spread.

He said: "It is not really a big shock if it starts to become a community issue because we are prepared for it..."

"In other national locations, it becomes like almost falling off a cliff. It starts to breed or seed some of the intolerance and xenophobia."

Touching on the panic-buying that ensued after the Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (Dorscon) was raised to orange here, Dr Jayakumar said feedback from many quarters was that there was little warning given, and he agreed with Dr Koh that it is for the Government to put out strategic information to assure the public and build trust.

IPS senior research fellow Carol Soon said the panic-buying was a "momentary panic", but urged the authorities to do more in terms of anticipation and inoculation.

One example of this was when Health Minister Gan Kim Yong came out to quash rumours about the possibility of the Dorscon being moved to red, which means the disease is severe and spreading widely.

### 'MENTAL SHORTCUTS'

Warning of what the World Health Organisation has labelled an "infodemic", where the public is flooded with false information, Dr Soon said it is important to understand why people spread it.

"When there is an information gap, people rely on heuristics, what we call mental shortcuts. People will attempt to find whatever information they can to plug the gaps," she said.

Dr Soon said the Government has been putting together a relatively effective playbook for public communications during the outbreak, but more can be done.

"Where possible, we should not leave members of the public to make their own interpretations," she said.

Dr Soon said emotional preparedness is one indicator of Singapore's social resilience in the face of the Covid-19 epidemic.

Another is the ability to care for others.

Citing examples of people using technology to facilitate the donation of masks and hand sanitisers to those living in rental flats, as well as people creating videos and memes reinforcing key messages from the authorities, Dr Soon said: "Moving forward, hopefully, we will see more of these things."

Dr Jayakumar said a lot of work is being done by think-tanks and governments on how to bounce back from terror attacks, but more needs to be done to look at whether societies can do the same in the face of pandemics and other slow-burning issues such as climate change.

Over 10% of coronavirus patients have been in ICU.

More than 10 per cent of the coronavirus cases here have needed intensive care, the Health Ministry's director of communicable diseases Vernon Lee revealed yesterday.

"This is certainly concerning, but at the same time it doesn't look like - on face value looking at the case fatality - something like Sars (severe acute respiratory syndrome)," Associate Professor Lee said at an Institute of Policy Studies forum on Singapore's response to the outbreak.

He did not say exactly how many cases here have been in intensive care. But as of noon yesterday, seven of the 33 cases still in hospital were in critical condition.

At least two previous Covid-19 cases who were in intensive care units have made full recoveries.

Prof Lee said that while Covid-19 seemed to be spreading quicker than Sars, measures taken here, in China and in Hong Kong show that it might be containable.

"We need a lot more time to understand how this virus transmits, its severity and so on... It is its own virus, essentially. I think it would be unfair to compare it to Sars or influenza and pigeonhole it," he said.

Asked about the recent surge of cases outside China, which has fuelled fears of a global pandemic, Prof Lee said Singapore is always at risk of importing cases, being a global hub of travel and trade, but robust surveillance systems have allowed the authorities here to identify cases early.

## *PANDEMIC*

Should the World Health Organisation declare the outbreak a pandemic, which it did with the H1N1 outbreak in 2009, Prof Lee said this does not mean the disease has become more severe.

"What it actually means is that the disease is spreading very quickly and it is likely going to be difficult to be able to contain it globally."