

Pandemic led to mental health slide for those in 20s and 40s, with inflation now adding to anxiety: IPS study

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SINGAPORE — Singapore residents in their 20s and 40s have suffered declining mental health over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, while those aged 60 and over have fared better as the health threat from the infectious disease waned, a study found. Those in their 30s and 50s fell somewhere in between on average.

Levels of anxiety over the rising cost of living also split according to various age groups. About 40 per cent of those aged 21 to 29 expressed a high level of worry over inflation, while a markedly lower 24 per cent of those 60 and above felt this way.

On a brighter note, the overall proportion of respondents who felt more stressed from the pandemic has generally fallen since its start.

These were some of the findings from a study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) released on Thursday (July 14). The study is called "Moving forward through Covid-19 in Singapore: Well-being, lessons learnt and future directions".

It was undertaken by Dr Mathew Mathews, a research team comprising IPS principal research fellow and head of IPS Social Lab, as well as IPS Social Lab's associate director Mike Hou and research assistant Fiona Phoa.

More than 2,000 citizens and permanent residents aged 21 and above were surveyed over more than two years from April 2020 to June 13 this year. It started when Singapore's Covid-19 infection controls were in place during a semi-lockdown in 2020.

TODAY takes a closer look at the results of the study.

MENTAL HEALTH ON THE DECLINE FOR SOME GROUPS

Participants were asked to rate their emotional and mental well-being on a scale of one to five.

By looking at the mean scores of the different age groups, the study concluded that those aged 21 to 29 saw "an overall decline" in their self-reported mental and emotional health.

The report said that the pandemic may have "restricted their opportunities for meaningful interactions and curtailed many activities, which had been commonplace for young adults at this stage of their development such as travel".

Ultimately, these restrictions may have taken a toll on these younger respondents.

"This group may also be at a fledgling stage of their careers, and the pandemic has inevitably caused significant disruptions to individuals' plans or aspirations."

The researchers noted that mental health for this group declined despite the further lifting of Covid-19 restrictions such as border re-openings and the removal of group size limits for social activities.

Elaborating at a media briefing on Thursday, Dr Mathews said that the "positivity" that has come from these loosening restrictions may have been cancelled out by "all kinds of declines, difficulties and disadvantages" experienced by the respondents.

Dr Hou said that there is "a lot of uncertainty" for younger people.

"This is a time when many people take stock of their lives after observing the disruptions that people have gone through — you re-evaluate your life priorities. And for the young, that presents to them an even greater form of existential challenge to their lives... it's something that the youth may face more starkly compared to other demographic groups."

Respondents aged 40 to 49 also saw a "steady decline" in their emotional and mental well-being.

"This age group, sandwiched between attending to the needs of their parents and school-going children during this trying season, may have systematically become more psychologically and emotionally weary," the survey report stated.

These stressors may have also become more pronounced, especially in the midst of job disruptions and rising costs of living, it added.

However, respondents aged 60 and above reported that their mental and emotional health steadily improved over the past 15 months.

The study explained that in the early days of the pandemic, this age group received substantial advice about the dangers of Covid-19 to their health, with the impact of an infection among older persons known to be much more serious.

Dr Mathews said: "There was a lot of looming fear, especially because things were unknown, and you started off with many older people being quite worried."

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

OVERALL STRESS LEVELS DUE TO PANDEMIC FELL

The proportion of respondents who felt stressed from the pandemic had generally fallen since the start of the pandemic, although it fluctuated according to key events over the past two years:

- About half of the respondents were stressed or very stressed about the pandemic when polled in April 2020 during the semi-lockdown that was the "circuit breaker"
- The figure generally fell over the next two years — for example, it dropped to as low as 29 per cent in August last year, when there was a relaxation of infection controls during the Phase Two (heightened alert) restrictions
- Then, it shot up to 48 per cent during periods such as the stabilisation phase in October to November last year to cope with the high number of Covid-19 cases at the time
- The figure fell again to 30 per cent by April this year, with the further easing of infection controls and "as life seemed to return to normal"

- The study noted that although the proportion of respondents who were stressed by the pandemic has fallen since its earlier stages in 2020, it did not necessarily translate into respondents' self-perceptions of better mental well-being:
- In a question on whether they were worried in the next six months about losing their mental well-being, 28 per cent who were surveyed between May and June this year said that they were either rather worried or very worried, compared to 18 per cent who were surveyed between April and May
- This spike reflected "concerns about a new Covid wave surfacing, with respondents worried about the return of rising case numbers and possible restrictions", the study noted
- Dr Mathews said: "The proportion who are worried reminds us that more people are aware of how their mental health can be affected by waves of stressful events and periods."
- He added that they may "reflect on the kind of changes that have come about because of the pandemic, and the new worries that have come about... more are saying that they better be careful because these anxieties and these issues can reduce their mental health"

CONCERN OVER INFLATION

The study noted that as Singapore moves towards normalcy, many challenges remain, with the biggest issue "looming over everyone's minds" appearing to be the rising cost of living.

- More than four in 10 respondents were rather or very worried about the cost of healthcare (45 per cent), cost of utilities (41 per cent) and cost of food (40 per cent) possibly rising this year
- The proportion of people who were rather or very worried about the rise in the Goods and Services Tax (GST) from 7 to 9 per cent has also been on the decline since March to July this year, falling from 54 per cent to 47 per cent.
- Government support announced in the months after the news of the GST hike could have helped ease some worries, the report said. "For example, a new tranche of Community Development Council vouchers was rolled out in May to help Singaporeans cope with rising prices."

As for the breakdown based on age groups, of those aged 21 to 29, 40 per cent said that there was "high worry" over the rising cost of living, as compared to only 24 per cent for those aged 60 and above:

- The research team noted that those in younger age groups may "tend to experience lower financial independence, as compared to those who are older, given that they would be relatively fresh entering the workforce"
- "They may also not yet have been able to achieve their desired financial goals, such as procuring a property or saving up for marriage... This, coupled with the real and felt experiences of rising costs of living, may exert a negative impact on their future outlook in terms of their sense of financial security."
- While those who are older were also worried, especially those who have less financial resources, it is also "possible to assume that they have survived some of these economic difficulties previously and have built some resources to deal with them, and perhaps then are less worried"

LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE PANDEMIC

Respondents were also asked to reflect on the lessons learnt from the pandemic and what they look forward to ahead.

When asked what the top three areas of focus should be for Singapore, attitudes here were "more pragmatic" the study noted. The top three most important areas were:

- Providing support for Singaporeans to cope with the rise in GST (48 per cent)
- Providing immediate financial support for households to cope with daily expenses, utilities and education expenses, and supporting children from disadvantaged families through programmes (45 per cent)
- Providing immediate support for businesses, such as by supporting those affected most by Covid-19, and encouraging employers to hire Singaporeans through the Job Growth Incentive (44 per cent)

The respondents were also asked to engage in a free-response question on what they felt were the important lessons that the nation should learn and improve on, based on the pandemic.

Their responses were grouped into three themes: National values, institutional resilience, and social resilience.

- It was found that lessons pertaining to institutional resilience — such as how Singapore should have strong finances, healthcare and other systems in place — was more likely to appeal to older respondents
- 40 per cent of those aged 60 and above selected such lessons, as opposed to only 24 per cent of those aged 21 to 29 who did this
- On the other hand, lessons pertaining to social resilience, such as citizens being more compassionate to each other, were more likely to be emphasised by younger respondents, with 20 per cent of those aged 21 to 29 selecting such lessons, while only 11 per cent who were above 60 did so

The report noted that older respondents "may be more pragmatic, preferring lessons that reflect the importance of having good governance and policies to overcome any crises.

"It may also be reflective of the times they grew up in, when there was a survivalist mentality," the report said.

"Younger respondents may be more attuned to social issues as compared to older respondents, given that younger respondents grew up in a time when there was relative stability in governance and greater emphasis on social cohesion issues.

"Hence, younger respondents may be more interested in how Singapore citizens should improve on being more inclusive and caring," the report added.

Although the young respondents were more likely to select social resilience, it was the lowest in priority among all the lesson themes and across all age groups.

"This could be because in general, Singaporeans adopt a more pragmatic and survivalist mentality, and choose to prioritise issues that directly affect lives and livelihoods when needed," the research team said.

"That said, the fact that younger cohorts are at least a little more interested in prioritising these issues could indicate that, over time, we may see some difference in prioritisation."