

45,000 calls made to National Care Hotline since April last year

Covid-19 a stress test of Singapore's mental health and healthcare systems, says Janil

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The National Care Hotline, which provides psychological first aid and emotional support to those who dial in, has fielded more than 45,000 calls since it was set up in April last year.

Revealing these numbers at a conference yesterday morning, Senior Minister of State for Health Janil Puthucheary said the Covid-19 pandemic has been a stress test of the country's mental health and healthcare systems.

"This pandemic will continue to pose a challenge to the mental well-being and health of the population, since the impact is likely to last for some years to come," he added.

Dr Janil was speaking at the Asia-Pacific Mindfulness Conference, which featured local and international experts sharing their views on topics such as mindfulness and mental well-being.

The virtual conference, which started yesterday, is being held over a two-week period until Aug 29. It is organised by mental wellness charity Brahm Centre. More than 6,000 people from 59 countries signed up for the event.



Senior Minister of State for Health Janil Puthucheary (top row, third from left) and speakers at the Asia-Pacific Mindfulness Conference 2021 yesterday. With him were (top row from left) Brahm Centre's chief executive Angie Chew; Professor Richard Davidson, founder and director of The Centre for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin-Madison; Professor Craig Hassed, director of education at Monash Centre for Consciousness and Contemplative Studies, Monash University; (middle row from left) Agency for Integrated Care CEO Tan Kwang Cheak; National Healthcare Group's group CEO Philip Choo; Institute of Mental Health CEO Daniel Fung; Mr Kevin Fong, founding teacher of ATINAT Institute of Mindfulness Training in China; and (bottom row from left) National Council of Social Service CEO Tan Li San and Professor Peter Pang, master of National University of Singapore Residential College 4. PHOTO: BRAHM CENTRE

One topic that came up frequently in discussions yesterday was the pandemic's impact on Singaporeans' mental well-being.

For instance, a series of polls by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) found that although Singaporeans' quality of life has generally improved since last year's circuit breaker – which took place from April 7 to June 1 – anxiety levels have largely been “sustained” since.

These polls were carried out at three points – during the circuit breaker, in September last year during phase two of Singapore's reopening and about three months ago, said NCSS chief executive Tan Li San.

Much of this anxiety was related to employment and finances, she said, adding: “Even as we move into the endemic (phase), there are concerns about the future.

“Therefore, it is much more crit-

ical that we take care of our mental well-being, and mindfulness practice is one way to do this.”

Associate Professor Angie Chew, chief executive of Brahm Centre, observed that many people – from healthcare workers to teachers to students – are experiencing a great deal of stress.

She emphasised the importance of learning good coping techniques, adding: “If there isn't an approach or a technique that can help

us calm our minds, that's when we experience burnout, insomnia, depression, anxiety and many other mental health conditions.”

The centre has received more inquiries about its mindfulness courses since April last year.

It trained more than 23,000 people last year, marking a three-fold increase from the year before, Prof Chew said.

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