



Overcoming

Pandemic

# fatigue

*The invisible wounds of a pandemic: uncertainty and mental health challenges, all cause anxiety and fear—making mental wellness more important than ever. Mental health experts share their thoughts on how you can conquer pandemic fatigue.*

TEXT: Chow Ee-Tan IMAGES: Courtesy of iStockphoto

It's an understatement to say that the Covid-19 pandemic has a major effect on our lives. The virus is not only posing threats to our physical health but more so now on our mental health. Many of us are facing challenges that can be stressful, overwhelming, and cause strong emotions. While social distancing is necessary to reduce

the spread of Covid-19, it can make us feel isolated and lonely as well as increase stress and anxiety.

As Covid-19 is highly contagious, this may lead to high vigilance and fear of being infected by the virus or unintentionally passing it to our loved ones. Mortality due to the infection may also lead to bereavement and grief.

"The inevitable implementation of movement restrictions leads to issues such as social isolation, boredom, loss of income, lack of outdoor activities, and a sense of helplessness due to uncertainties and the loss of freedom," says clinical psychologist, Lee Sook Huey.

Different people are likely to be facing different stressors, she says. For example, young adults may face uncertainty in their income. Students need to deal with the stress of remote learning. Parents have to manage working from home and parenting due to school closures and lack of childcare. Frontliners may be stressed by long hours of working and high patient load. The elderly and those with special needs may have higher mental health risks due to dependency on others.

"There is definitely an increase in stress, anxiety and depression. The changes and adjustments people have to adapt to in this 'new normal' is quite extraordinary," says consultant psychiatrist, Dr Lee Aik Hoe.

"Some of the situations that I have encountered among my patients include loss of income, social isolation and the inability to meet family and friends. The biggest problem is the fear of contracting the virus and the uncertainty of future," he says.





Dr Lee says the most common mental health problem during the pandemic is anxiety. This causes sleep disturbances, excessive worrying, poor concentration, and a variety of physical symptoms such as palpitation, bowel symptoms like dyspepsia, gastric pains, and tremors of hands.

He says like all mental health illnesses, when the symptoms of stress, anxiety, or depression cause considerable distress of psychosocial functioning, the person should seek professional help from counsellors, psychologists, or psychiatrists.

“What I have observed is that those who had suffered anxiety or depression before are more prone to recurrence during the pandemic because of the stress and changes in their lives,” he says.

**THE REALITY OF PANDEMIC FATIGUE**

Despite its name, pandemic fatigue in this context is not so much about exhaustion, tiredness or depletion of mental resources. Rather, it should be understood in terms of the lack of motivation for the tasks we choose to do. Understanding pandemic fatigue is challenging because it is not one phenomenon and likely stems from several causes.

Life during the pandemic is brimming with tasks requiring control and mental effort as we are constantly adjusting to new rules and policies. Everything from working to getting groceries to travelling is different than what we know. They involve new rules and protocols that require cognitive control to plan out novel behaviours and monitor what we’re doing every step of the way.

Indeed, pandemic fatigue is a

natural and expected response when we experience a prolonged public health crisis, says Sook Huey.

“People may start to feel demotivated to engage in protective behaviours or follow the SOPs as the pandemic seems to have no end in sight,” she says. “From actively searching up the statistics of Covid-19 every day, people may start to care less about it. They may also start to feel desensitised towards the numbers of infection and perceive that they have a lower risk to be infected.”

Being restricted for too long may also lead to an ingrown urge and wish for freedom, she says. And all of us who have been in this pandemic for a sustained period of time are at risk of pandemic fatigue. Those who have been experiencing a higher level of stress may be more prone to burnout and fatigue.



*“Pandemic fatigue is like having burnout. The person with pandemic fatigue lacks motivation, feels exhausted despite having adequate rest and sleep, and feels hopeless over the future.”*

– Dr Lee Aik Hoe  
consultant psychiatrist



He says those who have mental health issues previously are more prone to developing pandemic fatigue. People who live alone and with little social support, as well as those who are badly affected financially are at higher risks.

“I recall a patient who had done well financially, and who owned several properties all with partial loans. But when the pandemic occurred, his tenants could not pay their rents and he was in a fix. He couldn’t pay his mortgages, felt very anxious, and resorted to alcohol which worsened his mental health,” says Dr Lee.

Suicide rates have increased in some countries due to the pandemic and its social complications—job losses, financial difficulties, and idleness and loss of directions. If negative and suicidal thoughts occur, Dr Lee says we need to recognise them as symptoms of mental distress and one should seek help.

### KEEPING MENTAL HEALTH IN CHECK

“When symptoms persist, it’s important to seek advice from mental health professionals such as counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists. Family physicians and even teachers may also be able to help and guide the person,” says Dr Lee.

On an individual level, he says one should try to set a routine of sleep, exercise regularly, and cultivate new hobbies. One should not be too overwhelmed by the social media information and controversies but depend on legitimate information sources instead.

Meanwhile, Sook Huey suggests some steps that we

can take to keep our mental health in check.

The first is to understand and be aware of our current mental wellness. From time to time, we can reflect on how we are doing so far in terms of our overall wellbeing, she says.

Secondly, it will be helpful for us to set realistic and kind expectations on ourselves during this period. Setting idealistic goals may lead to unnecessary distress.

“Thirdly, we can use proactive strategies to cope with our current struggles. For example, to cope with income loss, people can start to sell things online. To cope with boredom, people can engage in new interests and learning. To cope with social isolation, people can spend more quality time with their family.

“Fourthly, we can create a sense of

certainty through setting structures, routines and boundaries in our daily life. Creating structure through healthy routines are beneficial,” she says. “For example, schedule break time and exercise time. Setting boundaries include discussing with your family on who to use which part of the home and planning with your children when it is a good time to do things together.”

Last but not least, she recommends that we should communicate and support one another. Work as a team with your family to manage the household and reach out to your peers, coworkers, friends, and community for help and support when the needs arise.

She advises people should always reach out and seek help if they are struggling to cope with emotions

## The Most Common Psychological Impact of Covid-19





that are affecting their work, study or social relationships.

“Mental health professionals can provide a safe space for you to share your difficulties and facilitate you in increasing your current resources to cope with the difficulties,” she says.

**STAYING CONNECTED**

“We need to treat the pandemic as a marathon instead of a sprint,” says Sook Huey. “Public attention may fade, but we need to make a long-term commitment to maintain the preventive practices and do the right things to keep ourselves and others safe despite the inconveniences.

She admits that social isolation and loneliness have a negative impact on our wellbeing.



*“Try to stay flexible and adjust our behaviours as new facts emerge and recommendations change. We need to shift from the mindset of “the pandemic is controlling our life” to “we control our behaviours to overcome the pandemic.”*

– Lee Sook Huey  
clinical psychologist

“Do reach out to your family members, especially the elderly in self-isolation, through texts, phone calls, or video calls. Volunteer your time to help individuals in need. Stay connected to your family members by listening, talking and engaging in enjoyable activities. Sharing your feelings can also help you feel calmer and closer to each other,” she says.

Dr Lee concurs with this and advises people to be socially connected despite physically distanced. This means we should support our family, friends, colleagues, and neighbours.

“We can help one another to cope with stress through social support. Regular phone calls or video chats can help us and our loved ones feel less lonely and isolated. Simple actions such as assisting one another doing chores, buying food, and sharing your cooking with your neighbours are ways to stay connected.

“Taking care of yourself can better equip you to take care of others. During times of social distancing, it is especially important to stay connected with your friends and family,” he concludes. ☺



**HOW TO LOOK AFTER YOUR MENTAL HEALTH DURING A PANDEMIC**

Understand and be aware of your current mental wellness.

Set realistic and kind expectations on yourself.

Use proactive strategies to cope with your current struggles.

Try to set a routine of sleep.

Exercise regularly.

Cultivate new hobbies.

Communicate and support one another.

Reach out and seek help if you are struggling to cope with emotions that are affecting your work, study or social relationships.