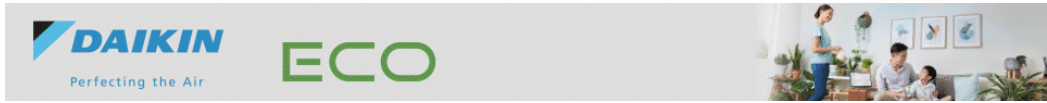


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Singapore

Students in distress: How can pressures be eased so they don't feel 'boxed in'?

Education Minister Chan Chun Sing outlined in Parliament a plan to ramp up counsellors in schools. But there are a few tricky things to overcome, say guests on this week's Heart of the Matter podcast.



Ms Lena Teo helping youth understand impact of mental health and how to manage their stressors, in a photo that was taken before the COVID-19 pandemic. (Photo: Lena Teo)



Crispina Robert

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SINGAPORE: Quite often when young clients come to Bettina Yeap, principal counsellor at Care Corner, their first concern is whether their parents need to know.

Many don't want to involve mums or dads - because "they wouldn't understand", or they don't want to "burden" them, she says.

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Speaking on CNA's Heart of the Matter podcast on Thursday (Aug 5), Ms Yeap recounted what some clients told her: "I told my mum and dad, and they are like, why don't you just talk to me, why do you have to go to a mental health professional?"

"They would say, 'What depression, what anxiety? You're just being lazy.'"

On Jul 19, [a 13-year-old was killed at River Valley High School and a 16-year-old was arrested](#). A week later, Minister of Education Chan Chun Sing [addressed the incident in Parliament](#) and spoke about the pressures young people face and how

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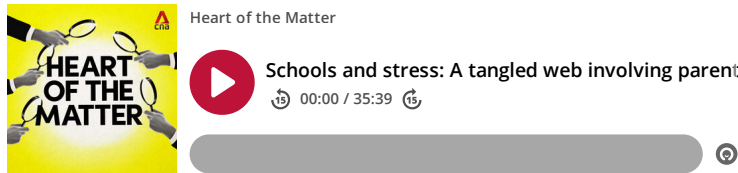
schools can support those facing mental health challenges.

Ms Yeap, Minister of State for Education Sun Xueling and parent of four, Adrian Tan were on CNA's Heart of the Matter podcast to discuss whether relieving the stresses ailing Singapore youths required deeper structural and mindset shifts.

While stress can come from sources other than school, Ms Yeap raised the critical role parents play. Knowing their child has a mental health issue can be a shock, denial can set in before guilt, which makes being supportive hard.

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Listen to Minister of State Sun Xueling, counsellor Bettina Yeap and parent of four, Adrian Tan discuss school and stress:



This is especially so for teenagers under 18. If they choose to seek help outside the school system – they need parental consent.

Looking out for signs of distress instead of dismissing their children's concerns altogether is critical. "Maybe my child is talking less, talking more than usual or becoming more withdrawn," she explains, adding how drastic changes in appetite, sleep and motivation levels are other key signals.

GIVING YOUTHS MESSAGES OF HOPE

Agreeing, Ms Sun shared her own journey when she was a young student.

"What Bettina (Yeap) said about losing sleep, losing weight – it is all very, very real ... when you are depressed you can sleep a lot, but it is never enough. You feel tired when you wake up and realise, wow, it's another day you have to go through. You just feel there's a lack of meaning ... For a young person what you want is for someone to listen to you," she said.

Parents should be the first port of call, but this isn't always the case. "If the relationship isn't a strong one, if it isn't a warm one, then you may feel you've no one to go to, you may seek out friends," she says.

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On Jul 26, Ms Sun had posted on her Facebook page an account of her struggle in junior college where she didn't fit in and thought of "finally (getting) some rest". Having been through that, she wrote about how as a parent, she would never place academics above her daughter's well-being.

Asked what got her past that rough patch, Ms Sun said: "I read, listened to music ... Some people are more open and want to talk to others. There are others who are very quiet ... the silent ones. We look perfectly okay from the outside and find individual ways.

"You'll be amazed, you can come across a quote, a picture of a lighthouse, we can look up the colour of the sky, it's different for different people.

"Sometimes you come across something, like a poster on the wall. And that thing you saw on that road on that day, gives you confidence to live on Monday. It sounds very weird. But it's absolutely true."

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"That's why I think that it is so important for all of us as a society to try our very best to create those messages of hope for young people. And you never know, the young person may watch that video. And that might be the source of strength to get that young person through," she said.

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DEPLOYMENT OF MORE TEACHER-COUNSELLORS COME WITH CHALLENGES

Would the deployment of more than 1,000 teacher-counsellors in the next few years, up from a current 700, announced by Mr Chan make a difference in mental health support for students?

How do counsellors handle confidentiality, and could there be scenarios where patient privilege must be broken to notify guardians, parents, or teachers? "If there is a risk of self-harm or harm to others, if there's a crime, we are obliged to breach confidentiality. That's professional ethics in terms of counselling," Ms Yeap said, pointing out these are made clear to patients.

What if parents disagree with the advice of teacher-counsellors when it comes to academic choices like taking a subject at a less advanced level when parents may have a completely different idea of what is best for their child?

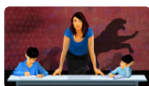
"I will definitely seek a second or third opinion ... and gather feedback from (my child) whether it's something he wants to do, knowing it's very hard for him to make a firm decision right (away)," Mr Tan, who was on the same podcast, said.

"Actually, my experience was the opposite, because they wanted him to maintain (his advanced subject) and I wanted him to drop it because I felt it may be better for him," Mr Tan quipped. "But the school wins."

MOVING BEYOND SCHOOL COUNSELLING TO TACKLE STRESS

Despite these challenges, the MOE has to work on giving students more options should they need help. Teacher-counsellors in school should work like "first-aid" stations, said Ms Sun. Still, she accepts that not all students will go to them.

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"Anonymous hotlines work for these students. There's nothing wrong with that," she added.

Would increasing teacher-counsellor numbers place an additional, even unfair burden on teachers? Ms Sun pointed out that it was not just a question of what MOE wants, but what teachers can handle – not everyone wants to or can do counselling, and training is critical, she explains.

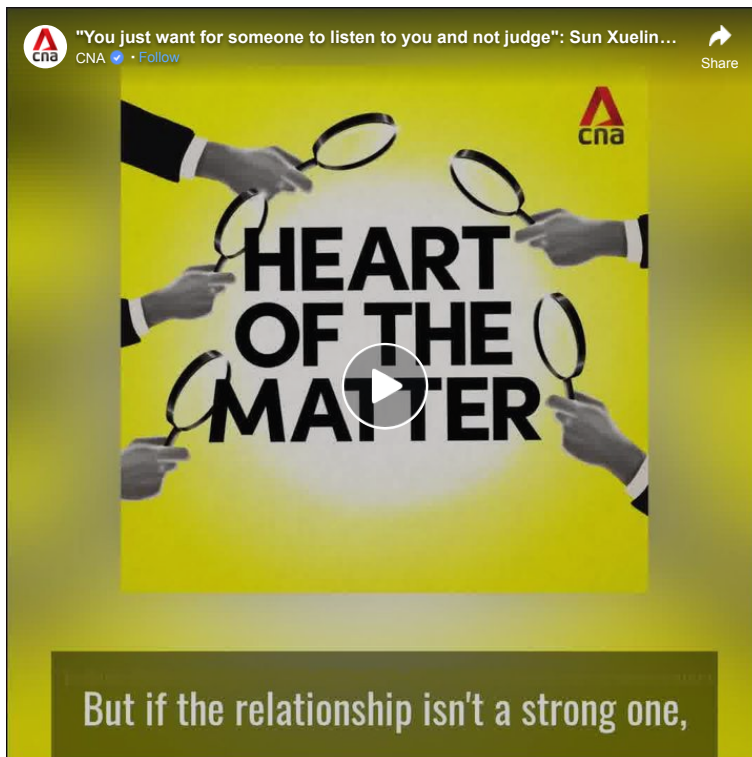
Ultimately, choice matters greatly. "People look for help in different ways ... when we work with partners and create these channels outside the formal school system, these help channels are available to all in the society," she said.

But putting aside help avenues, how much further would MOE push on reducing stress off students? In his statement, Mr Chan announced the dropping of

Common Last Topics (CLT) to ease the pressure on students taking major exams this year in view of how disruptive COVID-19 has been.

But does this mean the curriculum is potentially overloaded and students can be allowed to do less and spend time on other activities like sports or arts? Would MOE consider doing away with standardised testing like the PSLE exams or allow students to start school later to reduce stress.

LISTEN: "You just want for someone to listen to you and not judge": Sun Xueling on feeling "depressed" during her junior college days.



Those are very big decisions and MOE is taking "baby steps", Ms Sun said. It has started by tweaking the system, taking away the arms race for every mark in the new PSLE system, she added, highlighting the shift away from the PSLE scoring system. "The idea is to have more flexibility in the system," she said.

Mr Tan however raised the issue of peer pressure – whether we like it or not, high-stakes exams like PSLE does take a toll on parents and students, he said.

There's simply no time for students to do anything else – between school, enrichment, tuition, CCA and extra classes. Sharing that he tried to be a relaxed parent at first, he eventually succumbed – because he did not want his children to fall too far behind.

Ms Sun said the current system allows every student to learn at their pace. The problem arises when parents or students feel "boxed in".

"What we are trying to get at ... is (for) every student to be able to learn at the level he is comfortable with, but we don't want that to prejudice the outcome for him," said Sun. Still, this is not something the MOE can dictate. Everyone from parents, students and employers have a role to play, she added.

How optimistic can Singapore be for those needed mindset shifts to take root? Ms Yeap pointed out how they were already underway: "We're trying to shift some of the focus away, that you're not your grades and there are other important things in life to pursue."

"Cultural change takes a while ... but we can shift over time. The academic aspect has always been an important part of achievement and identity in Singapore so we can't run away from that," Ms Yeap concluded.

Source: CNA/cr


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