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## Young people stay strong in the face of stress



PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

Mental health helplines have been receiving more calls from young people because of the pandemic, but experts say youth can nonetheless be very resilient

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Before the pandemic struck, 19-year-old Ashley was already struggling with her mental health.

Ashley (not her real name) recalls: "I get anxious in a big group of people. My anxiety got worse after I finished secondary school, where I had friends who supported me.

"Growing up, my self-esteem was very low. I hated myself. I always compared myself with others and I saw myself as a failure."

In 2018, she attempted suicide. At the end of last year, she did so again. Both times, she tried to throw herself into the path of a car, before a friend pulled her away from the traffic.

The fourth of five children, Ashley is taking a year's break from the Institute of Technical Education this year to recover.

She has had mixed reactions to the Covid-19 restrictions.

The first month of the circuit breaker, which started in April, was "stressful and loud", she says, as she was confined at home with her parents and siblings.

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Her mother is a canteen vendor and her father, a warehouse worker.

But although she missed her friends, the shut-in period, when most people worked or studied at home, had resulted in a quietening of public spaces, which contributed to her recovery.

In recent months, she has relished spending time alone in the hushed void deck of her Housing Board block writing in her journal, which she started after her suicide attempt last year.

Journaling has helped her reflect on and regulate her emotions.

"Set up mental and physical boundaries at home, such as designated study and relaxation areas. Youth should also set aside 'me time' that is free from disturbances, to check in with how they feel, and to destress."

- Ms Andrea Chan, head of Mental Wellness and Intervention, Touch Integrated Family Group

"Identify effective coping strategies which are safe during Covid-19, such as doing deep breathing exercises, listening to music or working out at home with an online fitness video."

- Ms Chan

"While you should have a strong support network of friends, consider speaking to a trusted adult or mental health practitioner about mental health concerns.

"A trusted adult, preferably one trained to handle the difficult conversations that adolescents may have, can help you to better process the situation you may be facing."

- Mr Martin Chok, assistant director of youth services at Care Corner Singapore

**Samaritans Of Singapore:** 1800-221-4444

**Singapore Association For Mental Health:** 1800-283-7019

**Institute Of Mental Health's Mental Health Helpline:** 6389-2222

**Care Corner Counselling Centre (Mandarin):** 1800-353-5800

**Tinkle Friend:** 1800-274-4788

She also leans on family, friends and mentors at HappYouth, a mental wellness project by the Character & Leadership Academy, a youth development charity.

She says: "Thinking about my mother and reading motivational quotes have also helped. My suicidal thoughts rarely come back now."

Some youth like Ashley, who have mental health struggles, are displaying signs of resilience despite the challenges posed by Covid-19.

This comes as mental health helplines have been ringing more as a result of the pandemic.

As the stresses from the coronavirus pandemic kick in, teenagers and young adults are more open to seeking help with their mental health, experts say.

Between July and last month, HappYouth received an average of nine calls each month relating to youth looking for emotional support.

This is up from an average of three such cases a month for the same period last year.

Touch Community Services received 142 calls to its helpline between March and June, a spike of nearly 70 per cent compared with the same period last year.

About 80 per cent of these calls relating to mental health were from youth aged 13 to 21.

Ms Andrea Chan, head of Mental Wellness and Intervention at Touch Integrated Family Group, says: "Covid-19 has increased the public's awareness of mental health-related issues and more youth are willing to seek help.

"The significant increase in such calls that we've seen also emphasises how the risks, uncertainty and disruption of lifestyles during Covid-19 can trigger symptoms of anxiety and depression."

Being in a phase in life that places a high value on friendship, peer approval and autonomy can add pressure on adolescents during the pandemic.

Ms Chan says: "Not being able to meet friends and go out to destress can lead to youth feeling helpless and disappointed.

"In addition, youth are at a life stage where they feel a stronger need for autonomy. Being home with their parents for an extended period of time may result in more clashes and disagreements at home."

Mr Martin Chok, assistant director of youth services at Care Corner Singapore, a non-profit organisation, adds that unremitting headlines about Covid-19 infections and fatalities have led some young people to reflect on "life and loss in a heightened way".

For Mr Syed Syahir Syed Idris, 23, the pandemic has resurfaced anxieties and insecurities from a 2017 serious road accident he was involved in.

A car crashed into the motorcycle he was riding and his left leg was broken in three places.

He spent almost a year in hospital, undergoing more than 20 operations.

The accident dealt a blow to his dreams of becoming a physical education teacher.

Mr Syed, who has finished his polytechnic education and is waiting to enter national service, can no longer play his favourite sports like football and silat, though he has regained his mobility.

He says: "With Covid-19, most of the time, I was in my room alone with negative thoughts about feeling useless.

"I remembered the time when I was in hospital and I couldn't do anything, needing help with daily tasks."

He kept such thoughts at bay by watching stand-up comedy on YouTube and staying connected to people close to him, such as his girlfriend of five years, who also supported him through his accident.

Healing a broken body and navigating a pandemic have some things in common, he has learnt.

"I will not think of anything negative and will push ahead."

Care Corner's Mr Chok has not only witnessed teenagers catching Covid-19 curve balls like having to adjust quickly to nationwide home-based learning.

He has also seen other teens taking on temporary jobs to help their parents who have lost their income during the pandemic.

One teen he knows dropped out of school recently because of an anxiety disorder diagnosed two years ago.

He is now determined to take up night classes in the future.

Many youth are very resilient, says Mr Chok.

"They can adapt to changes, sometimes even better than adults."

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## PERSEVERANCE HELPED ACTOR NICK SHEN OVERCOME FAMILY WOES



Actor Nick Shen's father used to berate him for pursuing Chinese opera. The actor says perseverance is key to overcoming challenges. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

Several years ago, actor Nick Shen supported two friends, both now in their early 30s, who had suicidal thoughts. Shen says one of them, who attempted suicide, had schizophrenia and spoke of people trying to "catch" him.

The other friend had relationship and family problems and cut herself. Shen accompanied her on her visits to the Institute of Mental Health.

"Resilience is important for everyone," says Shen, who is in his early 40s. He was recently made an ambassador for HappYouth, a youth wellness programme by the charity Character & Leadership Academy, together with Nick Vujicic, a motivational speaker from Australia who was born without arms and legs.

Shen says perseverance is key to overcoming challenges, including mental health problems. He learnt this value over the years. When he was 13, his father berated him as being "the shame of the family" for wanting to pursue Chinese opera.

Shen, owner of Lao Sai Tao Yuan Teochew Opera Troupe and founder of events company Tok Tok Chiang, was also the main caregiver for his dying mother for five years. She died more than 10 years ago from colon and liver cancer.

The bachelor recalls: "I was acting full time with Mediacorp then. I also needed to act for my mother and appear strong to give her reassurance."

There are a few events to mark World Suicide Prevention Day on Thursday, which promote resilience and mental wellness in youth.

HappYouth is running its #GateKeepingLives #HappYouth campaign ([facebook.com/CLAFutuReady](https://www.facebook.com/CLAFutuReady)) from Thursday to Oct 10, which is World Mental Health Day.

An online mental wellness and suicide prevention event, Difference in YOUth 2020 ([facebook.com/carecornersg](https://www.facebook.com/carecornersg)), runs from Thursday to Saturday. It is jointly organised by Care Corner Youth Services and North East Community Development Council.

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