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Agencies go digital to help youth with mental health issues

Outreach teams tap platforms like Instagram, TikTok as many young ones prefer anonymity

Goh Yan Han

Agencies here have been turning to online channels to engage youth with mental health concerns, as these young people have indicated a preference for anonymity or are worried about the stigma attached to seeking help.

As at June this year, more than 12,000 young people had been engaged since the first youth community outreach team was rolled out in April last year, through various means including online platforms Instagram and TikTok, said Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) chief executive Tan Kwang Cheak.

There are now four teams, run by Fei Yue Community Services, Care Corner, Limitless, and Shine Children and Youth Services.

Mr Tan said the Ministry of Health and AIC worked with community partners to set up the teams, which are meant to be a basic community safety network for young people with or at risk of developing mental health issues, as well as for caregivers who need additional support to care for their loved ones.

Each team comprises allied health professionals such as counsellors, social workers and case workers, and is supported by youth worker associates.

The teams conduct outreach events to improve mental health awareness, and help to identify symptoms early and offer basic emotional support. They leverage

online channels and resources to reach more young people and encourage help-seeking, said Mr Tan.

For example, Care Corner's Insight department, which focuses on mental health, and Fei Yue Community Services have both tapped digital platforms to reach young people.

Care Corner Insight principal counsellor Bettina Yeap said its team has engaged more than 1,000 users on Instagram and has over 75,000 views on TikTok.

She noted that young people are often faced with various sources of stress, including school, relationship issues, struggles with identity and managing their emotions.

"However, many young people do not seek help because of the stigma associated with mental illness. There are also those who desire help but, because of their age, are not able to access intervention due to parental consent and stigma," she said.

The team is offering alternative ways to seek help so that people feel more at ease about doing so.

Said Ms Yeap: "For instance, through Instagram, young people would be able to read through the tips and guides on improving their mental health and managing their emotions better.

"If they want more support or someone to talk to, they can then fill in a questionnaire on the signs and symptoms of mental stress they face and submit it to the Care Corner Insight team."

A trained professional will then reach out to them for a follow-up

conversation via a phone call, Zoom or text message.

A 20-year-old polytechnic student, unnamed for privacy reasons, filled out the questionnaire in April through a Telegram bot. With Care Corner's help, he is learning how to manage the stress he faces in school.

He had followed Care Corner on social media after attending one of its mental well-being workshops.

"My friends noticed repeated signs of me having mood swings and feeling stressed, so they suggested that I seek help," he said.

"Reaching out online is less stressful because I can take my time to think. If I called a hotline, it can be quite stressful thinking about how to phrase things."

For Fei Yue, it reaches out to young people through its free e-counselling platform www.eC2.sg. This is a text-based platform that allows young people to speak to a counsellor anonymously.

Ms Yeo Hui Teng, a social worker at Fei Yue, said that in an internal 2020 survey conducted to understand youth behaviour in seeking help, it found that anonymity was important to them.

"Some of them also found it difficult to share their thoughts with a stranger and typing their thoughts on their phone was less intimidating to them," she said.

"Some young people have concerns about the seriousness of their issue, and question if they need formal help."

From April to July this year, more than 500 sessions have been conducted on Quickchat, the instant chat service on eC2, Ms Yeo added.