

Transforming the mental health landscape

Singapore aims to create an ecosystem that can link individuals to the care they need. It hopes to reduce the stigma of mental health challenges and encourage various efforts at peer support and community initiatives.



Joyce Teo
Senior Health Correspondent

Waiting times for public sector mental health services may currently be long, but there is light at the end of the tunnel as efforts to increase and improve mental health support in the community gather momentum.

"If you have access to care in the community, if you have access to a number of providers who are providing care, then your ability to get care sooner will be increased and improved," Senior Minister of State for Health Jitendra Poon told the Straits Times recently.

A new tiered model of care firmly anchors care in the community, where all provided – whether a nurse, family doctor, social worker, community worker or volunteer – will be on the same page in providing an individual the right level of support.

Though there are now more than 200 mental health touchpoints such as helplines, hot or e-mail chat, home, digital resources, and in-person services in Singapore, people may not know about them or how to go about getting help.

It is to create an ecosystem that can link individuals to the care they need.

"The need to get mental health care shouldn't be about going to IMH (Institute of Mental Health) in the first instance. It should be about accessing through one of these first step touchpoints, and that can be a helpline, can be a textline, can be an online portal, and it can be a physical portal," Dr Jitendra said.

He was speaking to ST in an exclusive interview on the evolving mental health landscape, nearly a year after he launched Singapore's National Mental Health and Well-being Strategy in October 2023.

To make it easier for people to seek help, a national mental health helpline and textline service will be operational by mid-2025. Dr Jitendra said this is not a service offering just the first level of support and counselling, but will also connect callers to more specialised treatment if they need it.

By 2030, all family doctors under Singapore's Healthier SG program

the care programme and all 33 polyclinics will provide mental health services.

In addition, there will be 30 Community Intervention Teams (CITs) and 90 Community Outreach Teams (COTs) operating in social service agencies that can also provide counselling and educational support.

Having access close to you in the community means that you have care available sooner where you need it rather than having everything centralised and having a single waiting line, as it were," Dr Jitendra said.

Yes, that basically will mean that the capacity for mental health care within the community, within primary care, will increase. The availability of mental health care will increase, and then, the access that people who need mental health



care will have to seriously suffer will also improve."

In time, the Government hopes to reduce the stigma of mental health challenges and encourage various efforts in peer support and community initiatives, he said.

HOW THE LANDSCAPE IS EVOLVING

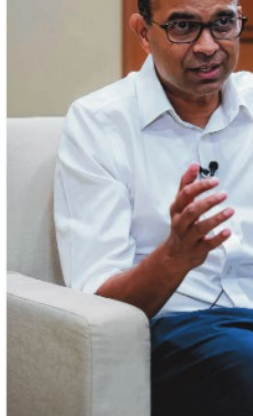
Singapore has 284 registered psychiatrists today, as well as several hundred psychologists – a profession where there is a lack of a regulatory framework.

According to the Ministry of Health (MOH), the ratio of psychiatrists and psychologists to the population is 4.6 and 97 per 100,000 respectively, lower than in other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development nations.

Earlier in 2024, the Government said it will increase the number of public sector psychiatrists and psychologists by about 30 per cent and 60 per cent respectively by 2030.

The tiered care model will change the landscape for mental health care, said Adjunct Associate Professor Daniel Fung, the chief executive officer of IMH.

Spreading the burden of care will allow the 16-year-old institution to function as a national centre for



psychiatric care, focused on treating the most severely ill patients, collaborate with care providers and provide expertise and support for the other tiers.

Prof Fung said, "This strategy brings in the ecosystem beyond IMH, and gives the playing field out to the rest. Now, we have partners, and it's very helpful, because we can do everything."

Everyone has a part to play, and not all change efforts need to come from the Government.

A more comprehensive strategy, with specific recommendations that would require the participation of a wider community, beyond just the mental health and government spheres, is needed for a deeply complex issue, said former minister Mr Arif Rahman, who led an effort to create a White Paper for a national suicide prevention strategy.

All these efforts are happening as the spotlight is increasingly shone on mental health around the world, with the Covid-19 pandemic bringing it to the fore.

In particular, young people, transitioning from childhood to young adulthood, who are bombarded by social media, struggle more with poor mental health.

In many countries, youth mental health has been declining over the past two decades, signalling a worrying that more, long-lasting, societal changes such as environmental, social, economic, political or technological changes, and changes in many societies, are increasing mental ill health, according to a Lancet study released in September.

For the most of mental illness peaks at age 15, with 63 per cent to 75 per cent of cases occurring by age 25, any substantial improvements in mental health must come via efforts on young people, it said.

Recognising the importance of safeguarding mental health in young people, the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) started Centre and Court teams for young people aged 12 to 25 in 2020.

The teams are funded by the Government and offer services at no charge.

The whole idea of Centre and Court is to provide for facilities and interventions closer to home," said AIC CEO Dinash Yoo Dinah.

Having till such teams by 2030 is significant as it will be more than half the number of active ageing centres for seniors, which will no



with 200 by 2030, he said.

Mr Dinash said they are not just expanding existing capabilities but also embedding mental health services within the community, so that people will know that it is normal to have struggles and will know where to go for help.

Social service agencies also have their own mental health programmes and some may start to offer new services, such as play therapy to help abused children or pet therapy to help those with social anxiety, said Adjunct Associate Professor Lee Ching, president of the Singapore Association for Mental Health (SAMH).

SAMH is expanding its rehabilitation care programme for those in recovery, to participation of its counsel to break from the hospital as well as walk-in, and planning a new programme to help young working adults transition from school to working life, he said.

Mr Ching said, "It will certainly get increasingly easier to navigate the system, especially if we can seamlessly integrate primary care with community care to address access, ability and affordability."

But the quality of care is also important, because a poor first encounter of the care experience can

be re-traumatising, she said.

Across the world, governments spend an average of just over 2 per cent of their health budgets on mental health, according to the World Health Organisation Mental Health Atlas in 2023.

In 2023, Singapore's projected mental health spend increased to \$424.6 million, which was 2 per cent of total healthcare expenditure (not including Covid-19 expenditure).

SCAN TO LISTEN

<https://str.sg/JW4N>

SCAN TO WATCH

"No wrong door policy"

Dr Jitendra Poon

Those who need help can approach different care providers, be it a GP, a family physician, the polyclinics or a social service agency, and be directed to the appropriate place.

THE STRAITS TIMES



Adjunct Associate Professor Daniel Fung, chief executive officer of the Institute of Mental Health, says the tiered care model will change the landscape for mental health care. Spreading the burden of care will allow the institution to function as a national centre for psychiatric care, focused on treating the most severely ill patients, collaborate with care providers and provide expertise and support for the other tiers.

In this podcast episode, ST senior health correspondent Joyce Teo has a chat with her colleague, correspondent Lee Li Ying, on her journey seeking help as a mental health patient. They are joined by Singaporean film-maker Yuen "Shaggy" Separi, who went on a journey of his own.

EVERYONE HAS A PART TO PLAY
More than 80 per cent of the population will never develop a mental illness. That doesn't mean they don't have a role to play. They need to understand mental illness. They need to be destigmatised against it... because you will develop it yourself.

ADJUNCT ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR DANIEL FUNG, chief executive officer of the Institute of Mental Health

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At the end of the day, greater in-

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