

## ABSTRACT

Four mental health effects are the consequences of the current pandemic of coronavirus infection across the globe. These are fear, anxiety, burnout, and isolation perceived by medical practitioners and patients. The individuals affected may have been pre-morbidly well or the pandemic is an aggravating factor to existing mental health morbidity. Fear of contagion affects our duties to patients; a sense of responsibilities keeps us going. Anxiety can be allayed by attention to habits of mental resilience both in ourselves and taught to anxious patients to help them cope better. Burnout can occur with prolonged sense of helplessness. Having a team or circle of friends whom we can tap on to help us cope can prevent burnout; we need to nurture such social capital. "Circuit breaker" can be interpreted differently namely, from a time of restriction to a time of reflection.

**Keywords:** Fear, Anxiety, Burnout, Isolation, Reflection

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## INTRODUCTION

To contain the COVID-19 pandemic our Singapore Government's decision is to lock down mobility and create social distancing rules to effect a "circuit breaker" to the person-to-person transmission of the Coronavirus infection now circulating throughout the world. During such situations, public health authorities and the social media are likely to focus on the biological and physical repercussions of the outbreak and overlook mental health effects. The initiative of Associate Professor Cheong Pak Yean's effort together with several of his GP colleagues to launch a series of four webinars for primary care physicians and open to specialist colleagues with expressed mission of building resilience is therefore laudable. It is also significant to note that the webinars are held at 9.00 – 10.30 pm to accommodate the working life of primary care doctors. I was invited to share my perspective on mental health issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic with Professorial Fellow Goh Lee Gan. This paper is a report of the four areas namely, fear, anxiety, burnout, and isolation which were discussed in a "in conversation" mode of presentation, as requested by the organisers of these webinars.

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## Q1. DOES FEAR OF COVID-19 AS CONTAGION IMPEDE FRONTLINE DOCTORS FULFILLING THEIR PROFESSIONAL DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES?

Certainly in this unprecedented time, we are always mindful of the danger around us. In my e-chat with other psychiatrists in China, Japan, United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (USA), it appears that we have not just the COVID-19 pandemic, but also a pandemic of fear. Some call it Covid-Anxiety.

### Duties to patients

Some doctors tell me they wish to reduce their consultation days, a few who are older (65 years or more) want to close their clinic until 'the coast is clear'. The duty of doctors is also towards their staff because they are right in the front line meeting the patients first. We have a duty to ensure their safety and that adds to the anxiety.

### Responsibilities of doctors

I see responsibilities as what we need to do beyond our clinical duties. When we return home, we hope we do not pass the virus to the family or neighbours. We have the responsibility to ensure our medical colleagues have accurate information, hence this webinar is important.

A/Prof Goh Lee Gan has been involved in the Jurong community dementia prevention program for the past ten years and has the responsibility to ensure the program is still running well. So, responsibilities help us rise above our fear of the contagion.

## Q2. WE HAVE PATIENTS WHO ARE ANXIOUS BECAUSE OF FEAR OF COVID-19 AS CONTAGION. WHAT PRACTICAL SKILLS CAN FRONTLINE DOCTORS APPLY TO ALLAY PATIENTS' ANXIETY?

### Allay patients' anxiety

There are various skills we can share with our patients: These are the seven habits of mental resilience in the time of COVID-19

- 1-First acknowledge that being anxious is quite normal.
- 2-Get correct information – fake news causes more anxiety.  
Look at Ministry of Health (MOH) website for information.
- 3-Regular exercise and balanced diet<sup>1</sup>
- 4-Muscle-relaxation – yoga or relaxation video from website of National University of Singapore (NUS) Department of Psychological Medicine.
- 5-Mindfulness Practice – see website of NUS Mind Science

Centre or Google MindFi for free app.<sup>2,3</sup>  
 6-Recreational activities – gardening, art, music, etc.<sup>4-7</sup>  
 7-Social capital – provide support to others like helping to purchase groceries for those elderly living alone or ring a family member or friend to say hello.

### Q3. WILL COVID-19 AFFECT DOCTORS LEADING TO BURNOUT?

#### Doctors' burnout

Short answer is yes, especially if the pandemic becomes prolonged and our mental resilience is sapped.  
 Important preventive checklist: seven habits (as above)

For doctors, social capital is very important. If you are in a quandary about a case, there must be a friend whom you can turn to for advice. Having a team or a circle of friends you can tap on is necessary to prevent burnout – even attending such a webinar so late in the evening is good for your mental health.

### Q4. WITH COVID-19 CIRCUIT BREAKER ON – DOCTORS NOW WORK IN ISOLATION. SOME BECOME NEGATIVELY AFFECTED. OTHERS WELCOME THIS AS TIME FOR REFLECTION. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS?

#### Circuit Breaker (CB)

The CB is a good preventive strategy we must take it seriously.

It makes us rethink on work and workplace. But will the restriction make some doctors melancholic?  
 One doctor told me that he has become morose because his routine of visiting his grandchildren and shopping is curtailed. He is uncertain what to do because he closes his clinic early - his life revolves round his work and he has no hobbies or other recreational activities. I mentioned to him the pandemic has a silver lining or wake up call for him to think about his life on retirement – he has to plan or he will drift into depression.

Many doctors are happy with this temporary restriction and being able to work from home. E-consultation, telemedicine and e-psychotherapy are now common. It gives us flexibility of time and there is no need to dash to the clinic to avoid the traffic jam in the morning or evening.

### CONCLUSION

The pandemic has given us time to reflect and be introspective. How to work more efficiently as doctors, how to prevent burnout and most importantly how to enjoy our work, enhance mental resilience and be happy.

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### LEARNING POINTS

- **Fear of the contagion is normal. Our sense of responsibility helps us overcome our fears to some extent.**
- **By developing the seven habits of mental resilience, we can help ourselves and teach our patients to develop the skills to overcome anxiety.**
- **Prevent burnout by building a circle of friends you can tap on for help in times of need.**
- **Take the Circuit Breaker as a time to reflect on yourself and work – it may be a wakeup call that you need to develop yourself and your interests beyond just professional work.**