

Social workers' mental well-being impacted during pandemic: Study

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More social workers serving on the front lines of the Covid-19 pandemic were found to have experienced a higher level of anxiety, depression and stress, compared with healthcare workers, according to a new study.

The Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) study, which interviewed 308 professional social workers here from June 19 to 27 last year, found that a majority of respondents, or 56.5 per cent, were suffering from anxiety.

Singapore had then just exited a circuit breaker, which lasted from April 7 to June 1 last year.

The study also found that 45.8 per cent experienced depression and 38.3 per cent had been dealing with increased stress levels.

The results were compared against at least two studies that were published in Science Direct and Annals of Internal Medicine last year that involved healthcare workers.

In both, it was found that the number of respondents who faced stress, anxiety and depression was much lower than in the SUSS study.

Professor Seng Boon Kheng, the lead of the study, said that the greater impact felt by social workers was likely due to a lack of experience in working during an unprecedented medical event.

Many hospital workers would have had experience with Sars in 2003 and H1N1 in 2009, she noted.

Moreover, information about the issues, such as Covid-19, would reach hospital workers quickly and likely be out of date by the time it gets to the social workers, she added.

She was speaking on the sidelines of a virtual symposium that attracted participants from the social service industry in the region, including South Korea and Cambodia.

Prof Seng, who heads the social work programme at SUSS' SR Nathan School of Human Development, also noted that hospital workers generally receive healthy recognition from the public.

"They were very much appreciated, and that goes a long way in improving their sense of well-being, whereas the social workers, I do not think anyone actually paid attention to them," she said.

Dr Vincent Ng, chief executive of social service agency AMKFSC Community Services, said organisations must step up to support their staff.

He stressed that organisations not only need to have the right structures in place to look out for their staff's well-being, they must also work on developing strong relationships among the staff.

"When we place the importance on creating relationships that are helping people to feel that they are adequate, that they are able to respond to challenges... I think that helps to allay a lot of the anxiety," he said.

At the symposium, co-organised by SUSS and AMKFSC in collaboration with academic partners Ewha Women's University of South Korea and the Royal University of Phnom Penh of Cambodia, veteran psychotherapist Tracy Jarvis, the keynote speaker, said the study's findings were not a surprise.

She said that social workers, like mental health professionals, have a learnt ability to help others, which makes them more vulnerable to feeling vicarious trauma.

"So it's not just feeling our own anxieties but then also being empathically connected to the people that we help," said Ms Jarvis, director of a not-for-profit organisation in Britain.

Another key finding in the study was that the initial impact of the pandemic had a greater effect on the mental well-being of younger social workers.

Prof Seng said this was likely due to a lack of professional work experience, and being largely isolated from senior supervision and peer support at the start of the pandemic due to work-from-home arrangements.

She added that one area to look into is enhancing the practical aspects of teaching social work in university to help develop more resilience among the graduates.

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308

Number of professional social workers interviewed in the Singapore University of Social Sciences study