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Arthur ADIMOELIA

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COVID-19 has rewritten social narratives. What we now need is a unifying mindset

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By Arthur Adimoelia

As COVID-19 cases climb into the millions and the world scrambles to contain its spread, many fingers are pointed at different members of society for not taking social distancing and other mitigating measures seriously.

The "socially irresponsible" youth were an early target of much backlash. American spring breakers, for instance, were criticised for being blasé and selfish while cases were burgeoning across the country—incidentally, the US presently has the highest number of cases in the world.

Similarly in Germany, millennials were holding corona parties, signalling a worrying trend that socialising superseded any worry of spreading the virus. In Singapore, too, young merrymakers flocked to clubs and entertainment spots prior to the implementation a national "circuit breaker". In this video, a young man even refers to COVID-19 as "a personal problem".

But are "reckless young people" entirely to blame for our present predicament?

As it turns out, older folks have minds of their own, too. On Twitter, many millennials are calling out their parents for what they deem as a lack of compliance to social distancing guidelines. Here in Singapore, most found to be flouting safe-distancing rules and getting into trouble with law enforcement are not "wayward youth", but the middle-aged and elderly. To date, many continue to frequent markets and food centres despite Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's pleas for Singaporeans to stay indoors as much as possible.

As we witness a range of human responses during these unprecedented times, I see a valuable opportunity to examine human behaviour and the need to adapt quickly to new and ever-changing realities.

Globally, a large proportion of coronavirus cases have affected the elderly population, whose advanced years, compromised immunity systems and preexisting health conditions have made them especially vulnerable to the

disease. In theory, it makes perfect sense for this group to stay home and assign the shopping and errands to younger household members. However, this has been a difficult ask for many seniors who are used to lives of self-sufficiency and mobility—and who do not consider themselves “old” in the sense of being frail or infirm.

Madam Lim, a 66-year-old Singaporean who was interviewed at a wet market, alluded to her active lifestyle and independence, as valid reasons for doing her own grocery-shopping.

"But for us, we are active and we've been running every day for 20 years..."

"Why would I want to trouble them [her children] when I am fit and can walk and move around on my own?"

To understand Madam Lim's response—and other seniors who share her sentiments—one has to consider the wider social narrative. In Singapore, the elderly have been encouraged, through public policies like the Action Plan for Successful Ageing, to be active and engaged members of society. Therefore, after many older persons have come to view themselves as empowered individuals rather than recipients of help, it is almost counter-intuitive to ask that they now switch to a passive role.

Months into the global fight against COVID-19, it's time for us to take a closer look at why we—baby boomers, Gen X, Y or Z alike—have responded in the ways we have. With the benefit of hindsight, we might see that in the early days, the heavy media coverage of elderly coronavirus patients might have created a false aura of invincibility among the youth. This myth has since been shattered with ample evidence that young people are just as vulnerable to infection.

And speaking of the youth, the very millennials who were earlier labelled irresponsible and selfish are now taking back the narrative. Young Singaporeans are displaying resilience and grit in their first big crisis: most are obediently staying home and cutting back on unnecessary spending, while those in the workforce have found themselves in the gig economy, such as food delivery.

Renowned deaf-blind educator Helen Keller once said, "Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much." Her words ring ever so true at this moment in history. If nothing else, this pandemic is showing us the strength of the human spirit—in coming together to accomplish extraordinary feats when faced with tremendous difficulty.

The Singapore government recently unveiled its Unity, Resilience and Solidarity budgets to tide the nation through the coronavirus crisis. When—not if—the worst is over and we look back at this time, we will see that these very qualities are what got us through to the other side.