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Keeping a distance to go further

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By Lim Wee Kiat

Social distancing has social costs, but nobody is safe until everyone is

The last time my wife and I had dinner with my parents and sisters' families was more than 13 months ago. It was late January last year, when we gathered early for our Lunar New Year reunion dinner. Like many others in Singapore, we have been planning our social activities and festive celebrations around the changing group size limits, from Lunar New Year and Hari Raya Puasa to Deepavali and Christmas.

Akin to a game of Tetris in-real-life, many of us have gained mastery in figuring out permutations to fit the schedules of family and friends. Over the last two years, we have also been socialised to other social behaviour in this pandemic, from wearing masks to doing fist bumps, as well as keeping to safe distancing.

KEEPING PEOPLE APART...AND SOCIETY SAFE

When safe distancing was first introduced as a public health measure, soon after the virus reached our shores in early 2020, the term of choice was "social distancing". It was aptly modified soon after to "safe distancing" in public communication, recognising that the objective was to maintain a physical distance between individuals to reduce contagion, not one that purposefully dilutes social connections.

This was a concern that sociologists and psychologists raised, specifically the connotations that "social distancing" might carry. Some may see this as simply semantics, but words shape the ways we see the world and conduct ourselves, so being precise is useful.

The safe distancing measure has been largely in place, despite the swings of varying strengths between "hammer and dance" that trail the developments of the pandemic, even when the situation looked most optimistic in the post-2020 and pre-Delta wave months last year. Just this month, this measure seemed poised to be done away with (though still encouraged) for people and groups that don masks. Planned to be in force from February 25, 2022, it would only be mandatory between people not wearing masks.

Given the dynamic nature of the pandemic, this much-anticipated easing unfortunately had to be deferred given the ongoing Omicron surge and the strain it places on our public health system. To rub salt in the wound, the public announcement came on the eve of its implementation.

We know that social distancing, and along with it, a slew of other measures such as quota on gatherings, comes with adverse effects, especially when it has been in force for an extended

period. It affects the young and the elderly more. For the young, safe distancing has reshaped how they live, study, and play. Co-curricular activities, critical social markers of transition and growth, such as graduations and birthday parties, have turned virtual and shrunk significantly in scale and intimacy.

As Dr Kwan Jin Yao, a Singaporean social work researcher has observed, “Like everyone else young Singaporeans have not been able to gather in large groups, but adolescence is an especially important socialisation phase during which friendships and new relationships and even inter-personal conflict and strain are negotiated. The pandemic has since taken all of these away, to the detriment of children, adolescents, and youths.”¹

For the elderly, social distancing, as part of other measures such as quota on social and community events, has also affected them adversely, notwithstanding its protective intent. The impact is also more salient for senior citizens who live alone. Somewhat paradoxically, some may even suffer from poorer health during this pandemic, especially for those who have pre-existing conditions and need help with medication and regular supervision. Their mental well-being also takes a hit from missing their routine social gatherings with friends and family.

TAKING CARE OF HEALTHCARE

But we also need to remember that measures like social distancing are not only to protect ourselves from the virus, but also to preserve our healthcare capacity. The Omicron surge, or any surge as a matter of fact, hits our healthcare workers in more than one way. They need to deal with a higher volume of patients, even when proportionately more are experiencing *milder* (but not necessarily mild) symptoms compared to when the population was not as well vaccinated.

Our healthcare workers—including doctors, nurses, and allied healthcare professionals—live within us and are also part of our community. An Omicron surge means they, too, may fall ill. This further weakens our healthcare capacity, putting more strain on the remaining healthcare workers who have to cope with the high caseloads.

The protracted stress that healthcare workers are shouldering has led some to contemplate or actually leave the healthcare sector. About 1,500 healthcare workers had resigned by the first half of 2021, a significant jump when there were about 2,000 resignations annually before the pandemic. As Senior Minister of State for Health, Dr Janil Puthucheariy detailed in Parliament, healthcare workers felt “increasingly stretched, overworked and fatigued”, especially this fight against the pandemic had morphed from “a 2.4km run” into “a marathon”.²

Indeed, Singapore had gone through a nationwide “circuit breaker”, the Delta wave, and most recently, still under siege from an Omicron wave, interspersed with a general election and a nationwide vaccination drive (with one booster and counting), all in the last two years. While many of us might have enjoyed brief respite at one point or another through this period, our healthcare workers who continue to be managing this crisis at the frontline have not.

As I have mentioned in a commentary that I made during the early days of the pandemic, back in May 2020:³

Compared to the 2003 SARS epidemic, ...the world ha[s] already entered a protracted response period. Governments need to work closely with other stakeholders, taking them into confidence, and collectively build the staying power to pull through the crisis.

Already, there are signs of the public succumbing to compliance and communication fatigue, such as stepping out more instead of staying at home and not keeping to safe distancing. Care has to be taken to ensure new measures be blended into existing ones, should the virus stage a resurgence despite our best efforts at containing it.

Indeed, Singaporeans were also showing fatigue and less receptive toward safe management measures (SMM), including safe distancing, as the pandemic drags on, according to [a recent Institute of Policy Studies report](#). Thankfully, Singaporeans do believe the SMM should stay in place as long as they need. Even before the rise of Omicron, close to 60 percent of those surveyed in November 2021 believe SMM should stay on for another one to six months.

Social distancing, as well as several other measures, are likely here to stay for a while, whether we like it or not. It may be a truism, even somewhat glib, to say the world is safe only when everyone is safe. While all of us wish to get a little closer with one another and meeting more in a group, we also have to bear in mind that such comfort and convenience that we have taken for granted before COVID-19 while may come at the expense of others in our community.

1 <https://socialservice.sg/2022/01/25/covid-19-716-days-later/>

2 <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/resignation-rates-among-healthcare-workers-singapore-year-moh-increase-icu-capacity-2282766>

3 <https://cmp.smu.edu.sg/article/covid-19-there-was-sars>

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