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Citation

Chan, David. (2020, February 15). The 5Cs of beating the coronavirus outbreak. Straits Times, A21.

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The 5Cs of beating the coronavirus outbreak

By David Chan

Published in Straits Times, 2020 February 15, p A21.

Practise being calm, cautious, considerate, caring and collectivistic. And use these tools to build up arsenal of psychological defence against the virus threat.

For a few weeks now, Singapore's news headlines have been dominated practically daily by case updates and control measures related to the coronavirus disease, now officially known as Covid-19.

To tackle public fear and anxiety, our political leaders promptly release information affecting public health and emphasise that health advisories and decisions on control measures are evidence-based. They reassure the public that there is adequate medical and food supplies.

They also warn against irrational, counterproductive or discriminatory behaviours. They highlight societal values of social harmony, civic-mindedness and altruism.

On Friday last week, Singapore raised the Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (Dorscon) level to orange after several local cases without links to previous cases or travel history to China were tested positive.

The orange level refers to a situation in which a virus is spreading but not widely. It involves introducing additional precautionary measures and enforcing compliance to contain the spread of the virus.

The next day, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong delivered a televised statement to alleviate fear and anxiety, urge Singaporeans to stay calm and carry on with their lives while taking sensible precautions, and rally the country to "take courage and see through this stressful time together". He highlighted that the ongoing virus outbreak is a test of Singapore's social cohesion and psychological resilience.

In my view, a key message in PM Lee's statement is the importance of psychological preparedness in our fight against the coronavirus.

Today is Singapore's Total Defence Day. Psychological defence is one of the six pillars of our total defence. What is the current state of our psychological defence against the virus threat?

BEING PSYCHOLOGICALLY PREPARED

In the past few days, daily updates from the Ministry of Health (MOH) reported more confirmed cases that do not have recent travel history or links to China. For the public, news of these local transmissions increases the salience of the virus threat.

Understandably, many individuals begin to worry more about themselves, their family members and their friends.

At the media briefing on Wednesday, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong (chair of the Multi-Ministry Taskforce) cautioned that we have to be prepared for the worst as there could be patients who may succumb to the viral infection.

This is psychologically important because a death is not just a fatality statistic – it also brings grief to family and friends, affects the morale of medical staff and front-line officers, and increases public fear, anxiety and other negative sentiments.

When it comes to test results, an increase in confirmed cases, recovery and death, we should hope for the best and be prepared for the worst. But psychological resilience is much more than our state of mind as we wait and react to daily updates from MOH.

At the same media briefing, National Development Minister Lawrence Wong (co-chair of the taskforce) acknowledged that the authorities do not know what sort of situation is going to unfold over the next few weeks and whether it will get better or worse.

Put in another way, we are currently in a VUCA situation – one that is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. But we need not be paralysed by the VUCA situation facing us. As individuals and in groups, we can make a positive difference not only to our lived experiences as the situation evolves but also to the type of society that we will become for years to come.

As the virus threat continues to loom, we need to understand psychological defence and shore it up at both the individual and societal levels.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL

Individuals, organisations and communities need to develop “psychological capital”, which provides the building blocks for our psychological defence.

Psychological capital is a critical resource for individuals, and society collectively, to solve problems and improve well-being.

Research has shown that four inter-related mindsets – self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience – contribute to psychological capital that helps people function in adaptive ways, such as adjusting our lifestyle to take precautions and deal with the various control measures.

Psychological capital can be cultivated through training and education such as clearly explaining what we know and do not know about the coronavirus, what Dorscon risk assessment levels mean and entail, and the rationale for various precautionary measures and public health advisories.

Psychological capital can also be developed through real-life experiences such as working together to solve a problem, being involved in volunteer activities and providing social support to help those in need.

Psychological capital can become a powerful resource and motivation, characterised by a “can-do” spirit and a “will-do” attitude.

We need to pay more attention to self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience as individuals adjust to the virus outbreak evolving in a VUCA situation.

PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE BEHAVIOURS

Psychological capital is an action-oriented resource. It produces positive behaviours. The resulting positive outcomes in turn reinforce the development of psychological capital.

There are many positive behaviours that we should or could engage in as we face the evolving virus outbreak situation.

I suggest five principles to guide our behaviours.

Be calm

We are likely to get more local transmissions in the coming days and weeks, with breaking news of new confirmed cases leading to disruptions in schools or workplaces.

Some cases could be close to home – both physically and figuratively – as cases emerge near where we live, study or work, or when they directly affect our family, friends or colleagues.

When that happens, our fear and anxiety levels will naturally rise. We immediately message one another to express our emotions and reactions.

How do we deal with this? Learn to take a deep breath, pause and reflect. Control our impulse to blame individuals, groups, organisations or the efficacy of containment measures before finding out the facts.

No one wants to be infected or to infect others. With the virus circulating in our population, it is still possible to have an infected case even when sensible precautions are taken.

Being calm should not be confused with behaving in a nonchalant or overconfident manner, which is a negative attitude showing that one is not interested and does not care, downplaying the severity or trivialising the concerns expressed by others who perceive a serious virus threat.

Be cautious

By now, everyone is familiar with the basic precautions. Practising good personal hygiene habits is the most important behaviour that each of us can do for ourselves and others.

Instead of seeing it as an inconvenience, we should make it a habit to practise good personal hygiene behaviours for our own health and also out of social responsibility for public health.

The authorities are clearly working very hard to enhance the containment strategy and tighten the various control measures. At schools and workplaces, employers have to make quick decisions and often with incomplete information. Employees have to put up with inconveniences ranging from minor to major adjustments. But it can take just one careless individual to breach the control measures for an infection case and cluster to occur.

We should be cautious and conscientious in adhering to the control measures in place.

Be considerate

Fear and anxiety can override rationality and social norms, driving us to do things that we normally will not do or imagine ever doing.

Last week, there was panic buying at supermarkets when the Dorscon level was raised to orange. We should be well-informed and inform others – it is a verifiable fact that Singapore has sufficient supplies of essential food items and an adequate food security system, with diversification of food sources so there is enough food for everyone.

It is understandable and reasonable to buy a little more than usual if we plan to stay at home more in view of the virus outbreak. We should not “demonise” these people who are buying more out of necessity or reasonable convenience. But there is no need to hoard essential groceries and create our own stockpiles. We should be considerate and not deprive others who may be more in need of the items.

Another inconsiderate behaviour is depriving others of seats at the hawker centre or refusing to share common spaces out of fear of potential infection.

Being considerate to others is essentially civic-mindedness. It also applies to maintaining public hygiene such as keeping public places clean after use.

Be caring

In crisis situations, it is important to care for others who are in need.

The needs and care could be tangible such as distributing masks or hand sanitisers to those who need them and delivering meals or other items to those who have to stay at home to observe mandated leave of absence from work to monitor their health.

Then there are intangible needs and care such as providing social support such as expressing gratitude and encouragement to our healthcare workers, Home Team officers, cleaners and many others who are at the front line working to keep all of us safe.

Our medical workers and other front-line officers are putting in long hours under extremely challenging conditions. Without their courage and perseverance, we would be in a much more dire situation now. To stay the course, what they need from us is our social support, not social ostracism.

When our espoused values of care and compassion for others translate to actual value-driven behaviours, especially in crisis situations where others are most in need of help and support, it becomes truly value-in-action.

Be collectivistic

It is human that fear and anxiety for one's own health will automatically trigger self-preservation behaviours. But humans are also social beings interdependent on one another, capable of altruistic actions rooted in collectivistic values that go beyond individualistic interests.

Collectivism is a personal and social value that emphasises the interests and well-being of the larger group that we are a member of. It prioritises the group's concerns over one's own individual needs and desires. This larger group could be our neighbourhood, school, work organisation and, of course, country.

When we are collectivistic, we value and prioritise social cohesion. We see the strengths of working together in a coordinated, cooperative and collaborative way to achieve collective goals for the common good. Being collectivistic is critical in our battle against the virus outbreak.

CONCLUSION

Psychological capital and guiding principles are mutually reinforcing. For example, when people are optimistic and have the efficacy beliefs that they can make a positive difference to the morale of healthcare workers in difficult times, they are more likely to care and offer social support.

Conversely, collectivistic behaviours guided by commitment to collective goals and trust developed from working together help build resilience in individuals as they persevere and learn to cope with difficult changes and adapt to new demands.

We need to shore up our psychological defence considerably and now, if we are to have a good chance of Singapore seeing through this crisis.

Focus on self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience to build psychological capital.

A society with strong psychological capital can defuse an adverse climate and mitigate the impact of negative events and severe crises. It helps prevent negativity and promote positivity.

Along with building psychological capital, adopt the 5C principles of being calm, cautious, considerate, caring and collectivistic to guide our behaviours, so we make a positive difference.

When we do that, we develop robust psychological defence. Then we can be realistically confident that we will defeat our public enemy, the coronavirus, and emerge stronger as individuals and as a society.

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