

Dealing with Anxiety during Covid-19 in Singapore

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Timothy* (name changed) was a married middle-aged man with a young toddler and he was in a good senior corporate job. He had family in China. When Covid-19 situation ascended into Singapore, he grew more nervous from reading the news daily and hearing the anxieties of his colleagues. While his family were healthy in China, the country was the first in the world to have a complete lockdown and it made the situation felt worse for him, worrying for them. His worry extended to his young child. It happened all so fast as the anxiety in him built and overwhelmed him, he had a slip to alcohol one day on a Monday.

The first sip of the beer was a wake-up call for him. He realized he had been suppressing his feelings about his worries – for his work security and for his child's health. It dawned on him that his anxiety only made things worse and he was not making or the best decision he could. He discarded the rest of the beer, and went to see his therapist that same week. He shared with her about his worry whether financially the family will be okay as he was the sole breadwinner. As he explored with his therapist, he communicated that his company was a major company and would be able to withstand the situation and the worst that would happen was he would have no commission as contracts would not be renewed during this period temporarily or a pay cut but he had put aside savings over the years. He knew his family will be able to manage financially.

He was worried about his child catching the virus and was troubled about how to protect his toddler from being infected by the coronavirus. He also shared how his child's childcare centre took very good measures daily to minimize infection and at home, they took all the hygiene precautions too. We explored his anxiety, the triggers and worked on a holistic

alcohol relapse prevention plan which included stress reduction strategies. The thing about worry he learned is that, it really is like a rocking chair and it dampened one's spirit to act right. Most importantly, his feelings were validated in this difficult time. He was not alone or judged for feeling this way.

The next time his therapist saw him, he had flourished and his self-constructed daily structure that they worked on in the previous session was relaxing and extended to his family. He added on a walk after work which decompressed his stress from work and he planned what to do with his family that day. He began to cook for the first time in his life and found that he enjoyed it, in fact keen to increase from weekend cooking to one more weekday. He took back up photography and invited wife to join him this time. It amazed him to learn something new about his wife, that she was a better photographer than him. He had said "she has a better eye for beauty than me". He started to read bedtime stories to his toddler and his child now looked forward to it every night and was well ready for bed before the bedtime. He did something when his wife told him their child always cried "I miss daddy" when dropped off at the childcare centre. He started to send his child to the centre and the child stopped crying when dropped off. He was more empathetic towards his wife's similar anxiety during this period and encouraged her to do things to take care of herself and had said to her "go do a manicure or pedicure."

Timothy had no thought to drink and he found new enthusiasm to what he could do and for the people around him. He was also appreciative that during this tough time, he was already seeing a therapist and he could be supported. He felt, otherwise, he could be trapped in his mind helplessly. It was a pleasure to watch his sparkle as he shared how his toddler and wife were happier even in this globally challenging time.

One Singaporean Perspective during Quarantine

Bella* (name changed) was served a Stay-Home-Notice when she returned from overseas. For that 14 days, Bella had a choice, to lament how boring and meaningless it was (as she was not infected) or make it as productive as she could. Bella has always had a bucket list of things she wanted to do but she had always been busy with work. On her bucket list was to learn to cook. Each of the 14 days, she learned a new recipe from online and tried it out. She was surprised that her cooking tasted in her words “decent”. She also enjoyed it very much. When she was not cooking, she “Marie-Kondo-ed” her house, cleaned and organized it. She shared about finally getting rid of the “exoskeletons of cockroaches that died so long ago”.

Isolating can feel very long and lonely. But she was not alone. She experienced the kindness of her neighbors who came to chat with her (while keeping a healthy social distance) or brought her food when they knew about her home quarantine. She felt very touched and she decided to snap photos of them as well as photos of the views from her place which she had been too busy to notice before and posted on her social media page. Each social media posting she put up, was of beauty, positivity and gratitude. New Zealand’s Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern shared in one of her broadcasts, “while you are working from home, it does not mean you do not have a job. Your job is to keep everyone safe.” Looking at Bella, she reminded us we can do social distancing or isolation with a thankful and creative mindset.

Working from Home during a Pandemic

Glenn* (name changed) was one of the many people tasked to work from home. This was unprecedented. Glenn decided to have some fun as well as to reassure family and friends who were feeling stressed in the same situation. Glenn saw that it could be a time of new discoveries for him and his family. Every day, he candidly shared his new discoveries with his friends when he found them. On the first day, he discovered his toilet flushes for exactly 4

seconds. He had not realized that before On the third day, he confirmed that in the afternoon at a specific hour, the wireless internet at home was slower than at other times. He wondered why this was so. On the fifth day, he shared, “The most common shape in my house is circles.” When he was late to post the sixth day discovery and he posted on the seventh day instead, friends shared with him about how they were looking forward to his daily sharing and how it cheered their day. These seemingly innocent simple discoveries that were all missed in the hustle of his day were not only lifted his spirit but also of his loved ones. A simple act, a humble observation with a sincere sharing equaled a cheerleading.

Besides Glenn, others who are working from home also began to share their versions of what they discovered about their family when they worked from home. Several revealed being surprised that their spouses talked differently with work and at home, like two different persons. One wife shared when it came to the family, her husband was easy going, usually let her make decisions and did not express strong opinions. When her husband had to work from home and took a work meeting call, she realized he could speak up, be proactive and decisive. She felt she was getting to know her husband again.

During this time, whether we work in the front line or at home, it could lead to a time of transformation for us, if we are willing. We could discover a new side to ourselves or our family members, explore new interests alone or with our family members or we could mope that we cannot manage. Whichever we think we are, we will be.

An Introvert’s Perspective of Coping

Unexpectedly, the world is thrown into a pandemic chaos when 2020 roared in. I read online of a quote shared: “We have to apologise to 2019 for what we said about it.” That rang true. Before 2020, 2019 seemed to be a trying year for many of my clients. A client had shared

about troubles in his romantic relationship, business and family and how he was looking to a better year this year in our last session in 2019. He was definitely having a different mind about it now.

Many countries had gone into lockdown or emergency states to “flatten the curve” or “break the chain” of contagion of the coronavirus. For half to two-third of the population who are extroverts, quarantine at home might feel like they are being driven out of their minds. They might be wondering: how had the introverts been living it?

Iris (*name change) read the news and articles daily from around the world about the virus. When she read, she also pondered upon it. Did she do anything after reading news? Yes and no. Iris autoimmune compromised, had young and elderly in her family and she reminded herself she was not the only person with vulnerabilities. First thing she did, was to arrange to celebrate her mother’s birthday at home instead of at a new restaurant as planned. It was still fun, they bought several pretty small cakes instead of a whole cake which became the topic of the evening.

Iris discussed with her family and agreed they would not stock up groceries unnecessarily. What were their thought processes? Our government had shared that our country has sufficient supplies to last us for a few years. They believed it. The grocery store closest to her was a 24-hour one, if they needed to get anything, they could easily get or they could make do with similar alternatives. Iris did not cook much at home, usually ordered in from outside, another reason not needing to get more supplies which she would not use or waste. Another factor was to practice healthy social distancing and queuing for a long time unnecessarily in a long line could be counterproductive to that. Iris shared about her brother-in-law going to the

supermarket to get new supplies of diapers for his baby, before they ran out in a few days' time. He was surprised to see extreme long queues and decided to leave without buying as he thought he could purchase from online. He went online to order and the delivery date was longer than usual. In fact, he had to keep pressing refresh on his computer to get a queue to get a delivery date which had not happened before. In that time, he was worried if the diapers they had would be enough for their infant.

Iris was keen not to let her thoughts run wild. When she began to feel that she might be crossing the line, she would find someone to talk to, usually her husband who was a rational cool cucumber and a biologist major and talking with him helped the doubts to pass. Most time, when it was not pertinent, she would not dwell on the articles. She also read news and articles that tell about the other side of the pandemic which were uplifting. About sea and air creatures coming back into Venice's water, about the immensely reduced air pollution over China's skies, about countries, organizations and individuals who are donating items or time to help others during this period and about the ozone layer healing during this period.

To be socially responsible, Iris reduced meeting up with friends and family especially those with children and elderly. She maintained contact by phone such as messages and video chats. Let's not forget the important handwashing, sneezing or coughing into a tissue and disposed properly. Iris and her husband reached out to their neighbours, left them their contact numbers and invited them to contact them if they needed any help, even if it was to buy food or groceries for them. They were heartened that most of them responded with their numbers too and the same supportive message. Iris adhered to taking twice daily temperature taking and masking up when unwell or when she had to meet with people in close contact, to prevent any spread in case she had the virus.

Iris still had to go into work while her husband worked from home. He maintained a structure for his day which followed his usual workday if he had to go into the office. To show some support, she would get him some treats when she got home from work, such as his favourite beverages and cookies to have during his day. She kept to a routine of what she usually did to maintain her balance mentally and physically. Besides work, she baked, read, meditate, watch television and run with her husband, and dog.

Essentially, Iris did her best not to let her emotions control her, as emotions come and go. She found out what were the good or right things to do by relying on authentic evidenced sources and did them while supporting others. Everyone is having a hard time. “One stick breaks easily, but not a bundle of sticks” is a Chinese proverb that reminds her to stand united as a group and they would make it through this period together as fine as we can. Reminders from a sharing by Daily Stoics, “premediatio malorium” which is “have a plan if things get worse”, “summum bonum” which is to “act virtuously, don’t be your convenience above other’s safety” and sympathetia, as “we’re all in this together. Be kind, help others, don’t be selfish”.