Battling pandemic fatigue

Restrictions, news overload amid prolonged crisis can cause burnout and the danger is that people may drop their guard against Covid-19

America Kaur

Freelance writer Sig Lin Jas has been spending more time on personal projects since March to earn extra money for her family and herself. His 50-year-old mother was transferred from a part-time job as a food promoter in February and his father, a 55-year-old driver, has been earning considerably less since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

Mr Jas, 35, a part-time driver, said his family is doing a communications degree from the University at Buffalo at the Singapore Institute of Management, said he feels “pressured to work harder”.

“Since finding a stable job after he graduates in December keeps him up at night. “I’m doing unpaid writing work to boost up my resume so I can try in job interviews,” said Mr Jas, who is an only child. Still, he feels “relieved” by the uncertainty, as he does not know whether the economy will improve in the future and if he will be able to consider entrepreneurship.

Because of this, his mood and energy levels have been low and he no longer enjoys the walks he used to take in the neighborhood.

Dr Amanda Choo, principal psychologist at the Singapore Institute of Psychological Medicine, said the pandemic is a perfect opportunity for people to re-evaluate and reflect on their lifestyle, which can help them to develop resilience.

For those working or studying from home, the frequent need to communicate via video conferencing can take a toll on mental and emotional health.

“Zoom fatigue” is a term used to describe the phenomenon of fatigue that occurs when people are required to participate in multiple video conferences in a short amount of time and many people are attending these meetings without taking short breaks to deal with the stress,” said Ms Chen, who is head of psychology at NUH.

“Pandemic fatigue,” which describes a mental state where a prolonged bout of fear and anxiety causes a form of “burnout,” is a phenomenon that can take a toll on mental and emotional health. It can result in anxiety, depression, irritability, withdrawal and physical symptoms such as headache, fatigue and digestive issues.

Ms Chen advised people to seek help from a psychologist if they experience persistent anxiety, after repeated exposure to stressors - a stimulus has caused people to become less-cared-for or conscious about the precautions they need to take to protect themselves and others from Covid-19.

“Burnout is the result of prolonged stress,” she said. “It’s a situation where you feel overwhelming weariness, especially if you are doing something you don’t enjoy doing to the point where you feel you cannot do it anymore.

“Burnout can take a toll on mental and emotional health and may result in the worsening of mental health conditions and chronic health problems,” said Ms Chen.

“The worry of finding a stable job is that people may drop their guard against Covid-19. According to a Sunday Times survey, 12 per cent of those aged 18 and above, people in Singapore are becoming more aware of the reality of being able to travel overseas and not the spread of the coronavirus. It showed that 46 per cent of those people are tired of following the necessary health measures. There is a need to check in with safety, limiting the risk of physical gatherings with friends and family and not being able to travel overseas.

Dr Choo said the constant barrage of Covid-19 news and advisories could actually be desensitising people to the reality of the pandemic.

“Working adults have also been hit hard. In Generali Life, director and principal psychologist at The Therapy Room, started noticing signs of pandemic fatigue in her clients last month.

“Being in lockdown at home, the impact of the job market and the impending crisis can take its toll. The breaks they need to take overseas are now non-existent and the work they do has diminished. The breaks they used to take overseas are now non-existent and the work they do has become less careful or conscious about the precautions they need to take to protect themselves and others from Covid-19. This means that over time – especially in the presence of anxiety, after repeated exposure to stressors – a stimulus has caused people to become less-cared-for or conscious about the precautions they need to take to protect themselves and others from Covid-19.

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How to cope with pandemic fatigue

Ms Terri Chen, head of psychology and senior clinical psychologist at the National University Hospital’s department of psychological medicine, gives some tips

1. **BE AWARE:** We cannot make changes if we are not aware of what is going on within us. When we are busy, it is easy to overlook emotions and behaviours that are warning signs for us.

   Practise awareness to take care of your mental health. Take some time to check in with yourself daily. This can be as short as one minute a day, to observe and describe to yourself what you are thinking and feeling within.

2. **BE CREATIVE:** Many of the ways we use to recharge have been thwarted or impacted by pandemic restrictions. Short getaways, for instance, are no longer an option. Neither are large gatherings, which feed our innate social needs.

   Being creative and open to new ideas and experiences can help you cope in the interim. For instance, you can travel vicariously with friends by having a “watch party” of a travel show and make a fantasy list of future travel plans together.

3. **BE KIND AND COMPASSIONATE:** There are many things that are not within our control at this moment, which could leave us feeling angry and frustrated. This can lead to criticisms being directed towards ourselves or others, which may worsen our mood.

   Show kindness to yourself or others through one act a day. Research has shown that this can help us feel happier and it also boosts our immune system and energy levels.

4. **BE PATIENT:** We do not know when the coronavirus pandemic will end and it is hard to be patient with the safety restrictions indefinitely. Make space for emotions, as it is impossible to think logically 100 per cent of the time.

   Try the “five, four, three, two, one” technique to relax: Look around you and name them aloud as you notice them: five things you can see, four things you can feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste.

5. **BE EFFECTIVE:** There are many tips and suggestions on how to cope with the pandemic, such as practising mindfulness or working out, and it can be overwhelming – and tiring – to try many things at once.

   It is more effective to identify what need – physical, emotional, intellectual or spiritual – is most pressing and try one technique at a time to gauge if it helps you.

6. **TALK TO SOMEONE:** Seek help if you notice that you have signs of pandemic fatigue.

   Talking to a professional or someone you trust, having them listen to what you are going through and getting support can help regulate emotions and reduce stress.

   - *Anrita Kaur*