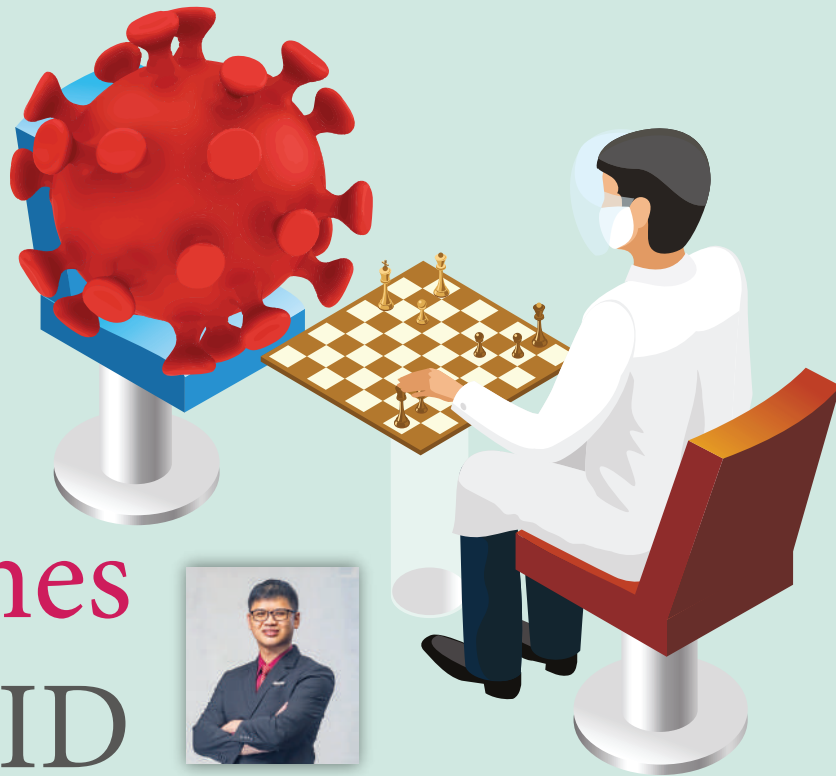


Playing Mind Games with COVID



Dr. Keith Tye Sue Kiat

Fear. Anxiety. Apprehension. Guilt. Hopelessness. Trepidation.

Yes, these are all negative emotions. Unfortunately, these are very much part and parcel of the gamut of emotions assailing us at this moment of medical uncertainty and unrest.

All of us have been affected emotionally, one way or another; what more are our front-liners who are right in the line of fire as they potentially face this virus in every patient they meet?

Forced onto this roller coaster ride, it is imperative that we do what we can, as individuals and as organisations, to mitigate the emotional effects of this situation. Patient Counselor Dr. Keith Tye Sue Kiat takes us through the human psyche that is up against the pandemic.

He says the most glaring observation, which even the untrained eye can see, is a sharp increase in anxiety and uncertainty. Initially, it was caused by the novelty of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and subsequently, and ironically, the knowledge of it - both of which have had all of us in a perpetual fight or flight mode.

"In the hospital setting, this is multiplied tenfold as the staff is caught between their commitment and responsibilities as medical and hospital personnel and the fundamental human instinct to protect self and loved ones.

"They are also faced with an increased workload, changed ways of working, PPE requirements, restrictions and new rules. Add to this fatigue, worry, possible financial difficulties, the apprehension of potentially infecting loved ones at home, balancing work and home, switched-up parenting roles, grief management and lack of closure, and you have the perfect recipe for high stress and mental distress."

Tye says this stress can manifest in various forms - reduced productivity, difficulty concentrating, emotional see-saws, mood changes, sleep problems, and, right to the other end of the spectrum, depression, incapacitation, burnout, and even suicidal thoughts.

"Thankfully, we all have some level of built-in coping mechanisms that are enhanced and supported by one's problem-solving skills and perhaps faith in a higher power, as well as external factors such as family, social support and community resources.

"What we must do is to ensure that these external factors are not only readily available but also proactive and out-reaching.

"Here in IJN, we have a two-fold strategy: 1) we work by referral from Head of Departments and 2) we have a staff support group comprising doctors, nurses, counsellors, Human Capital and Organisational Development Division, and OSH (Occupational Safety and Health) personnel who can identify, assess and address staff concerns and challenges, and provide support and follow-throughs.

"There were weekly meetings, discussions and open communication lines - channels that staff could easily access.

"We also have a special programme for staff who are diagnosed with COVID-19. We closely monitor and keep in communication with those who fall ill or are quarantined. We counsel and assess them to ascertain fitness for work post-recovery and offer additional support where necessary. This is especially important for clinical staff by virtue of the very nature of their work in dealing with patients' health. Some also fall victim to Long COVID that affects work capacity," Tye says.

He adds that with the hospital's plentiful resources and strong support mechanism, it is successfully looking after the mental well-being of its staff, with no extreme or major untoward incidences.

Also, with IJN on high alert on matters of staff health both mentally and physically and aided by a comprehensive internal in-house tracking and surveillance system, it has been easier to identify - and identify them early - those who may need help.

What about numbers and statistics?

Tye's answer, "It is challenging to compute exact figures of mental stress and distress, as it presents in varying degrees and many also suffer in silence or go unnoticed. Suffice to say that we have seen more incidences these past two years, with anxiety levels in tandem with the number of cases.

Notably, the most affected have been staff who have lost patients or loved ones during this time.

"The pandemic has affected everyone differently, and while some need a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on

or what we call Psychological First Aid (PFA), others may need regular counselling sessions and more intensive efforts, such as psychotherapy, to enhance their coping mechanism."

With society having been in suspended animation for most of 2020 and 2021, everyone needs a morale boost, encouragement, and comfort.

Unfortunately, the ultimate "cure", if you will, of mental distress lies in the hands and the minds of the people themselves. If not caused by physiological imbalances, mental stress is very much managed with counselling, empathy, and emotional support.

And the formula for mental well-being? Here's his prescription to our staff:

- Firstly, stay focused on the here and now and take each day one at a time. We don't know what tomorrow will bring, and worrying will not change it; neither can we solve everything all at once.
- Make sure you take care of yourself, stay away from unhealthy habits that can lower your immune system, i.e. smoking and alcohol, eat and rest well, exercise and relax. Make time for yourself.
- Stay connected with your social networks and seek help if you need it. Feelings are like a balloon that will burst if everything is bottled up.
- And finally, take comfort that you are doing something good and noble. Focus on this positive aspect, be kind and compassionate and encourage each other.

As for how patients cope...well that is another story altogether.

