



SG MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

SG Mental Health Matters OPPI Poll #AreWeOkay Summary Report

Foreword

SG Mental Health Matters (SGMHM) is a community initiative that was started off as a public consultation exercise in 2020 intended to support Nominated Member of Parliament Anthea Ong's preparation for the Budget 2020 debates, focusing on mental healthcare and mental wellbeing. This first public consultation in 2020 (PC2020) resulted in close to 400 responses from the community, and has generated insight on issues of access, affordability, and quality of mental healthcare in Singapore. These were key aspects of Anthea's parliamentary speeches that called for policies and key structural changes to improve the mental well-being of Singaporeans.

The work doesn't stop here. SGMHM is committed to furthering our discussion and understanding of mental health issues in Singapore. The SGMHM #AreWeOkay poll ran from 26 March 2021 to 30 April 2021, and was intended to spark a conversation on mental health among Singaporeans amid the pandemic. This poll was launched on OPPI, an AI-powered crowdsourcing platform with proprietary analytic and statistical capabilities and involved a series of demographic questions and statements to which participants could respond to, including topics on perceptions of mental healthcare, vulnerable communities, COVID-19 on mental health, and mental health and society. Our findings provided deeper insight into issues of access, affordability, and quality of mental healthcare in Singapore a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, and suggest a need to further support and address the pressing concern surrounding mental health more holistically.

Key Findings

Trust in the mental healthcare system was a defining feature of different opinion groups. A total of 561 responses were gathered throughout this poll period. Through OPPI's analytic capabilities, we have identified four key opinion groups, namely '*Low Trust in Mental Healthcare System*' (44.2%), '*High Trust in Mental Healthcare System*' (26.9%), '*Undecided on the Mental Healthcare System*' (27.6%), and those who are *unclassifiable* (1.3%). Our demographics analysis indicates that those in the low trust group were more likely to be younger and without a religion,

and those in the high trust group were more likely to be male and never experienced any mental health challenges.

We found high consensus around cost being a barrier to mental healthcare access and the importance of mental health screening. Participants' responses exhibited high consensus on the statements concerning the support offered by the local mental healthcare system. For instance, 78.9% of the total participants agree with the statement of "Cost is a barrier to quality mental healthcare in Singapore" and 76.6% of the total participants believe that compulsory mental health screening should be conducted in all secondary schools. This indicates public awareness on the importance of addressing mental health issues and the need of necessary measures to enhance the mental well-being among the Singapore population.

We found high consensus around the greater mental health vulnerabilities of low-income households, people living with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals and healthcare workers. Participants had high consensus on statements that discussed the increased risks of mental health challenges among vulnerable groups. This includes individuals who identify as being from low-income household, living with disabilities, as LGBTQ+, or as healthcare workers; For instances, 89.6% of the total participants agree that people living with disabilities are at greater mental health risk and believe that they should be given additional support and 85.8% of the total participants believe the same applies to healthcare professionals.

We found high consensus around the need to address suicide in Singapore. A significant majority of the participants agreed that more needed to be done for suicide prevention in Singapore, with 79.1% of our total respondents believe that not enough is being done to prevent suicide in Singapore and 89.2% agree that the role of family as a prevention strategy for youth suicide risk has not been explored enough.

COVID-19 and its related control measures have negatively impacted the mental health of participants, especially those who identify with having past mental health challenges. Specifically, our findings indicated that respondents who have experienced past mental health challenges, were more likely to have agreed with statements on how COVID-19 and the control measures had negatively impacted their mental health, in contrast to those who did not.

Participants who had past experiences with mental health challenges were more likely to have critical views of the current mental healthcare system. These participants were more likely to be part of the *low trust in mental healthcare system* opinion group (86.3% of the group). They were also more likely to agree with statements around difficulty in accessing information to seek help for one's mental health and knowledge of seeking out subsidized mental healthcare, and in contrast, disagree with statements around trust in mental health hotlines and the influence of mainstream media on one's understanding of mental health conditions.

We found several demographic patterns and sentiments that were associated with ever seeking out professional help for participants who ever experienced mental health challenges. Of those who had past mental health challenges, those who were earning an income of SGD2999 and below (compared to no income), and those who had university-level education (compared to those with secondary school level education and below) were more likely to have sought help. Those who knew how to seek out subsidized mental healthcare and who thought that the quality of private mental healthcare was satisfactory were more likely to have sought help. In contrast, those whose understanding of mental health conditions were largely influenced by the mainstream media, or were likely to claim for work insurance for mental healthcare (if available), were less likely to have sought help.

As this study did not utilize a probability sample of Singaporeans, and thus the general trends cannot be assumed to be representative of the Singapore population. Nevertheless, associations between demographic factors and certain sentiments and mental health-related outcomes (e.g. the relationship between demographic attributes and ever seeking help for professional mental health services) can still be drawn in a robust manner - these were the key insights that we had focused on in our report.

Recommendations

Overall, SGMHM proposes one key policy recommendation - that a whole-of-government (WOG) approach is urgently needed to build a strong and mentally-healthy Singapore. In practice, we need a national coordinating body for mental health reporting into the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) with a Minister-in-Charge.

This national coordinating body should not just be a taskforce, but a full-fledged agency with dedicated resources and targets *solely* focused on mental wellbeing and mental health, neither should it be subsumed within integrated health as part of the Agency of Integrated Care.

We draw inspiration from the WOG strategic structure and implementation model of the Smart Nation and Digital Government Office (SNDGO) and suggest that this national co-ordinating body may be called the ***Mental Wellbeing and Sustainable Development Office (MWSDO)***, overseen by a ***Ministerial Committee*** made up of relevant ministers e.g education, health, manpower and social & family development.

Like the SNDGO, the MWSDO would allow the government to be more integrated and responsive to policies that may have implications for mental wellbeing. Also, there are several parallels between MWSD and SNDG; first, both Smart Nation and population mental health are integral parts of nation building; second, in a Smart Nation, we would see transformations across several domains such as health, transport, urban solutions, finance, and education - and we expect the same for policies addressing mental wellbeing in Singapore; third, Smart Nation involves the development of strong system foundations, which would be integral to sustainable approaches to promoting wellbeing as well.

This national coordinating body would allow us to address complex mechanisms that place vulnerable groups at greater risk of mental health challenges, and develop equitable policies that span across ministries. Our findings highlighted consensus among participants that there are indeed groups that are at greater mental health risk, which underscores the downstream impact of complex social, political, and occupational dynamics and policies that intersect to impact these groups.

This national coordinating body can be empowered to monitor key performance indicators in the context of mental health, and to be an authoritative resource on mental health-related information. Our findings highlighted how participants in general felt that access, affordability, and quality of mental healthcare were still key issues that remained barriers to promoting mental well-being among Singaporeans. Those who identified with ever having mental health challenges were more likely to hold such views, therefore enhancing the validity of these sentiments. A national coordinating body can be tasked with assessing such outcomes on a regular basis, and would be well-situated to be an authoritative resource on mental health-related information, mental healthcare financing, and other evidence-based resources on mental health in Singapore. This national coordinating body should also play a leading role in synthesizing best practices, and subsequently informing and coordinating the work of both government and community mental health agencies.

A national coordinating body has the potential to holistically address the upstream determinants of mental health and well-being among Singaporeans. Our findings highlighted upstream factors in the promotion of mental health and well-being, such as the influence of media and policies to prevent suicide. To address these issues meaningfully, a coordinating body would be required to mobilize interest across sectors such as the media, the family and social sector, the education sector, as well as the health sector to implement mental health campaigns that are effective, and to enact policies that protect our youth and those who may be

more vulnerable due to the impact of established social determinants of health such as socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, and occupation. More work also needs to be done to investigate and delineate additional social determinants of mental health.

This call for a whole-of-government approach to promoting mental health and well-being is not new, and calls have been made in parliament by Anthea Ong as well as SGMHM in the past. The #AreWeOkay poll reiterates the importance of such reforms, which will go a long way in alleviating suffering and optimizing mental health outcomes for those who call Singapore home and for us to emerge stronger and build back better, and kinder as a nation in a new COVID-19 norm.

Join Our Conversation, Join our Community

What happens next? SGMHM is committed to furthering our conversation on mental health with the community through a webinar series focusing on key issues that have been uncovered from PC2020 and the #AreWeOkay OPPi poll. These will focus on topics of access, affordability and quality of mental healthcare, vulnerable populations (e.g. LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, individuals from low-income households, healthcare workers), individuals who have been impacted by suicide, and policymakers in the mental healthcare landscape of Singapore.

Watch this space! www.sgmentalhealthmatters.com

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