

## Pandemic Fatigue and Mental Resilience of Elderly People in Singapore

Webinar, 15 January 2022



Gerontological Society of Singapore kicked off the start of the new year with an online webinar by acclaimed speaker, Professor Kua Ee Heok, also known as the Tan Geok Yin Professor of Psychiatry and Neuroscience at NUS and Emeritus Consultant at NUH.

In this online webinar, Prof Kua shared about pandemic fatigue and its relation to older adults in Singapore. A topic very relevant during such COVID-19 times. COVID-19 was foreign to everyone at the start, hence evoking deep fear in many. It led to the government rolling out tight restrictions in hopes of keeping everyone safe, especially those from the vulnerable groups. The seniors being one of them as well.

On the long run, these measures did keep people safe, but it brought about other adverse effects on people too. Everyone's lives halted, we had much to adapt to. Many were even stuck to staring at their four walls daily, especially those from the vulnerable groups. Seniors who were already facing social isolation, were getting further isolated from the community. For those that were trying their best to manage their physical or mental conditions before COVID-19, took a bigger hit with the pandemic.

With this issue in mind, Prof Kua also dived into preventive strategies that one can take to prevent pandemic fatigue. Strategies that we can consider taking up to make each day slightly better as well.

### What is Pandemic Fatigue?

It's not an illness but a collection of symptoms which we call as syndromes. Individuals with pandemic fatigue would display symptoms of tiredness, insomnia, anhedonia ("things that you used to enjoy doing, now bring you very little pleasure"), poor concentration, irritability, and the blues.

Lack of care for people in this phase can lead to severe consequences for the individuals. Prof Kua shared that people more prone to this fatigue tend to be those working at the frontline, like hospitals as they have very strict measurements in place. Followed by seniors, and lastly those working in food and beverage businesses as their number of customers decreased drastically.

But this fatigue is not exclusive to this list. People in the entertainment industry may also experience it as they encounter difficulty in getting work to get by.

### Seniors at risk of Pandemic Fatigue

Within the group of seniors at risk of this fatigue, they usually would have mental health conditions, physical illnesses, or dementia. They may display personality traits of anxiousness. Additionally, they could be living alone.

These factors may not exist solely alone, as the seniors may display more than one factor. For example, seniors living alone may also have physical illnesses. Thus, it can be a combination of factors being displayed from the seniors. Prof Kua commented that those with disorders at the start, may spiral downwards and their conditions may worsen during the pandemic.

With this pandemic, many seniors may get stuck at home and cannot see their loved ones. They may not be able to get the care and support they need as centres or day care centres close as well.

However, this fatigue can be prevented with these 7 habits that Prof Kua shared in the webinar, which links back to building one's mental resilience during the pandemic.

Dear Members, want to share your expertise, a best practice, or new research? Or if you have a gerontology-related event or article that you would like to share with our readers, please write to [admin@gs.org.sg](mailto:admin@gs.org.sg)

### GS COUNCIL FY 2021-22

|                           |                            |                        |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>President</b>          | <b>Hon. Treasurer</b>      | <b>Council Members</b> |
| A/P Thang Leng Leng       | Mr Ang Eng Hoe             | Mr Wong Lit Soon       |
| <b>1st Vice-President</b> | <b>Asst Hon. Treasurer</b> | Mr Laurence Wee        |
| Mr Tristan Gwee           | Mr Tan Tai Kiat            | Ms Tan Yeh Min         |
| <b>2nd Vice President</b> | <b>Hon. Advisor</b>        | Dr Tan Jit Seng        |
| Ms Mary Low               | Prof. Kua Ee Heok          | A/P Corinne Choh       |
| <b>Hon. Secretary</b>     | <b>Hon. Member</b>         | Ms Shirley Lim         |
| Ms Susana C. Harding      | Mr Raymond Lim             | Dr Wayne F. Chong      |

# Pandemic Fatigue and Mental Resilience of Elderly People in Singapore

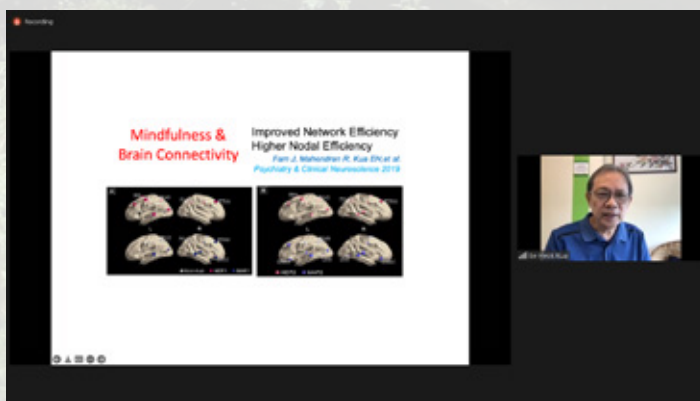
...continued

## 7 Habits to prevent Pandemic Fatigue



Prof Kua sharing on 7 Habits we can take to build our mental resilience during the pandemic

- 1. Acknowledging the New Norm**  
One should acknowledge changes derived from the pandemic such as mask wearing and safety measures.
- 2. Staying informed**  
Keeping informed of the changes through official and reliable channels before making decisions.
- 3. Exercise**  
Exercising releases hormones called endorphins from the body, to help manage your moods.
- 4. Managing your Diet**  
Certain things that you consumed may not be good for you and would lead to you developing other issues.



Impact of mindfulness on individuals who practice it.

- 5. Mindfulness Practice**  
Though mindfulness is still a relatively new practice, it's an area of interest among researchers on the benefits it provides. Some local studies have managed to find that mindfulness benefits you cognitively and emotionally as well as decreasing the risk of depression. According to research done by Prof Kua, it was justified that mindfulness and brain connectivity improved network efficiency and higher nodal efficiency. A suggested app to use would be MindFi.

## 6. Recreational Activities

There are a variety of recreational activities one can take up, that bring about various benefits physically, emotionally and cognitively. Recreational activities like gardening, singing, fishing and many others.



Prof Kua sharing on Social Capital and some examples of people connecting over mutual interests.

## 7. Building and Relying on Social Capital

An ecology of resilience is key. Having a sense of compassion and care for each other is important. In ageing in place, there are many different factors from family, friends and to the community.

## Conclusion

This webinar had been a true eye-opener as we got the hear from Prof Kua on his insightful sharing on the pandemic fatigue and ways to help manage it. While listening, we recounted the role of active ageing and senior activity centres in providing care for seniors in the community, which we had learned a lot on during our internship. As the centre would encourage seniors to age actively in the community through recreational activities that were similar to what Prof Kua had shared. Thus, it reinforces having such centres, especially during pandemic times to prevent and reduce the risk of seniors experiencing pandemic fatigue. Also, Prof Kua had shared more examples which we did not think about until the webinar. Hence, we would actively use what we learnt from Prof Kua to better support and care for our seniors during internship.

Many cases are arising in Singapore in relation to pandemic fatigue. Therefore, it is vital for such awareness of preventive measures in pandemic fatigue. Without adequate knowledge on pandemic fatigue prevention, it could lead to a domino effect where mental health deterioration could lead to the decline of the other aspects of personal health. Therefore, with heightened awareness, people will know how to practice self-compassion and mindfulness to reduce their risk of pandemic fatigue before going to the doctors for everything. Hence, relieving the workload of frontline workers as they are also in a vulnerable position to experience pandemic fatigue and burnout.

Denice Yeo  
Jacelyn Tan  
Nurulhuda Adanan  
Diploma in Social Sciences in Gerontology, Temasek Polytechnic

# Mother of Gerontology

*Danial Kaarthik Pillay, Kishanraj s/o Selvaraj, Nurulhuda Adanan  
Diploma in Social Sciences in Gerontology, Temasek Polytechnic*



## Introduction:

Our mother of gerontology, Professor Kalyani Mehta, began her journey in the field of social work focusing on Children. As she began her professional career as a social worker, she noticed a gap in the policies and programmes for seniors. This was a professional calling for her to do more in the field. Prof Mehta is a well-known individual in the field of Gerontology in Singapore. Prof Mehta achieved her PhD in Gerontology at the age of 47, it was at that point of time where she began her journey in the Gerontological Society of Singapore (GS). Her commitment to GS still continues for 28 years and counting. One may question, why did she take her PhD in Gerontology and what has kept her this long in a committee? Well, she has a strong interest and passion for seniors. Furthermore, she met like-minded individuals who were interested in ageing issues, ageing policies. Collectively their main goal was to advocate for better policies that are affordable, equitable and relevant at all periods of history. Over the past 20 years, GS has done significant work in the field of Gerontology.

Apart from Prof Mehta's professional interest, she had a personal influence that sparked her interest in the field of gerontology. She has lived with her parents in law since she was married. For about 30 years she has seen her parents-in-law transform from individuals who were very independent mobile adults to becoming semi-independent and then at the last stage totally dependent. Fortunately for her family, they could afford rehabilitative services. However, she knew of individuals who could not afford medical services such as operations or daycare rehabilitation for patients who had a stroke. Services that were costly could not be paid by children even if they were filial as

they themselves struggled with their own finances. Prof Mehta viewed this as an important subject for all social workers to make sure that services are affordable to all ages and all economic groups.

Prof Mehta continued to move deeper into gerontology as the years went on. She continues to play an active role in the gerontology landscape of Singapore. Her two key contributions would be in the education and caregiving fields. In the field of education, she set up the first Master of Gerontology programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences. Although there are presently two universities offering the master in gerontology programme, it can be agreed that more needs to be done in the field of gerontological education. Presently, there are efforts in place to provide diploma students with a bridge to the master's and PhD in Gerontology. As far as the pathways are mapped out, it is important that students are able to retain the passion in the field while they continue their educational pursuits to PhD in gerontology. Moving ahead, it is noted that Gerontechnology is one area in the future of gerontological educational pursuits. With manpower shortage, technology could play a vital role in helping our healthcare providers.

## Caregiving:

"Caregiving is a journey that benefits not only the receiver but also the giver"

Before Prof Mehta started Silver Caregiver's Co-Operative Limited (SCCL), her involvement in caregiving for her parents-in-law who lived with her family sparked her interest to start this non-profit organisation. Secondly, her research on family caregivers for seniors with dementia, made her realize that they could advocate for better policies.

With that, Prof Mehta started the SCCL in 2013. Through this organisation, Prof Mehta's faith in the resilience of the human spirit has been reinforced through her involvement with the organisation. Some achievements that the organisation has achieved would be setting up celebrations to appreciate the efforts of the caregivers in Singapore and they have also published a book called, "I am not alone," both in English and in Mandarin (ebook). The SCCL applies the cooperative model in their operations as it does not rely on any government subsidies, i.e. self-help and mutual help amongst the community of caregivers. The cooperative model does not limit anyone from participating in these courses and workshops. These courses and

# Mother of Gerontology

...continued

workshops heavily focus on educating the public on the harsh reality of what the caregivers face both at home and at work.

An example that Professor Mehta gave was this participant whom she came across. The caregiver mentioned that for 15 years, she has been caring for either parents-in-law, grandparents or her own parents. Once someone passes on, they are quickly replaced by the next one and then the next one, and the cycle continues. This lady was a tuition teacher, and because of the flexibility that her job gives her, she is able to attend to her family members who needed her help. In between, she will have her tuition sessions and of course, she has a few children of her own to care for. Professor Mehta says the tuition teacher was a very dedicated caregiver. The lady shared with Prof Mehta that when relative approached her for help she just could not refuse them.

Thus, caregiving can become too much to bear if people could not understand from the caregiver's point of view and many times caregivers would choose to keep it to themselves and not burden others with their problems. The SCCL aims to educate the public of the problems these caregivers face and how they could lend a helping hand to ease their challenges. As for the caregivers, the organisation aims to educate them on how to cope with the challenges through the workshops and informal sessions called Tea sessions. Due to COVID-19, they have been conducted online.

## Social work:

Based on Prof Mehta's extensive experience in social work, Prof Mehta advises that this field of work is more of a calling. She mentions that if people had the mindset to take advantage of the subsidies and were in it for the pay they would be heavily disappointed and would not last being social workers. On the flip side, she says that if the person joins social work to accomplish their personal goal in life to help others and it aligns with their personal values, these people will attain job satisfaction. Most importantly it will be a joy for them to work in that field of work because they would find meaning.

She also mentioned that this field of work would be great for young couples because social work gives that work schedule flexibility. She gave her experience as an example where having young children to raise at the beginning she wanted to have that flexibility and as such social work was a profession that gave her that flexibility to work part-time or one could even do volunteering.

## Successful ageing:

According to Prof Mehta, she mentions that for one to age successfully, there are just 3 things to fulfill that. The three things are basically interpersonal skills, spiritual growth, and contentment. For interpersonal skills, it is important to possess such skills because, without this, seniors could experience

loneliness and eventually, this could lead to isolation. Whereas, if a senior were to be able to communicate effectively with their peers as well as enjoy people's company their peers would want their company more.

Secondly, spiritual growth, because as people age, they tend to become less materialistic and more spiritual. The prof mentioned that spiritual growth is indeed important because as they age, they would realise that their own children would be more preoccupied with their own commitments. Thus, it is not possible for these seniors to gain that emotional and social companionship from their own children all the time. As such having spiritual growth is important to have and to be preoccupied with. Another thing that spiritual growth helps with is to be more optimistic in times of crisis.

Thirdly, contentment, this quality helps the individual to keep their balance and to keep faith in themselves and with the higher being. Professor Mehta says that contentment is a value that is very rare to find in people and she says that if one trains the mind to accept and to adjust with every stage of life, they will be contented because they would not be hankering over things they don't have and would appreciate the little things that they have at their current stage. Thus, making them very grateful and happy individuals.

## Conclusion:

"Never quit until you get your answers. That is my motto. I don't quit until I know or I find what I wanna find."

In addition to being a professor, Professor Mehta juggles many roles as a daughter, a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law, a grandmother, and a caregiver amongst others. She is a proponent of successful ageing as she is able to balance her commitments well. Based on her own personal struggles as a caregiver, Professor Mehta established a support group for other caregivers to share their grievances with each other and feel less alone in their struggles. In remembrance of International Women's Day on 8 March, we invite you to ponder on how gender is still affixed to the caregiver role and how this impacts older women in the population.

Despite the challenges faced by older women in Singapore, we continue to be inspired by prolific older women like the late Dr Lee Kng Swan (of Gerontological Society of Singapore) who placed community service over materialistic gain, as acknowledged by Professor Mehta. We are sure the Mother of Gerontology will continue to be a beacon of hope to many caregivers, gerontologists and aspiring social workers who will in turn inspire others to do good for the society.

We would like to thank Professor Mehta for setting aside time for the interview, as well as her valuable contributions to the community.