

- Mental health

Six steps to overcome pandemic fatigue

New Straits Times · 6 May 2021 · 14 · The writer was formerly a federal counsel at the Attorney-General's Chambers and a visiting professor at UTM, Skudai. He is now a full-time consultant, trainer and author

IT has been more than a year. The Covid-19 virus landed on our shores via three Chinese nationals who came here, and by Jan 30, we had eight cases.

The first spike occurred following a tabligh event at the Sri Petaling Mosque between Feb 27 and March 1. The government announced a lockdown beginning March 18, because the day before, we had our first two deaths due to Covid-19.

Since then, we've had a series of lockdowns. We started wearing face masks in June, following advice from the World Health Organisation. By the end of June, we had 121 deaths, and by Dec 31, 113,010 cases, 88,941 recoveries and 471 deaths. On Feb 18 this year, the death toll breached the 1,000 mark.

Up to Monday, we had 417,512 cases and 1,551 deaths. Will the number increase or will the Covid-19 curve flatten? More cases and deaths on Hari Raya?

My youngest daughter, a Petaling Jaya resident, constantly texts me to stay home and be safe and not to go out unless absolutely necessary. At 80, I am a "high-risk" subject, she said.

Although Kota Setar has been declared a red zone, none of my neighbours seems to care. As Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said, pandemic fatigue is around us.

He said: "The recent spike in Covid-19 cases is caused by pandemic fatigue, among others". Pandemic fatigue causes people to "become complacent" in adhering to public health measures,"

Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia medical director Associate Professor Dr Mohd Radzniwan said recently that pandemic fatigue can cause people to let down their guard in fighting the pandemic.

He added that when the Movement Control Order (MCO) was implemented in March last year, people were "enthusiastic" in efforts to flatten the Covid-19 curve.

However, when inter-state travel was allowed, there was a spike in cases. People grew tired as there seemed to be no end to the pandemic.

For Universiti Malaya's consultant psychiatrist Associate Professor Dr Amer Siddiq Amer Nordin, pandemic fatigue led to non-compliance with the SOP.

A public perception that different laws apply to different levels of society had "caused anger and frustration among the community", he said.

On April 19, economist Professor Jomo Kwame Sundaram said the emergency and MCO were “not necessary to curb the Covid19 pandemic”. On the contrary, it had “worsened the economy further”.

“Covid-19 did not drag down our economy. It is the emergency and the MCO that had worsened the economy,” he added.

What is pandemic fatigue? An Australian-based psychology portal (<https://www.psychology.org.au/>) described pandemic fatigue symptoms as including frustration, irritability, depression, anxiety, physical exhaustion, difficulty in focusing, problem-solving and making decisions, and diminishing interest in activities previously enjoyed.

Is there a remedy for pandemic fatigue? The portal suggests the following:

ACCEPT the new normal. Accept the fact that you may not be as productive as before, that you may have a shorter fuse and be more irritable;

CREATE and stick to a new routine. You will be tired and unmotivated if you do not have a schedule to follow and a purpose to achieve. So create a new routine for work, rest and exercise. If you work from home, take time out and go for breaks and fresh air;

CONNECT with family, friends, and colleagues. Make the most of technology to keep in touch with people on a regular basis.

FIND the time to relax, and do the things you enjoy;

BALANCE your negative thoughts with positive ones, focus on the present, and do not try to worry about what you cannot control; and,

LOOK after yourself, keep active, sleep well, drink plenty of water, get fresh air and sun.

In the United Kingdom, The Guardian called it “pandemic burnout”. The daily on Feb 5 said 60 per cent of people in the UK now find it “harder to stay positive”.

They realise the pandemic will not end soon, restrictions will continue, and so will the mental stress and exhaustion. We are different, but we are the same.