

## Pro tips for mental health

Healthcare professionals share their plans for well-being in the new year

The Straits Times · 27 Dec 2023 · C1 · Akshita Nanda Correspondent

If you struggle with stress or find self-care hard, you are not alone.



According to a study released in July by insurance group AIA Singapore, three in five Singapore residents are concerned about their mental health.

The AIA Live Better Study 2023 canvassed 500 residents aged 18 and up between Nov 30 and Dec 30 in 2022. Nearly half were aged 35 to 55, and this age group also struggled with work-life balance and a general lack of motivation.

Doctors say that stress at work, or the pressure of living in a competitive society, can trigger low moods, feelings of burnout or trouble sleeping.

Professionals in the fields of health and well-being are not immune from such stressors, so how do they cope?

The Straits Times asked 12 such experts to share their tips and resolutions for better mental health in 2024. This is their advice.

### LIFE IS HARD, BE GENTLE WITH YOURSELF

In 2023, relationship counsellor Theresa Pong faced so much stress while running her private practice that she had an eczema outbreak lasting almost three months.

The married mother of a teenage daughter has resolved to focus in 2024 on having a healthier diet, making time to exercise, and taking breaks from work to spend time with her family.

The founder and counselling director of The Relationship Room says that, thanks to the eczema outbreak, she has learnt the importance of self-compassion. Kindness to herself helps her be present for others.

“I am as human as anyone. I do feel tired and experience setbacks,” she says. “The eczema episode made me pause and relook at my personal space.”

#### TIME MANAGEMENT MEANS MAKING TIME FOR REST AND SELF-CARE

Many people divide their schedule between work and family, and maybe exercise. However, the pros also include time for rest and other aspects of self-care.

Dr Lim Boon Leng, a psychiatrist at Gleneagles Hospital, says that without adequate rest, it is easy to burn out.

“Rest helps us to rejuvenate and carry on,” he adds, noting that he has been more disciplined about resting in 2023.

Ms Olivia Khoo, head of Singapore General Hospital’s (SGH) Medical Social Services, divides her day into blocks for work, herself, her family, her social life and so on.

She focuses completely on each aspect of life during its assigned time. “I am keenly aware that I need to end work by 5.30pm to be a master chef in my kitchen by 6pm. Having that clear demarcation and focus helps,” she says.

Making time for what matters also means cutting out what is unnecessary.

Yoga therapist Agnes Tay, who teaches at Active Hive and works in marketing as founder of AT Marketing Consultancy, says: “I am selective in the projects I handle.” In 2023, she focused on charitable projects.

“I am also learning to say no to unnecessary meetings or work that is not meaningful.”

#### SLEEP

I am as human as anyone. I do feel tired and experience setbacks. The eczema episode made me pause and relook at my personal space.

”

THE RELATIONSHIP ROOM FOUNDER AND COUNSELLING DIRECTOR THERESA PONG, who plans to have a healthier diet, make time to exercise and spend time with family in 2024

I am keenly aware that I need to end work by 5.30pm to be a master chef in my kitchen by 6pm. Having that clear demarcation and focus helps.

Adults over the age of 18 need at least seven hours of sleep a night or their physical or mental performance might be impaired, says Singapore’s national health platform HealthHub. Most of the professionals interviewed for this article plan to prioritise sleep, even during busy periods in 2024.

Spend time devising a sleep routine that works for you, suggests Ms Martine Hill, director and counsellor at private practice Alliance Counselling.

She spent 2023 figuring out her sleep practices, including the impact of using her phone before bedtime. Now, she sets an alarm to remind her to go to bed, and meditates before she sleeps, instead of scrolling on her device. She tends to sleep by 10pm and wake at 5am.

”

MS OLIVIA KHOO, HEAD OF SINGAPORE GENERAL HOSPITAL’S MEDICAL SOCIAL SERVICES, divides her day into blocks for work, herself, her family, her social life and so on

I am learning to say no to unnecessary meetings or work that is not meaningful. ”

YOGA THERAPIST AGNES TAY, who teaches at Active Hive and works in marketing as founder of AT Marketing Consultancy

Positive relationships keep us happier and healthier, and help us live longer. ”

ANNABELLE PSYCHOLOGY CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST ANNABELLE CHOW, who will continue to invest in interpersonal relationships

### NURTURE RELATIONSHIPS

Family, friends and colleagues all contribute to your well-being. Clinical psychologist Annabelle Chow of private practice Annabelle Psychology says that, in 2024, she will continue to invest in her interpersonal relationships.

She cites an 85-year study by Harvard researchers, which shows that social well-being affects physical and emotional health. “Positive relationships keep us happier and healthier, and help us live longer,” she says.

The Relationship Room’s Ms Pong notes that having a support network of other entrepreneurs and colleagues in private practice helped her through tough times in 2023.

“Knowing I have peers to turn to helped me manage my emotions and enhanced resilience.”

Social connections can also motivate you towards personal goals. Ms Hill says some of her friends with similar interests have become “accountability buddies” who nudge her to exercise or meditate. She does the same for them.

“It’s easy to ask a buddy: ‘Can you follow up on this for me?’ or ‘Can I let you know when I do this?’” she adds. “Having someone to be accountable to works.”

Ms Pearlyn Tay, principal pharmacist at SGH’s department of pharmacy, says spending more time with friends and colleagues in 2023 helped her emotional wellbeing, since she had more outlets to share her feelings.

However, she advises: “Check in with yourself daily and spend some time loving yourself before you spend your time and energy on those around you.”

### EXERCISE

Exercise has a positive effect on mental health. Dr Andrew Fang, family physician with private medical chain Doctor Anywhere, says: “Besides helping to alleviate stress, exercise also helps improve one’s focus, memory and mood.”

Gleneagles Hospital’s Dr Lim suggests cardiovascular exercise – such as jogging, walking and swimming – to help with mental and physical health.

Clinical psychologist Karen Pooh of Alliance Counselling says strength training helped her shed 30kg of excess weight that she had gained over years of stress eating.

Strength also helps reduce her mental fatigue.

“When I am mentally strong, I persevere through challenging exercises,” she says. “Conversely, when I am physically strong, my mind is clearer and my overall mood is elevated.”

### BE MINDFUL

Dr Edwin Chng, medical director of Parkway Shenton, plans to practise mindfulness in 2024 to boost his mental wellness.

“This is the mental practice of being aware of the present moment,” he says. “Research has shown that the mindfulness meditation practice has a positive effect on improving

anxiety and stress management, and can lead to long-term happiness and greater satisfaction in life.”

For Dr Rie Kubota, senior clinical psychologist at the Institute of Mental Health, mindfulness at work means attending to one task at a time, rather than multitasking.

In 2024, she says: “I plan to go on more frequent nature walks and practise mindful walking.” In a mindful walk, you are consciously aware of the surroundings and how you feel while moving.

Meditation and deep breathing are also ways to add mindfulness to your life.

Mr Pardeep Fogat, 36, is the founder of Jal Yoga, which has six branches in Singapore. He meditates every day, saying it helps him make better decisions under stress.

In 2022, his team was hesitant about expanding to Malaysia, but after meditating, he made the decision to go ahead. The yoga teacher and entrepreneur will open a third branch in Malaysia in 2024.

“Meditation improves mental well-being and how you react to situations,” he says.

I always look at what’s the smallest thing I can do. It could be a five-minute change. When I started meditating, I meditated for five minutes and didn’t try to go for a full hour.”

My field of work allows me the privilege to help with social work in the community, and this is immensely meaningful and enriching for me.”

GLENEAGLES HOSPITAL PSYCHIATRIST LIM BOON LENG, who plans to volunteer more in 2024

Research has shown that the mindfulness meditation practice has a positive effect on improving anxiety and stress management, and can lead to long-term happiness and greater satisfaction in life.”

PARKWAY SHENTON MEDICAL DIRECTOR EDWIN CHNG, who plans to practise mindfulness in 2024

I moderate my expectations so as not to feel too disappointed when things don’t fully work out the way I expect.”

DOCTOR ANYWHERE FAMILY PHYSICIAN ANDREW FANG

When I am mentally strong, I persevere through challenging exercises. Conversely, when I am physically strong, my mind is clearer and my overall mood is elevated.”

ALLIANCE COUNSELLING CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST KAREN POOH, who plans to continue strength training

Check in with yourself daily and spend some time loving yourself before you spend your time and energy on those around you.”

SINGAPORE GENERAL HOSPITAL PHARMACIST PEARLYN TAY, who finds calm and joy in crocheting

Meditation improves mental well-being and how you react to situations.”

JAL YOGA FOUNDER PARDEEP FOGAT, who meditates every day

I plan to go on more frequent nature walks and practise mindful walking.”

INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH SENIOR CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST RIE KUBOTA

START SMALL

Perhaps you feel your life needs a complete overhaul, or maybe you want to start eating better, sleeping earlier or exercising regularly.

Dr Lim says: “Rather than resolutions, it may be better to just start the year by solving a few simple problems or completing a few simple tasks that you may have sat on.”

Perhaps, you can make an appointment for a health screening or finally catch up with a friend.

Completing such tasks can boost your sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence.

Ms Hill says she has built good habits by making very small changes. “I always look at what’s the smallest thing I can do. It could be a five-minute change. When I started meditating, I meditated for five minutes and didn’t try to go for a full hour.”

While making a New Year’s resolution might help some people, it is important to be realistic and flexible.

Dr Fang says that when he sets goals, he accepts that there may be setbacks. “I moderate my expectations so as not to feel too disappointed when things don’t fully work out the way I expect.”

#### GIVE BACK

Helping others can boost your well-being. SGH’s Ms Khoo has made new friends through volunteering with a marriage preparation organisation. “Volunteering in social groups allows one to meet people outside work and to draw on different perspectives,” she says. Dr Lim plans to volunteer more in 2024. “My field of work allows me the privilege to help with social work in the community, and this is immensely meaningful and enriching for me,” he says.

#### ADD FUN TO YOUR LIFE

Fun is an important aspect of wellbeing. Ms Hill plans to “add more lightness” to her life in 2024 by taking dance classes.

Ms Pearlyn Tay crochets as a hobby, making things such as flowers and cupcakes.

“Crocheting involves keeping track of the number of stitches, and this counting helps to calm me. The end product also brings joy,” she says.

Parkway Shenton’s Dr Chng has this advice for better mental health: “Life may not be as smooth sailing as we would like it to be, but we can take charge of our own mental and physical health.

“Get sufficient sleep, adopt a healthy diet, maintain an active lifestyle, interact and socialise, do good deeds and help others. And most importantly, laugh.”