

Thrive in Life

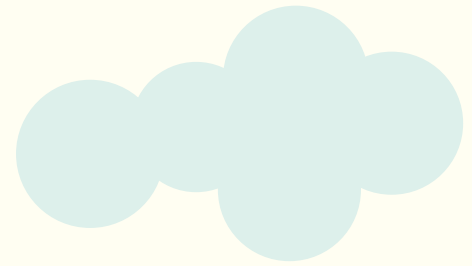
Resilience • Strength • Hope



"A collection of community stories of resilience, strength, and hope in the face of COVID-19 pandemic"



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by Founder CEO Samuel Ng	

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Foreword

by Founder | CEO Samuel Ng



From breaking through dense soil as a budding plant, to growing deep roots so that they can bend and sway with the wind without breaking, trees can teach us a lot about thriving in life.

With the tumultuous onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, the team at Montfort Care had realised more than ever the importance of mental health, of maintaining familial, social and community ties, and of celebrating the silver linings during turbulent times.

Montfort Care would like to commemorate the strength and hope of our clients and colleagues with “Thrive in Life”, an e-book that captures how the community had collectively overcome these challenging times. Through the eyes of young school children, social workers, elderly who live alone, those living with chronic illnesses, and more, we discover personal reflections on resilience, strength, hope, and how they managed their mental wellbeing throughout the pandemic.

Like trees, humans are often stronger when we come together and rely on each other during difficult times. We hope that this e-book will offer perspective, comfort and encouragement, and a gentle reminder that it is okay to ask for help, to share a struggle, and to extend support to another person in need.

Samuel Ng BBM
Founder | CEO, Montfort Care



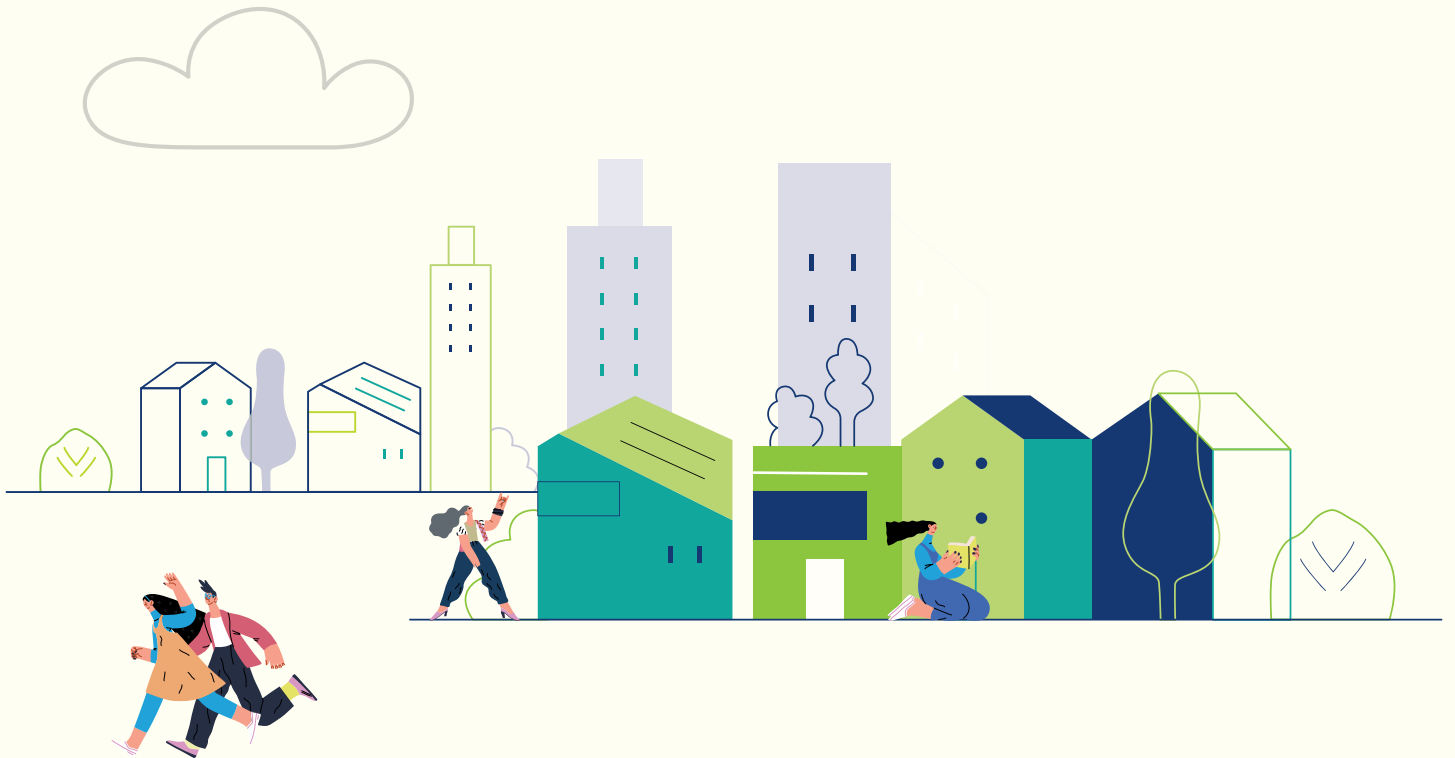
About us



Montfort Care is a network of programmes committed to improving the lives of individuals, families and the community facing transitional challenges.

Montfort Care seeks to empower lives and strengthen communities by offering community-based social services through its Family Service Centres, child protection services through its Big Love Child Protection Specialist Centres, bereavement support through Grief Matters, as well as supporting and empowering seniors holistically through its GoodLife! and YAH! programmes.

www.montfortcare.org.sg



Resilience

... an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change

“*Thinking of My Family Kept Me Going*”

At 76 years old, Mdm Umma has gone through a lot in her life. After successfully beating breast cancer, she is now battling diabetes, osteoarthritis and depression.



Getting COVID-19 was definitely not on her bucket list either. Unfortunately, both her and her husband tested positive back in April 22. Luck was on her side though, as the symptoms were not severe and they were suitable for home recovery. They spent a total of 12 days in isolation, making the most of things that they had, apart from the occasional support with groceries and meals from their sister-in-law.



She was stopped by the safe distancing ambassadors, and she was frantic as she pleaded to be able to go see her brother. She recalled the kindness and compassion shown by them, and how they got her a mask so she could continue on her journey.

Throughout the pandemic, it was **the thought of family that kept Mdm Umma going**. For a long period, she was the main caregiver of her

Mdm Umma considered these 12 days in isolation more bearable than the mandatory lock down during Circuit Breaker though. The safe distancing measures frustrated her immensely as she was unable to purchase daily necessities for her family.

The gap in digital literacy further exacerbated things, as she was unfamiliar with how to purchase items and groceries online - increasing anxiety levels tremendously.

Like many others, these safety distancing measures negatively impacted her relationships with others. She enjoyed spending time with her neighbours pre COVID-19, something she was no longer able to.

At the peak of the pandemic, everyone was paranoid of getting infected and preferred to stay in the safety of their homes. This deprived Mdm Umma of her daily interactions with her neighbours, especially one she was particularly close with. It led to a rather lonely and depressing period of time for her.

As if things couldn't get any worse, it was then she got noticed that her brother was gravely ill, with only a few hours left to live. She rushed down to the MRT, only to realize that she had forgotten her mask in her hurry.

grandson who is diagnosed with autism and formed close bonds with him. She fondly recalled the memories of caring for him as a toddler. "He was the focus of my life", she recounts. Whether during the times when he misbehaved and bit her versus those heart-warming moments when he would give her loads of hugs, she loved him all the same.

Apart from fetching him to-and-fro from school, she also brought him for his appointments. Mdm Umma used to be part of a support group of caregivers of children with special needs. Being part of the community gave her a sense of purpose in life. It was through her recollection of those moments that gave Mdm Umma great comfort and the perseverance to go through her difficult times with positive mindset.

Besides her grandson, her daughter is also a tremendous source of inspiration for her. Despite being paralyzed from the waist down, her daughter has never let her handicap stopped her from achieving her dream. Today, daughter is working as a Counselor in America, helping the needy to cope better with their living adversities.

Mdm Umma couldn't be prouder of her, and hopes to visit America to see her daughter once the pandemic situation gets better.

Breathe. Expect the Unexpected. Treasure Our Mental Health

Life is but an organized chaos in the eyes of a social worker. We dare to be different and we 'Chiong' to support families and individuals from all walks of life. But when a monster such as COVID-19 disrupts almost everything in our lives, what do we do?



Those were my thoughts as a social worker working with Kreta Ayer Family Services. As a social worker, I felt that my connection with my clients were disrupted significantly during COVID-19. On one hand, I had to prioritize clients who required face-to-face sessions. On the other, I had to get used to modalities such as WhatsApp video chats and Zoom calls.

It was an uphill task with little room for breath as I grappled between Zoom fatigue while engaging and supporting clients in the midst of my own struggles. Sometimes, it was difficult to have meaningful conversations and to concentrate in a Zoom session. With their homes not being ideal for honest conversations and sessions, most of my clients shared that they were not able to speak openly about their emotions and thoughts.

During the pandemic, I worry most for my clients who were going through a divorce and dealing with family violence and trauma from their family members. Most of my clients were still living under the same roof with their perpetrators and were unable to share as honestly as they could, making it difficult for me to fully support them as their social worker as I had to keep conversations succinct.

“
*Don't forget to breathe and
to always remember to hold
space for myself.*”

This was the mantra I had in my head all the while going through the sessions and the COVID-19 pandemic. The act of breathing mindfully has helped me through this difficult time. The next thing I did was reflect and learn! I went onto YouTube and online platforms to learn the different features Zoom offered so that I am able to provide better support to clients by ensuring that they are engaged through the meeting. My supervisors have been crucial in this process as I approached them for guidance and support along the way.

My greatest takeaway from the pandemic was to “**expect the unexpected**”. We have been living with COVID-19 longer than we all imagined. Riding through it as a social worker and as an individual, I learnt more about my strengths and limitations, and how I could be kind to myself just like how I can be kind to my clients. I aim to continue to learn to adapt to situations and technology and never to take granted of the traditional methods of social work.

At the end of the day, I wish that COVID-19 didn't exist. However, it has been over two years and yet, we're still living with COVID-19. My hope for all of us is to stay safe, stay resilient and to always **treasure our mental health**.



It Was “Fun and Not Fun”

Amy (pseudonym) is the youngest of two, and lives in a 2-room public rental flat with her mother and older brother. Due to space constraints, Amy usually shares the living room’s coffee table with her older brother to do her schoolwork.



While many students were excited to stay home during Circuit Breaker for home-based learning (HBL), Amy did not share similar sentiments. Rather, Amy felt conflicted about having to stay at home for such an extended period. In her words, it was *“fun and not fun”*.

Initially, she thought that it was such a new and exhilarating experience. The nature of home-based learning only required Amy and her classmates to unmute themselves only when needed, and they did not have to turn on their cameras throughout the lessons. Hiding behind her black screen, Amy felt so free to do all sorts of things. She would inform her teachers that she needs to use the washroom, but in fact, she would sneak off to snack on some titbits. The exhilaration from the rush of endorphins made her feel so excited to be attending classes from home!

At times, she would also secretly use her phone to play games but *shh!* – this is a secret! Additionally, even though she could not see her friends physically, it did not stop them from chatting using the secret chatroom function on Zoom. The best part of all was that her teachers did not scold her for doing such “illegal things”. Probably because they could not see what she was doing. *Oops!* Amy knew that she would have been punished if she had done these things physically in school.

That said, here are some reasons why this is considered “not fun” for Amy.

To start, Amy had to wake up in the morning even earlier during HBL compared to attending school physically which made her feel exhausted. Besides that, it was difficult to concentrate in class due to many distractions at home, one of it being the noises that came from her mother doing the household chores. She distinctly recalled an occasion when her mother was vacuuming the floors while she was attending a class. The loud sounds from the vacuum cleaner got her teacher to



question who was making so much noise in the background which made her feel extremely embarrassed.

Besides that, Amy couldn't enjoy herself fully during HBL due to the Circuit Breaker restrictions that were set in place back then. She was not allowed to meet her friends physically after school and was only left with the choice of Zoom or phone calls to maintain the connection she had with her friends. Despite so, they tried to overcome this challenge and make the best of things by arranging mobile game-playing sessions together. They played games such as Among Us and Roblox which got popularized during COVID-19. One of Amy's recommendations is for all to try out the game Roblox!

Although Amy continued to keep in touch with her friends through these methods, she knew that these experiences are just not the same as meeting them in person.

Even though it was hard to get used to the changes that came along with COVID-19, Amy found joy and happiness in eating snacks with her family members together - a new way for the family to bond together and go through this stressful time together.

My Reflections on the Ways I Take Care of Myself

Olivia (pseudonym) was only 14 years old when the pandemic first hit. As she turns 16 this year, she reflected on how the pandemic had affected her life.

"I was stuck."

Like most people, the pandemic was tough for Olivia to experience and cope with. There were many restrictions and it felt like people were suddenly trapped within the four walls of their homes. Olivia was greatly affected and her spirits were consistently low. She felt like she was going through the motions of a "normal" life, yet, everything seemed so different compared to before.

School and meeting up with friends did not stop despite the pandemic. However, it was now done in unprecedented ways. Everything was virtual; she attended classes and saw her friends through a computer screen. Needless to say, the once familiar schooling experience no longer felt the same for Olivia.

During the virtual lessons, Olivia had to stay silent and she was not allowed to pose questions until the end of the lesson to not disrupt the class. It was a challenge though as one tends to forget the questions once the moment has passed. It was also tough for



Olivia to stay focused during the lessons. The comfort of her own home, combined with the lack of class engagement, made it easy for her to get distracted or lulled into daydreams.

Taking walks was something that Olivia had enjoyed pre-pandemic. However, going out especially during the peak of the pandemic was out of the question. She shudders at the memory of pacing within the compounds of her home, with no scenery for her to take in.

Her experience could be encapsulated by the French term "jamais vu", which refers to the experience of a situation that is simultaneously familiar yet unfamiliar.

It was a huge challenge for Olivia to manage the changes that were happening all around her. Still, she found ways to lift her spirits. She found comfort in her dad's cooking, which was what Olivia considered to be "restaurant-level cooking!". Her favourite dishes were a salmon poké bowl and a very special pasta dish decorated with ikura (salmon eggs) on it – yum! It was these times that made her realise that good food plays an essential role in turning her moods around and making the days slightly more bearable.

Besides food, Olivia also found it helpful to channel her energy and craving for social interaction into taking care of other living things, namely her guinea pig and a miniature plant. She could not help but smile as she recalls the adorable antics of her guinea pig. She delighted in playing with him, as he would scurry to her side and lean gently on her. He also always made these loud wheeking noises to get the family's attention whenever he was hungry. "He's adorable!" squealed Olivia. As for her miniature plant, Olivia found it heartening to enjoy the small successes when she observes its growth as it "graduated" to bigger pots, thanks to her patient nurturing.

When asked about her takeaways from the pandemic, Olivia shared her learnings through her journey caring for her miniature plant.

"Treating and caring for my own plant made me reflect on how I should be treating myself too," said Olivia. She explained that

plants require water and sunlight to grow and flourish healthily. Likewise, as humans, our essentials are things like moral support from our loved ones, and positive thoughts. In Olivia's view, these are factors that were extremely important in helping her persist through the pandemic.

"The pandemic wouldn't last forever. It will be over soon. Even if it remains around for a little bit, it will not always be as severe."

Olivia believes in the power of positive thinking, knowing that it will help her through the tough days.



Staying Connected Through Different Means



During the pandemic, many legal restrictions were established to safeguard the health and safety of the public against COVID-19. Despite knowing the restrictions were in place for the better good, it was still a difficult period for all to learn and become accustomed to the new way of living. Similarly, getting used to the pandemic was a nightmarish experience for Mdm Nani (pseudonym) and her five children.

With the restrictions set in place, Mdm Nani could no longer indulge in her favourite activities such as organising social gatherings with her family, friends, and colleagues. At one point, only a certain number of people can be out together at one go, limiting social contact. For Mdm Nani, she had always found respite in having frequent social gatherings with families and colleagues, as it was her go-to coping strategy that helped her in managing her stresses in life. Through such gatherings, she could feel the bond between her and her family members and colleagues getting stronger, which is often a plus point for Mdm Nani. Thus, halting of all such activities made it extremely suffocating for Mdm Nani. To make things worse, Mdm Nani was not even allowed to access and take a walk at East Coast Park alone to release her stress from all these stressful changes!

At home, tension was also building up among her family members. Her children were getting restless from being trapped at home as they are not allowed to meet their friends at the playground. Mdm Nani had to be firm with them that they were not allowed out except going to school or accompanying her to get groceries from the store.

It got even harder for the family when they were not allowed to visit their loved ones during Hari Raya. However, Mdm Nani and her children tried to keep the spirits up by dressing up in their favourite baju kurungs for the occasion. Fortunately, her children were understanding of the situation and could find alternative ways to have fun together. They managed to get along well through the times they had to stay home despite having to face each other day in and day out. Mdm Nani reflected that she sympathized with the struggles her children had to face as she was also having a tough time with the same problems too.

To cope with the tough times, Mdm Nani recalled that her employment has brought her some breathing space. Mdm Nani found it truly a privilege to be able to have short conversations physically with people outside of her immediate family, i.e., her colleagues as a form of releasing stress after facing her family members 24/7.

That said, Mdm Nani also felt grateful to her family who remained supportive and encouraging throughout the pandemic. They were part of the most important factors that made the pandemic less torturous for Mdm Nani to persevere through.

Additionally, Mdm Nani is also thankful that the pandemic did not affect her familial relationships. There were no major conflicts among the family members, and they got along well despite living in the same space all the time.

Lastly, Mdm Nani shared a wise tip of her own that she found especially helpful during the pandemic. ***“Stay connected with family and friends through different methods,*** that is the most important during difficult times,” concluded Mdm Nani.



Learning Through Tough Times

Many who were already struggling with trauma or mental health problems before the pandemic were deeply affected by the prolonged isolation that came with COVID-19, and in some cases, it could lead to suicide. Dan (pseudonym), an 18-year-old recounts his experience knowing someone who had passed on by suicide. He remembered how he found out about the passing of the girl through somebody else.





Dan was in year 2 of ITE when the pandemic first hit Singapore. At first, he felt that it was not affecting him, but shortly after, he started to feel the negative impacts of COVID-19 on his mental health. He felt frustrated when his mother constantly asked him to not head out, as he felt that he should be able to do whatever he wants to do. Dan's mindset was simple - if he was destined to meet death, he will. As with COVID-19, he felt that it was only a matter of time that he would get infected with COVID-19, and has fully accepted the consequences that came with contracting the virus.

However, COVID-19 started affecting him mentally and it made him feel depressed. At first, he struggled with it, but eventually came to a realisation that it was a waste of precious

time feeling these negative and heavy emotions. Dan relied on affirmations to bring him through the tough times, and one of the affirmations were - "Tough times make tough men. Tough men make easy times. Easy times make easy men, easy men make tough times." Dan coped by reminding himself that

it is a cycle, and he will be able to get through it. When times are tough times, it is also the time when people learn how to cope, and that's how we grow from the difficult times.

Strength

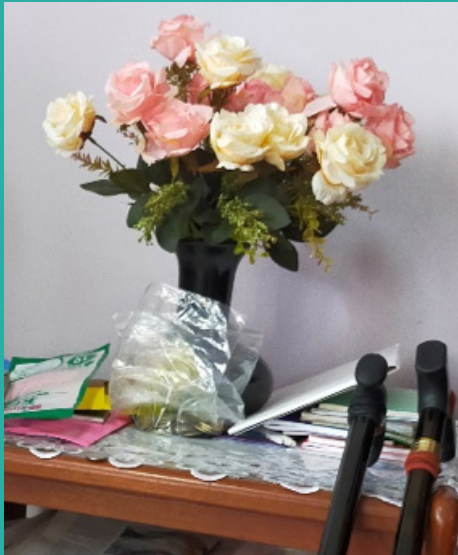
... the quality or state of being strong

“A Blessing to
Have Caring
Neighbours”

Life has always been quiet for Mdm Ani and her elder sister. The pair have been staying together in their 4-room flat since their mother's passing in 2007.



Although Mdm Ani and her sister were singles, they are not alone. They forged close bonds with their nieces and nephews, treating them as their own children. The pair also rely on each other for care and companionship. Being the younger of the two, Mdm Ani took on the caregiver role for her elder sister despite facing challenging health issues herself.



The sisters were also burdened with worries about their declining health. Due to her age, Mdm Ani's sister started experiencing difficulties walking and had fallen multiple times. Mdm Ani, with her own medical issues to deal with, had to provide even more care for her sister. It was a worrying time, as they grappled with increasing stress in managing their health coupled with reduced social support.

Like many others, the pair felt the impact of COVID-19 on their lives greatly. One notable difference was how they maintained their relationships with loved ones. Before, Mdm Ani's niece would frequently visit them on weekends, and at times, brought her children along for sleepovers during school holidays. With the onset of COVID-19, however, family members could only keep in touch through phone calls, and they were not able to visit the sisters in person.

Mdm Ani and her sister accepted the situation and understood that taking precautions during the pandemic must be a priority.

The festive season in mid-2022 ignited some hope for Mdm Ani and her sister as the situation seemed to be improving during that period, and they were looking forward to having relatives over during Hari Raya Puasa. Things took an unfortunate turn when they were both infected with COVID-19. Visits had to cease and phone calls remained the only way to connect with their family.

"Saya rasa terpinggir (I felt isolated)," remarked Mdm Ani.

Luckily for them, **they had kind neighbours who looked out for them.** The pair was able to rely on close neighbours for support, providing them with meals and constantly checking in on them.

Mdm Ani was able to take her mind off having to meet their daily needs with this neighbourly support, focusing instead on resting and focusing on her recovery, and they are grateful for having such kind neighbours to journey with them through the hard times.

Mindset at the Heart of the Matter

Mr Lim was never one to idle his time away. Even after his retirement as a taxi driver, he always sought ways to remain active and to give back to the community. In 2019, he joined *Happy Kopitiam*, a GoodLife! programme by Montfort Care that encourages seniors to stay active through the introduction of various life skills and community resources to support ageing in place. Not surprisingly, Mr Lim was a very active participant, bringing to the table his fluency in many dialects, as well as his wealth of life experiences.

Yet, he had a yearning to do more. With the encouragement of staff at GoodLife!, Mr Lim signed up to be a volunteer to reach out and befriend other seniors who lacked social support or are isolated.

However, Mr Lim's plans were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. He too was concerned about contracting COVID-19, especially as a senior with chronic illnesses. But what worried him the most was getting infected and spreading the virus to his family and friends. This concern and sense of responsibility drove him to make changes to his lifestyle and routine, such as controlling his diet and exercising to boost his immunity and reducing visits to crowded areas, such as making fewer trips for groceries. Fortunately, he was able to rely on his children to get his necessities.



Despite Mr Lim's best efforts to adapt to the challenges that the pandemic brought about, it was during this time that he received the unfortunate news that he had first-stage prostate cancer. It felt like a double blow to him. At a time when there were over 10,000 cases, he had to go for 20 days' worth of radiotherapy sessions, which meant more travelling and a higher risk of getting infected. It was an emotionally trying time, and he had to carefully plan his commutes to and from the hospital, such as taking the first cabin of the train where he felt was better air circulation. Thankfully, Mr Lim was able to complete his treatment for cancer without getting infected with COVID-19.

Even with these life challenges to deal with, Mr Lim's commitment to learning and living life never dimmed. He continued to stay active by picking up new skills, signing up for SkillsFuture courses and approaching his friends to learn how to use communication apps.

This newfound skill allowed him to keep abreast with news about the pandemic as he was able to receive the latest information on his phone instead of reading the newspapers or watching television. Eventually, the student became the teacher and Mr Lim is now guiding other GoodLife! seniors who have difficulty using these apps.

Technology also allowed Mr Lim to stay connected with his relatives when safe distancing regulations prohibited them from

physically meeting. He was able to utilise WhatsApp, WeChat and Zoom to message, call and even conduct video calls with them. When the regulations were relaxed, Mr Lim and his family continued to communicate through these apps to plan and schedule their meetings to ensure they did not exceed the gathering limit.

Reflecting on his experience during this pandemic, Mr Lim shares that *he believes a person's mindset is really the heart of the matter*. He recounts this saying in Mandarin, “活到老学到老”, which means one has to learn to adapt and change with the times to survive and thrive.

He adds that this is what he shares with his friends who are feeling down and struggling with adjusting to the pandemic – his way of still giving back to the community.



The Art of Being Patient

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about numerous changes in the workplace, at home and in the way I worked. When the restrictions were first put in place, I could not meet my clients in person. I would resort to contacting them via phone calls. However, many clients were not used to this form of communication as sharing over the phone was briefer than our in-person conversations.



I began feeling that my work lacked the warmth of human touch, as I was used to with face-to-face interaction in the past. With face-to-face contact and through their facial expressions, I could clearly understand how they were feeling and clients would also be more open to having long conversations. Nonetheless, considering that phone calls were the best available option to interact with clients at the time, I had to acclimatize to the new way of communicating.

Initially, I attempted to make simple check-in phone calls to understand clients' general

well-being. Over time, I learnt how to focus on my objectives in phone call sessions. My clients also became more accustomed to this arrangement and were able to speak to me for longer durations. With this, we were able to engage in deeper discussions about their experiences.

Fortunately, the situation improved when we taught clients how to use digital communication platforms. When the restrictions were temporarily lifted, I had the opportunity to teach a few clients how to use YouTube, Zoom and Facebook. Some of

these virtual platforms allow for face-to-face interactions, which proved to be useful when restrictions were tightened again. For instance, clients were able to show me their medication over a Zoom call. This is especially important for elderly clients as they often cannot verbalise or understand the English words on the bottle.

Besides having to adjust to the new working conditions, as a family man, I had to learn to navigate working from home. Initially, I thought that it would be easy to multitask and manage my workload and household duties. However, I soon realized that I needed some time to adjust to the new changes that were set in place. One of my main challenges was helping my children understand and respect my work hours.

Since they were unfamiliar with my new routine of working from home, the children were unsure of how to behave. They would shout and scream in the background during my meetings, demanding my attention and disturbing me as I went about my daily work. Initially, I lost my temper frequently and would scold them for their misbehaviour. However, I came to learn that this was not a good solution. When I shouted at my children, I realised they were not able to understand what they had done to set me off and registered it as yet another scolding. When I sat them down and explained to them that they needed to be quiet when I am having work meetings, they stopped being disruptive. This experience taught me to be more patient when communicating with my children.

Despite the drawbacks, there were also advantages to working from home. I enjoyed spending more quality time with my family. Since we were together at home from morning till night, my family grew closer. Before the pandemic, time spent with my wife and kids was little, as we only could spend two hours daily with our children after work, and I only had that extra time with my wife while we commute to work every morning.

While working from home, I definitely had more interaction with my children! They could show us things they did and share their thoughts and feelings. Overall, I had a love-hate relationship with working from home. I recognized that it enabled me to spend more quality family time, though I also had to juggle my workload with family responsibilities.

Through navigating the pandemic, ***I came to learn the art of being patient.*** This can be applied in work context as well, being an eldercare worker, patience is necessary. Every elderly is different, as workers we need to handle and adapt to different people. I also learnt to persevere in the work we do. Personally, having belief in the work we do aids me in preventing burnout. I view every day as a learning experience. When I face challenges, I ask around for advice and support.

Besides turning to colleagues when I need support, I also managed my stress levels by prioritising my me-time! I would enjoy my own me time by playing games and eating ice cream.

One piece of advice I have for people going through similar struggles is, no matter what roles they must play, they should not forget about themselves. If we do not take care of ourselves and have self-love, we cannot give our best to others.



“Stay Focused and Do Not Let Negative Thoughts Get to You”

It was a difficult experience for Tim (pseudonym) to tide through the pandemic. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, he felt restrained, and the fact that everyone needed to wear a mask whenever they went outside made it worse.



Furthermore, Tim felt the negative impacts of the lockdown, as he was emotionally and mentally affected. As he lives alone, Tim felt isolated 24/7 as the restrictions that were set in place then ceased any form of social interactions.

During the lockdown, Tim spent most of his time watching Netflix to pass time. Due to a much more sedentary lifestyle compared to pre-COVID-19, Tim found himself sleeping only at 2-3 am and waking up at 1-2 pm the next day. The change in his sleeping patterns affected his meal timings, resulting in Tim skipping his breakfast and sometimes, would only consume one meal per day.

Since 2014, Tim has stopped contacting his family, including his parents and siblings. The only person he still maintains contact with is his son that resides in Jarkarta, communicating mainly through Whatsapp messages or video calls. Despite the social isolation, Tim felt at peace as he was not bogged down with responsibilities and did not have many concerns. He solely focused on keeping himself safe by remaining home most of the time.

Tim was healthy physically, but his mental health took a toll on him during the COVID-19



period. The social isolation resulted in Tim talking to himself, and ruminating about the past events that has happened, causing frequent mood swings and an overall feeling of depression. Having no kin or friend to turn to, Tim found other ways to cope, by walking around the house for 1-2 hours until his legs felt tired, and would eventually lie down to rest.

Tim tried to think positively and this brought some comfort to him, sometimes. However, when he was overwhelmed by sadness, he tried to stay focused and not let his negative thoughts get to him and took extra efforts to ensure that he eats his medication as prescribed. This was how he kept his head above the water through this difficult time.

“Have Patience and Stay Positive”



Prior to Circuit Breaker, Mdm Soh’s elderly parents who have dementia had the liberty to go about their daily activities. They would purchase their own lunch and go out on walks, meet friends and sign up for courses.

However, during the pandemic, Mdm Soh had newfound responsibilities. While abiding by the government’s advice to stay at home, she had to juggle between the tasks of cooking meals for them and preventing them from leaving the house and getting infected.

Having to work from home, Mdm Soh experienced instances where her parents would interrupt her while she was doing work. Over time, she learnt to engage them with other things to do. This would prevent them from

sleeping or just spending their day watching Youtube. However, she also acknowledged that being able to work from home meant that she had fewer worries that her parents might experience falls without her knowledge.

The biggest challenge Mdm Soh faced was her anxieties surrounding her parents getting infected with COVID-19. She had to protect them by not letting them go out of the house. This led her to postpone medical appointments that were less urgent. However, she faced a dilemma in trying to reschedule her mother’s cataract operation. Ultimately, she chose to prioritise their well-being and safety, keeping them indoors. Thankfully, she managed to arrange for video consultations for certain appointments, and home medication delivery.

Mdm Soh took steps to prevent further infection. She instructed her parents to wash their hands and shower upon reaching home. There were moments when they did not listen, and this resulted in some tension between Mdm Soh and her parents. There was a difference in the expectations of cleanliness, as her parents could not envision what viruses look like. They would tell Mdm Soh that their hands looked very clean, which explains why they did not feel a need to wash them. Furthermore, Mdm Soh's parents would frequently forget to wear their masks when they went out. They would also touch the outer part of their masks, which often resulted in Mdm Soh's frustration.

Another challenge that Mdm Soh faced was having to manage her parents' forgetfulness. They tend to lose things or place food in the wrong compartments in the fridge, resulting in food being spoilt and thrown away.

Besides worrying about her parents contracting COVID-19, Mdm Soh was also concerned regarding COVID-19's impact on her parents' well-being. She noticed that her mother in particular had difficulty adapting to the changes that came with COVID-19. Firstly, she was not getting adequate physical exercise. Secondly, the pandemic interrupted their weekly plans to go shopping on weekends. Instead of eating out, they would pack food back home. Also, there was a reduction in enriching activities available for seniors as well. In the past, Mdm Soh would sign her mother up for classes at the Community Centre, but due to the pandemic, there were no more physical classes with this lack of activities, Mdm Soh felt that her mother's memory worsened due to the lack of brain stimulation.

Fortunately, Mdm Soh knew about two other avenues available for her mother. One of them is the memory club and one other is Goodlife! These organisations were holding online

activities via Zoom. There were arts and crafts activities and exercises. Mdm Soh noticed that because on Zoom, her parents can see other elderly doing exercise too, which acts as a motivation for them to exercise as well. Moreover, Mdm Soh would go for caregiver talks, such as those on dementia or nutrition. These talks were helpful as Mdm Soh felt that these provided her with practical tips on how to provide better quality care.

Mdm Soh felt that another aspect of her life affected by the pandemic was having less time for self-care. In the past, she would be working in the office and focusing on work during the day. Back then, her mother was more independent, being able to buy her own lunch and do some household chores. However, during the pandemic, Mdm Soh realised her mother had become much more reliant on her. Mdm Soh had to cook and clean. On some occasions, she would order food when she had no time. Having to juggle work and caring for her mother, Mdm Soh found it difficult to find time for herself.

Mdm Soh feels that some helpful tips for someone else who might be facing a similar situation would be to de-stress and stay healthy and happy. Also, she emphasised the importance of accommodating the differences between ourselves and our loved ones. It is indeed a **virtue to have patience and stay positive** as this will limit arguments between our loved ones.



“People Supporting People”

I am a counsellor at Montfort Care’s Strengthening Families Programme@Family Service Centre (FAM@FSC), an initiative by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) that offers marriage and divorce support programmes and family counselling services. I have been working in the social service sector for over two decades, and am a mother to two lovely daughters.

Before the pandemic, it never occurred to me that an infectious disease could hold such tremendous power over our personal and professional lives.

From the onset of the pandemic, the conventional format of face-to-face meetings with clients had to be temporarily suspended. Although my clients were generally receptive to moving our meetings online, some of them required more time and support in learning to navigate these new platforms. It was a difficult time for me and my clients as we worked through these changes, especially when some of them defaulted on their scheduled meetings due to the challenges of using the online platforms.

Even while engaging clients who had no issues switching their sessions online, other obstacles surfaced. Besides the typical technical difficulties during virtual calls, it was not easy for me to pick up on non-verbal and emotional responses and reactions. Through



the screen, the clients’ interactional patterns were often lost or missed. And so, I discovered that telecommunicating creates a barrier to picking up these cues, which is a crucial component of my therapeutic work.

There were also a few exceptional cases where I could meet clients in person. However, the risk of potentially being infected or possibly being a virus carrier worried me. It weighed on me heavily – the concern of either party transmitting the virus to the other, or spreading it to their respective loved ones.

Besides these unprecedented challenges at work, I also had to deal with the adjustments and changes that I was facing in my personal life. As I worked from home, I had to be considerate of my other family members who

were also studying or working from home. I did my best to manage the situation by staying in my corner and reducing the noise levels, so as to not affect others at home. I also had to set aside more time to help my young children with their online home-based learning.

It was a stressful time, and I struggled emotionally as a result. I felt frustrated, worried, and helpless. These emotions were further exacerbated by the ambiguity of the future.

It was during the peak of the pandemic that I decided to channel my internal struggles into moments of strength. I sounded out and actively offered support for my colleagues who were also in a similar plight. As they reciprocated that support, I realised that such connections during difficult times were immensely helpful for my emotional well-being.

As I recounted my experiences, I reflected on my learning from the past two years of living through the pandemic. I have a newfound appreciation for both people and things alike. I realise that life is simply too short to be squandered away.

“We need to cherish every aspect of life that is important to us, whether they be relationships, our careers, or anything else that is of significance to us.” I learnt to prioritise my life goals, and not be afraid to pursue what I have always wanted to achieve.

I will forever hold close to my heart the togetherness – with loved ones, colleagues and clients – that I encountered, found and fostered during the pandemic. I hope that the practice of “*people supporting people*” can continue beyond the pandemic because it had truly helped me through the most ambiguous and challenging of times.



Reminding Myself of My Own Strengths

Life has never been easy for single moms. The pandemic made it harder. Mary (pseudonym) a single mother felt the impact of COVID-19 the most when she gave birth to her son in the middle of the pandemic. Mary was struck with fear and stress as the pandemic raged on; she did not know how to protect her father and child who were vulnerable in the situation.



She recalled how she was always fearful when her father leaves home and hoped that he came back uninfected and well. She was also scared that her newly born child might get COVID-19 and chose to not bring him out often.

Her fear materialized faster than expected; she found out soon that her son was COVID-19 positive after he started attending school. The ordeal that followed was a painful and stressful one; Mary remembered how her son was in pain because of his fever. It was quite a scary experience to see her child going through it. Fast forward one year later and Mary still feels scared at times and tries to not bring her son out to playgrounds and public places. Her son, on the other end, is more active now, with the lessening of the restrictions. He has been interacting with others, playing more activities and going to school regularly.

All things went well until, Mary contracted COVID-19. She had to be away from her son to ensure he does not get infected with COVID-19 again. That meant she had to rely on her father to take care of him and that she could not be there for him as his mother. She felt frustrated by her situation as she couldn't even cook or do anything because physical exhaustion was overwhelming.

Employment was also an issue for Mary during the pandemic. She struggled to find a job as she was still on her probation period and the COVID-19 situation made it harder for her to land a proper job.



Thankfully, she managed to find a job at an advertising company through her friend, a fellow young mother. She recounted how they were welcoming of people from different backgrounds.

At first, it was hard to juggle her roles as a mother and employee; it was tiring and exhausting for the first six months. Mary had mental breakdowns as well as she felt alone as a first-time mother. She felt that she didn't know a lot of things and had to handle them on her own.

Mary shared that she coped with the pandemic by reminding herself that it is something that she cannot control and that she should not worry so much about it. She **reminds herself of her own strengths** and that she can thrive in midst of the chaos.



Hope

... desire accompanied by expectation
of or belief in fulfilment

The Power of Prayer Through the Difficult Times

Mdm Jeyaletchimi, a senior aged 69 years living in a household of seven in a 1-room rental flat with her sister and family.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, they were all stuck together in the flat as no one could go out for work or school. So, it was no surprise when she tested positive for COVID-19 in December 2020. The children tested positive first and soon after they recovered, Mdm Jeyaletchimi fell ill. She developed a fever, often felt nauseous and was vomiting as a result. On some nights, she was not able to sleep. Her symptoms did not get better but she still refused to see a doctor. Her sister persuaded and she finally visited the doctor who sent her to the hospital for further treatment.

However, things did not get better immediately as her whole body started to ache and she experienced headaches frequently. She did not have the appetite to eat during meal times and relied on Milo and biscuits. Fear overcame her as she realised her knuckles turned dark all of a sudden. Soon after, she also noticed the smile lines on her cheek turning darker as well. Mdm Jeyaletchimi called her sister and found comfort in speaking with her while she cried over the phone. Her sister and son offered prayers for her.

The days she spent in the hospital was quite lonely. No one from her family was allowed to visit her. For the first two to three days, she was confined to a ward with three other seniors. They greeted each other in the mornings but besides that, they did not converse much.

The nurses were not always in the ward and when they came in, they were wearing their Personal Protective Equipment. It was difficult to talk to them with their suits on. They would also leave the patients' food outside and thus, when it was time to eat after waking up, her food and coffee would be cold. But deep



down she believed that they were also human, and was also afraid of the virus, just like them. She would pat and reassure herself everything will be okay eventually. She remembers telling herself, "What to do, the times are bad not only for me but for others as well."

While her stay in the hospital was difficult, going home was not easy either. Before the pandemic, she enjoyed going out, meeting people and interacting with them. She used to go to the neighbourhood supermarket with her friend to do grocery shopping, greeting other neighbours after bumping into them while making their way to the supermarket. But after COVID-19, she stayed at home almost every day. Her sister would cook so she did not even go out to buy food. Mdm Jeyaletchimi feels that everyone else was also afraid of contracting COVID-19 as everyone kept their front doors closed and did not talk to each other like before.

This resulted in her missing the ability to be able to talk and catch up with her neighbours and friends, making her feel sad. Other times, she would feel really angry at the situation. Mdm Jeyaletchimi would try to distract herself and pass the time by watching television and listening to the radio.

Yet, it was also during this period that she began to pray more. She would pray twice a day, in the morning and evening. She would pray for good health for herself and her family. **When she prayed, she felt that there is someone watching over her and she did not feel so alone.** She knew that God was beside her and helping her. It made her less worried, and she was able to feel better about her situation.

“Accept and Let Go of What I Have No Control Over”

When Mr Muthu and his wife both contracted COVID-19, they had to take care of themselves as their children were away from them. When Mr Muthu had COVID-19, he was worried that he would pass on and not be able to see his daughter. Thankfully, Mr Muthu has since recovered and has regained his energy levels since then.



It was a challenging period for Mr Muthu and his wife, fighting the COVID-19 virus. Even though Mr Muthu and his wife were thankful for the food ration support they have gotten from the Silver Generation Office, it was temporary and it wasn't enough to see them through this difficult time. As there wasn't enough food, Mr Muthu had to buy plain thosai and requested for his wife to make ikan bilis sambal for a simple meal. Mr Muthu also needed to trouble his sister to cook and deliver some meals for him and his wife as well. (for a few days to assist him)

Despite her poor memory, Mr Muthu's wife cooks delicious meals with love for Mr Muthu, remembering her husband's food choices - something that Mr Muthu is greatly appreciative of. Other times, Mr Muthu would prepare his meals by frying an egg and eating his rice with yoghurt, in a small portion that is enough for him.

Due to the restrictions during COVID-19, Mr Muthu's social life was affected as he wasn't able to meet his friends and family regularly. Mr Muthu used to visit his brother's house regularly but refrained from going there as his brother contracted COVID-19, and only could speak to his brother over the phone instead of meeting face to face. Occasionally, Mr Muthu's niece would bring them home-cooked food like porridge or kuih-kuih whenever she goes to visit him and his wife.

Furthermore, Mr Muthu felt sad that he could not visit Goodlife! Yishun during this period, especially when he had COVID-19. He missed the activities he could participate in with his friends, such as drumming and dancing.



Mr Muthu felt plagued with worries during COVID-19. One of the things that he was most concerned about was his finances. For example, his wife wanted to go for activities at the centre but he had to gently remind her multiple times that they can't afford to do so. To cope with his worries, Mr Muthu **would tell himself to accept and let go of what he does not have control over**. He also turned to prayer and would visit the Chinese temple every morning to pray. He also prays twice a day, in the morning and evening at his shrine at home. Turning to prayer, Mr Muthu noticed that he would feel happier after praying. Mr Muthu would pray for his family members that he loves, the health of his wife and his daughter and son-in-law that is currently residing in America due to his job. Mr Muthu also prayed for a cute grandchild that would be a lovely addition to their family too!

Even though tiding through COVID-19 was not easy, Mr Muthu won the virus by doing activities to occupy his time well - by praying, visiting his friends and joining programmes! These were the things that kept him and his wife going through difficult times.

You Are Never Alone

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I recalled that our seniors under our GoodLife's befriending programme were quite fearful of contracting the virus so they stayed at home as much as they could. But this new norm of living due to the safe distancing regulations had other impacts on them too.



For example, markets were fenced off to ensure only one main entrance but this meant walking further to go about their marketing. Public seats and stools where they could sit and rest, or just simply chit-chat with their friends, were cordoned off. These often deterred them from going out. Before vaccinations, many seniors lost their aged loved ones due to increased vulnerability to serious illness from COVID-19. Children too

were rightfully afraid for their parents such that some decided against any visitations by both parties. It was understandable as they wanted them to be safe but for some of our seniors, the lack of face-to-face interactions did create feelings of loneliness, more keenly felt by some.

To address this, we tried to ensure that our seniors, especially those who were staying alone, were continually engaged and stayed connected. And so, we increased the frequency of our contact with them to daily calls. I recalled initially that they were not very comfortable over the phone and our interactions were slightly awkward, but I found over time that talking about their hobbies and interests helped to break the ice. Eventually, they began looking forward to our daily interactions and that led to deeper conversations about how they were coping with the pandemic. I supposed at the heart it was really a way **to let them know they were not alone during this difficult period.**

For myself, having to work from home had its boons and banes. At the start, I was definitely not prepared as I did not have a proper workstation. My table and chair were just too low for my posture and I developed a knee problem as a result. There were also not enough fans in the house for my siblings and I. Fortunately, having my own room spared me from "fighting" with them for a space to work. However, working alone also meant not having someone to chit-chat with from time to time as we tried to minimise our contact at home. I did feel quite lonely at times and I realised it led me to snack more often to cope. Nevertheless, with some extra spending, I invested in a good workstation which helped my overall situation.

One good thing that came out of working from home was saving on travelling costs and time. The latter allowed me to be more productive as I could accomplish more work with the extra time if I really needed it. Moreover, I found that I had more time for myself. For instance, I learnt how to prepare



meals for myself and that helped me to eat healthier and control my diet. Before the pandemic, I would also go for a walk around my neighbourhood once a week but during the Circuit Breaker period, I began doing so daily. After 6 pm, like clockwork, I would change into my workout attire and together with my friend who lives nearby, we would aim to walk 10,000 steps within an hour and a half.

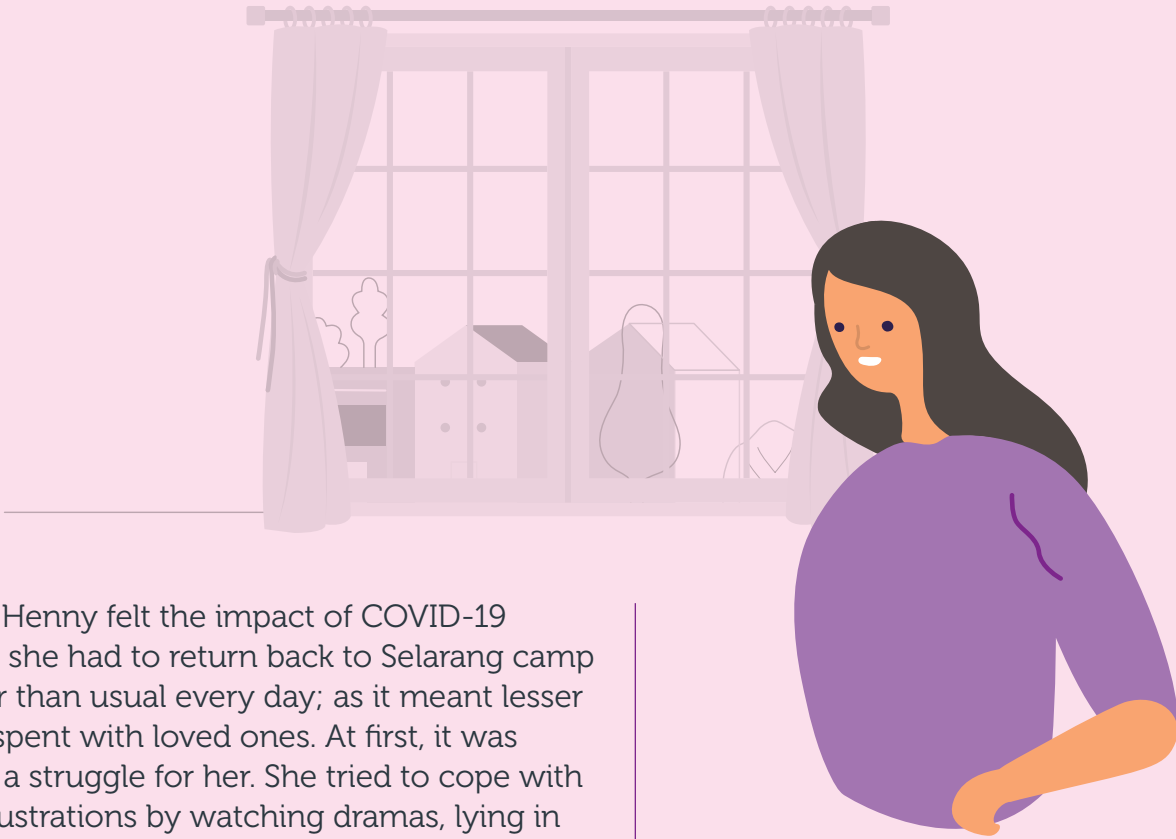
Reflecting on the pandemic, everyone including my colleagues, clients and myself was badly affected as we needed to adjust and adapt to the new normal. No one knows when it will end, so I constantly remind myself and my seniors to stay healthy and happy to boost our immune systems to fight off the COVID-19 virus. Moving forward, I will strive to stay connected with people especially being together physically. Just like my seniors, I too felt lonely when I was unable to see my loved ones in person. I deeply miss being with my relatives particularly during the Hari Raya festive season when we would do many things together such as shopping for clothes and preparing and having meals. I look forward to being able to charter a bus for the whole family to travel and visit each other's homes with the COVID-19 situation getting better.

I think the past two years have really taught me to treasure my family and friends and appreciate the bond we share. Though the pandemic will be around for a while, looking forward to the moments I can spend with my loved ones makes me feel hopeful.

Sometimes, You Just Need to “Take Things as They Come”

After the Circuit breaker in 2020, Mdm Henny's (pseudonym) intuition was telling her that the COVID-19 outbreak is not something she can hope to put behind her quickly and that it would still be around for long. She recalled the days spent inside prison and how the prison officers shared about the pandemic and its devastating impact outside the prison walls.





Mdm Henny felt the impact of COVID-19 when she had to return back to Selarang camp earlier than usual every day; as it meant lesser time spent with loved ones. At first, it was really a struggle for her. She tried to cope with her frustrations by watching dramas, lying in bed, and taking her medications.

She tried paying more attention to improve her quality of sleep by not thinking too much and sleeping early.

But it was not always easy. Mdm Henny shared that she felt frustrated and annoyed with her feelings during the pandemic. She recalled facing her anger and sadness, and would struggle with them at times. However, she tried her best to cope with them by not thinking too much. Mdm Henny felt that there was nothing memorable from the pandemic, except the lessons that she learnt and it is - **When such events happen, it is important take things as them come and go with the flow** and she believes that this lesson will be with her for a long time.

“A Prayer for Everyone to be Well”

An emphatic thumbs up – that was how Mary responded when asked how she felt about the recent lifting of safe distancing regulations. She could not wait to go out and have coffee with her friends. In retrospect, she felt the past two years passed by really quickly even though it did not seem so at the start of the pandemic.



It was difficult for Mary when she first learnt about the new safe distancing regulations.

As Mary lived alone, food became a concern during the circuit breaker period. Initially, she bought back from the nearby coffeeshop but soon realised it was not feasible in the long run. Heading down to get food became a chore, as she could not sit down and rest along the way as the chairs were all taped up. Thankfully, she managed to rely on the kindness of her neighbours and children to buy food and groceries for her.

The safe distancing regulations also affected her relationship with her friends whom she holds dear. When it was announced that dining out wasn't allowed, it meant she could no longer drink coffee and chit chat with them at the coffeeshop. When visits to homes of non-familial persons were restricted, it meant she was not able to gather with them at someone's house like she used to once a month. Even when outside, she did not interact with anyone much beyond waving and nodding to acknowledge their presence. Gradually, she began to feel lonelier, and it took a toll on her. She recalled how she would always cry to herself at home. Despite this, she managed to find some support from her friends through occasional phone calls which kept her going throughout – until dining out was allowed again.



During this time, Mary found some solace through praying. She would pray alone at home as the temple she frequents was closed. As news about the greater number of infections and hospitalisations, her thoughts were with her family and friends. ***She prayed for everyone to be safe, and especially for the health and safety of the elderly and for younger people to be able to carry on with work.*** She prayed that everyone would be well, believing that she must spread good thoughts and energy to others. Besides helping her to feel better, praying also allowed her to feel connected with others in a time of social isolation.

Now that two years has passed, Mary described herself as being more cheerful as she can now chit chat with her friends at the coffeeshop.

Nowadays, she hopes and prays that the pandemic will be over quickly and everyone's lives can return to normal.

“Take Care of Yourself, and Find Ways to Help Stay Calm”

When the pandemic broke out in late 2019, Lin (pseudonym) was attending a boarding school in Vietnam and her family had just left Vietnam to return to Singapore.

Due to the COVID-19 cases rising quickly then, Lin's family were worried about her and advised her not to go out too often. Lin tried to focus on her studies and examinations, but she was worried about her family back in Singapore, and her grandmother who was staying alone at home while she was in boarding school. The fear of contracting COVID-19 was also present, as there were many COVID-19-related deaths reported at that time.





It was also a challenging time to transition from classroom to online study. The long online lessons strained Lin's eyes, making it difficult for her to focus on her lessons. Nevertheless, Lin tried her best to cope with what she could do. When she found it difficult to take notes throughout her lessons, she would focus on what her teacher was teaching instead. After the lesson, she would regroup with her classmates to see what she has missed out during her note-taking and add them to her notes.

As Lin was away from her family, she missed her family in Singapore. When she heard that both her mother and sister contracted COVID-19, she was worried for them as she couldn't be there to take care of them. The worry didn't end as Lin's mother had difficulty breathing and lost her sense of taste for a while when she contracted COVID-19 again for the second time. Lin would also call her sister regularly as a way to maintain the bond she has with her family, and also a way to cheer her sister up as it was difficult to be away from each other.

The last thing Lin wanted to do was to let her mother worry about her. To not let that happen, Lin ensured that she took great care

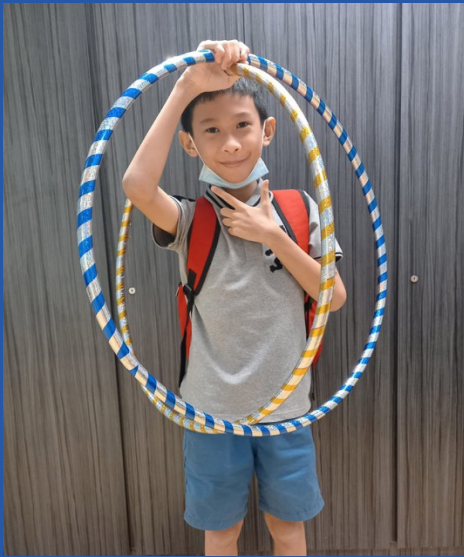
of herself, physically and mentally. She would only head out when it was necessary and spent most of her time indoors playing online games and chatting with her friends. Besides that, she enjoys listening to music and took the chance to catch up on sleep.

Lin feels extremely happy to be back together with her family when she returned to Singapore this year. She feels hopeful now that things are slowly getting back to normal.

The experience of being away from her family through the pandemic has allowed Lin to further understand the importance of spending time and being vulnerable to her loved ones.

Lin also added that it is **important to take care of yourself and find ways that help you stay calm** – this is something that she believes in greatly, which helped her through the times she was away from her family during the pandemic.

“Finding Glimmers of Happiness and Hope”



COVID-19's impact was felt nationwide by different communities in Singapore, including school-going children. Having no experiences of being in a pandemic, many of the students were caught off-guard by the sudden changes in the way schools operated during the pandemic and the need to adapt to different teaching and learning methods immediately.



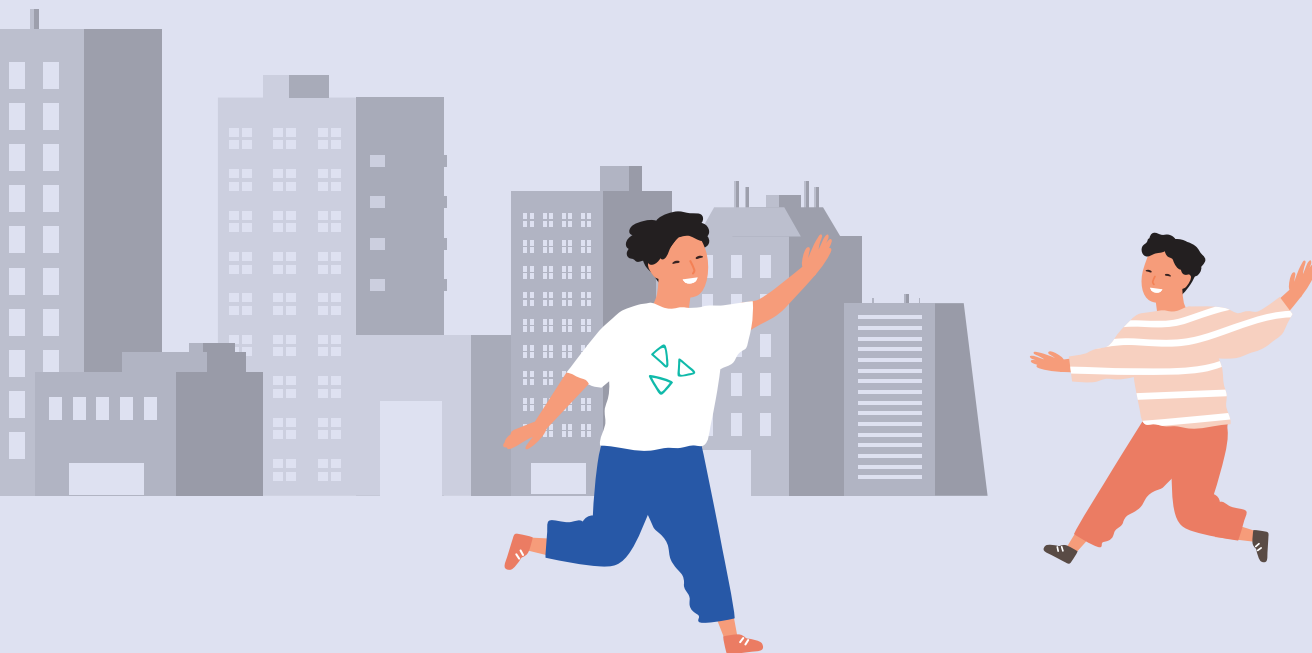
Arthas is one of the many students affected by COVID-19. Arthas is a 12-year-old boy who was studying for his PSLE, when COVID-19 struck. However, he took in his stride and tried to find ***glimmers of happiness and hope***. He shared that one surprising benefit of the home-based learning was that he could stay at home and not go to school, getting lesser scolding from his teachers. The time spent with family increased, and he recalls taking trips to Botanic Gardens and Gardens by the Bay with his family. The extra time he had also allowed him to play online games with his friends as well.

Arthas shared about his time having lessons on Zoom. In a class of 26 students, he tried his best to concentrate studying via Zoom. His only concern was that he felt that his teacher has limited time to watch and support them. He was annoyed with the safe distancing regulations that came with COVID-19 as it meant he could not sit with near his friends and had to wear a mask all the time.

Arthas also recalled that contracting COVID-19 was a difficult experience for him as he had to stay at home and ate porridge most of the time. He missed eating out and going to school for lessons, resulting in an overwhelming amount of homework to catch up on upon returning to school.

Sleeping and playing video games were the two ways that Arthas coped with the pandemic. He shared that he played games such as Among Us and BlockmanGO. He also played catching with his block mates and played nerf guns on each other.

Arthas enjoys drawing, mostly buildings and city landscapes, finding it relaxing and engaging by using his imagination to create these drawings, another way for him to cope with the difficulties that came with the pandemic.



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