

Some depressed young S'poreans missed average of 24 days of school: Study

Surveyed parents spent an average of \$10k on care for child's mental health condition

Shermaine Ang

Some Singaporean children and young adults have missed an average of 24 days of school in the past year due to symptoms of depression and anxiety, a recent study showed.

Nearly two in three made unplanned visits to an emergency department, and more than half were hospitalised over the past year.

Parents who were surveyed spent an average of \$10,250 on medical care for each child's mental health condition, translating to around \$1.2 billion on the population level.

These were among the findings from a survey of parents with children aged four to 21 in Singapore

by Duke-NUS Medical School and the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), to gauge the state of youth mental health.

A similar survey on Singaporean adults was published in April, and showed that one in five here have symptoms of depression and anxiety, and are costing Singapore around 2.9 per cent, or nearly \$16 billion, of its gross domestic product.

Professor Eric Finkelstein, a health economist from Duke-NUS' Health Services and Systems Research and senior author of the latest study, said: "The real effects of untreated mental health conditions among youth will extend well into adulthood, when they are less able to obtain rewarding and high-paying jobs due to poor school performance, and other

challenges resulting from their illness."

Conducted between April and June 2022, the survey asked 991 parents about their 1,515 children.

It identified 104 parents whose children, aged 10.6 on average, showed symptoms of depression or anxiety.

These parents then filled out a more comprehensive survey with questions on school absences and performance, and healthcare utilisation.

Nearly 12 per cent of the young people showed symptoms consistent with depression, while about 13 per cent had anxiety symptoms.

In total, 16.2 per cent of the young people had symptoms consistent with at least one of these conditions. But only 15 per cent had a formal diagnosis from a health professional.

A total of 39 per cent of the young people missed a total of one month of school or more, and 13

URGENT MATTER

With the high prevalence and costs of mental illness among both children and adults, a successful mental health strategy should take on the same level of urgency as Singapore's war on diabetes.



PROFESSOR ERIC FINKELSTEIN, health economist and senior author of the study.

per cent missed three months or more.

Over the past year, 63 per cent of the children with symptoms of depression or anxiety visited the

emergency department and 54 per cent were admitted to hospital.

They visited the emergency department an average of once a year, and stayed in hospital for an average of 2.9 days.

In total, 77 per cent of respondents said their child received healthcare treatment for their mental health condition over the past three months.

Sixty-two per cent reported medication use, with 37 per cent using a daily anti-depressant or anti-anxiety medication.

IMH chief executive Daniel Fung, another co-author of the study, said: "These findings point to the importance of early intervention to help reduce the risk of long-term complications and improve outcomes... For instance, if the parent recognises the symptoms and knows what to do, they could encourage the child to talk about it or suggest getting some help."

Prof Finkelstein said there should be screening programmes for both children and adults to identify mental health conditions early, as well as better use of peer support programmes and increased efforts to destigmatise mental health.

"With the high prevalence and costs of mental illness among both children and adults, a successful mental health strategy should take on the same level of urgency as Singapore's war on diabetes."

shermaineang@sph.com.sg

Helplines

MENTAL WELL-BEING

- Institute of Mental Health's Mental Health Helpline: 6389-2222 (24 hours)
- Samaritans of Singapore: 1800-221-4444 (24 hours) /1-767 (24 hours)
- Singapore Association for Mental Health: 1800-283-7019
- Silver Ribbon Singapore: 6386-1928
- Tinkle Friend: 1800-274-4788
- Community Health Assessment Team: 6493-6500/1

COUNSELLING

- TOUCHline (Counselling): 1800-377-2252
- TOUCH Care Line (for seniors, caregivers) : 6804-6555
- Care Corner Counselling Centre: 6353-1180

ONLINE RESOURCES

- mindline.sg
- stayprepared.sg/mymentalhealth
- eC2.sg
- tinklefriend.sg
- chat.mentalhealth.sg
- carey.carecorner.org.sg (for those aged 13 to 25)
- limitless.sg/talk (for those aged 12 to 25)