

SPEECH FOR WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY
BY SINGAPORE RED CROSS CHAIRMAN TAN KAI HOE,
AT RED CROSS HOUSE ON 10 OCTOBER 2021

Good morning.

Thank you for joining us at our World Mental Health event.

Any traumatic event can have a devastating effect on the emotional health of the people involved. Such traumatic events may include the grief from losing a loved one, livelihood stresses like retrenchments or other academic or career setbacks, or health stresses from illnesses, or family/relationship stresses like a divorce, amongst others. There is a growing awareness, and concern, about mental wellness in our society today.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only served to compound the situation. With increasing business closures and downsizing, unemployment rates have moved up. Family breadwinners, single parents and the working poor who lose their jobs and whose livelihoods are threatened as a result of the pandemic, struggle to put food on the table for their families. Even fresh graduates are concerned about their bleak employment prospects. Health care workers contend daily with the fear of contracting COVID-19 and bringing the illness back to their families. People with medical conditions and disabilities worry about the additional burden on their families should they contract the disease. Safe distancing measures have also meant that many seniors living alone have to grapple with greater social isolation than before.

These stresses have resulted in a greater incidence of mental conditions such as anxiety and panic attacks, nervous breakdowns, stress-induced insomnia, depression, alcohol addiction, and eating disorders. Earlier this year, it was reported that there was an 18 percent spike in people calling the suicide prevention agency Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) because of mental health issues arising from the pandemic.

These stresses will continue to rise. Going forward, as a nation, we need to brace ourselves to meet the heightened demand for mental health and psycho-social support among individuals, families, and communities. Organisations like the Singapore Red Cross must step up to the plate, both in terms of providing training, as well as, having the capacity to provide support for those needing help.

In September 2016, the Singapore Red Cross Academy (SRCA) launched the nation's first public training in Psychological First Aid (PFA). In fact, we were the first in Southeast Asia to do so. We have since also introduced an Advanced PFA certification course. To date, we have trained more than 3,000 individuals, including private individuals and staff of corporations and social service organisations.

As the first line of psycho-social support, PFA is an important early crisis intervention tool in supporting mental health. PFA empowers people to care for, better understand, and bolster the coping mechanisms of those experiencing mental issues. In any crisis situation, besides handling physical wounds, a major challenge is managing emotional distress and psychological wounds. That is what PFA aims to address. The psychosocial skills that are learned in PFA empower people to care for and support one another. This helps people to forge stronger bonds and provide peer support, in both critical emergency situations and ongoing day-to-day situations at home, school, workplace and community. Learning PFA helps establish a human connection in a non-intrusive and compassionate manner. Like physical first aid, it can help save lives. In recent months, in response to the ongoing pandemic, SRCA has also adapted its PFA training to the online environment. Through this channel, we hope to make PFA learning more accessible and convenient for the public.

With more people within the community being equipped with both physical and psychological first aid skills, we hope to build a more resilient community to overcome whatever adversities that may come our way. Together, physical first aid and psychological first aid are key components of supporting the SG Secure movement. It will help build a truly united, engaged and most importantly, empowered people, ready to protect ourselves and our community.

Today, two youth mental health ambassadors, Mr Cho Jun Ming and Ms Tyen Rasif will be sharing their personal stories on overcoming mental health challenges with us. It is not easy to step forward and we applaud your courage in doing so. Through your sharing, we hope to enhance people's understanding of what it is like to live with mental health challenges and inspire other people to seek early intervention.

We hope you will enjoy the activities lined up for you today; the sharing by mental health ambassadors, the short film and poetry writing competitions, and the series of online PFA workshops.

Thank you and stay safe and be healthy.