

COMING TO TERMS

with a COVID-19 world

Text by Dr Tan Yia Swam

Dr Tan is a mother to three kids, wife to a surgeon; a daughter and a daughter-in-law. She trained as a general surgeon, and entered private practice in mid-2019, focusing on breast surgery. She treasures her friends and wishes to have more time for her diverse interests: cooking, eating, music, drawing, writing, photography and comedy.



attended the webinar co-hosted by the Ministry of Health and SMA on 9 October 2021, would have heard my personal feelings first-hand. I believe I speak for my friends and fellow healthcare workers (HCWs) as well: allied health professionals, nurses, doctors – especially fellow working parents, as we have had to endure multiple stresses on all fronts.

The discrepancy of how each of us perceives the on-going situation, and the disparity in how we handle it, stems from the fact that no one knows enough to have the full picture. Someone close to me has a poster listing down 188 cognitive biases.² I am frequently reminded of this as I ponder the everyday chaos around me now.

Living with uncertainty has become the real new normal, and those of us best able to adapt fast to unpredictable changes are the ones who are most resilient and likely to come through this unscathed.

In these 22 months, I have had so many questions, some of which were vaguely answered on social media. I reflected on why I get so bothered and have realised it is because I have trouble making sense

of the rules, and sometimes even the explanations. Here are some questions on social rules that puzzle me:³⁻⁵

- How do groups of two, five or eight affect the transmission rate of COVID-19 in a restaurant?
- How was the 1 m distance derived? Why not 95 cm, 105 cm or 2 m?
- How is a family of five that gets split into three tables of two, two and one, safer than eating at a single table of five?
- Why would prohibiting all alcohol sales from 10.30 pm reduce the risk of transmission?
- Why would the absence of recorded music in a restaurant reduce the risk of transmission?
- At the Singapore Zoo, why is it that only groups of two are allowed?

Some of them I can guess at that mask-off activities are “riskier”. Some were explained by Madam Ho Ching in her Facebook posts. Yet, overzealous enforcement of these rules has also caused many unpleasant encounters.⁶

COVID-19 has spared no one. Even those who are fully vaccinated and are not sick. So many complex new rules govern our day-to-day living now.⁷ As someone who has been abiding by the rules, it is just increasingly frustrating that no matter how compliant I am, there doesn't seem to be any improvements, and in fact, I am being chided by some for being a whiner! To be a HCW adds on a professional burden, in addition to the ones that are imposed on **everyone** living in Singapore.

十面埋伏 – ambushed on ten fronts

To recap – because humans have short memories – we must not forget these hard-learned lessons, and should learn from our own history and mistakes.

HCWs have been on high alert throughout these 22 months, with no

After 22 months of COVID-19, it can be depressing to realise that it is going to be 2022 soon! It is no longer a war, but a siege.

The never-ending war against COVID-19

Singaporeans seem to be getting weary from the ever-changing national policies and guidelines, with no clear exit plan. There have been many articles discussing this, with both local and internal commentaries.¹ Those of you who

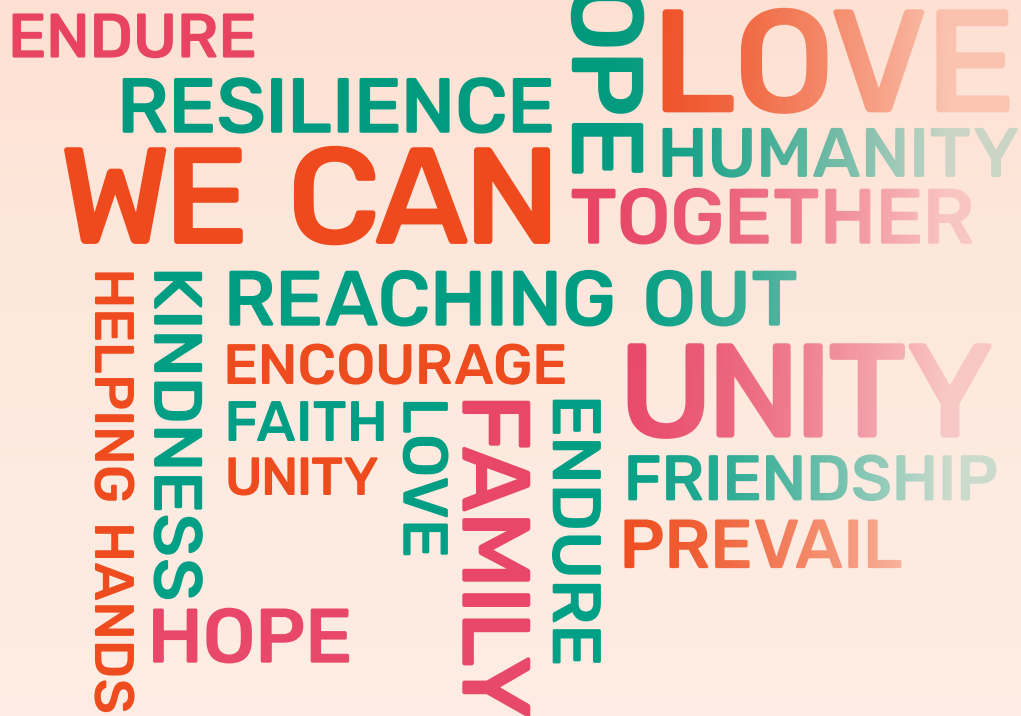
WEARY
RESENTMENT
DREAD
NEVER-ENDING
DEATH
FEAR
NEVER-ENDING
TIRED
UNFAIR
HOPELESS
ANGER
TRAPPED
DYLING
PREJUDICE
UNFAIR
DEATH
TRAPPED
DYLING
PREJUDICE
UNFAIR
DEATH

ease in precautions. Frontline HCWs are consistently at the highest personal risk of exposure, and also face various forms of abuse due to frustrations at long waiting times. HCWs are held to higher standards of restrictions in our personal lives and conduct, as well as stricter levels of routine rostered testing, which were only just recently aligned with that of other frontline workers. I repeatedly reference the Tan Tock Seng Hospital outbreak in May 2021, which saw HCW families being asked to live separately to reduce a theoretical risk of cross contamination to other healthcare facilities. Prejudices from some of the public saw children being turned away from schools, HCWs being declined by taxis/private car drivers and their food deliveries cancelled. I state these as a matter of historical fact and I am relieved that quick adjustments were made to acknowledge and support HCWs.⁸

On the home front, I see the adverse consequences of home-based learning (HBL) and social isolation on my young kids. Among my friends, I hear how their lives have been adversely affected as well. Friends who were planning for marriage or preparing to welcome a baby have had to deal with repeated postponements, changes in guest lists, and difficulties finding help from confinement nannies or even having their own parents come over!

Friends with older kids sitting for the Primary School Leaving Examination have had to struggle with a really strange year of HBL, and the loss of teacher and peer support for their children. Friends with kids in junior college (JC) report that their children are not quite having the same JC experience that we had and enjoyed. These two years have flown by with so many restrictions in social interactions that these young adults have not had the same opportunities to develop leadership or social skills that others have had. Friends with even older kids studying overseas have yet another set of adult worries: Are they safe there? Can they get medical help if they contract COVID-19? And if they were back in Singapore, they may be stranded here and unable to return, which means that their studies will be disrupted.

Friends in food and beverage, fitness and education industries also shared their problems: loss of clients and income, additional expenses from Antigen Rapid Test kits, and sometimes rental disputes. They have difficulties finding contractors



to fix plumbing/air conditioning/paintwork. They lose staff when any kind of interventions (circuit breaker, Phase 2 Heightened Alert, etc) are implemented, and then have difficulty employing people when things return to “normal”. Customers also complain when the service is not up to par.

Life events like marriage, deaths and births are all affected. I have friends who shared their grief – having to mourn the death of their elderly parents alone. Some of my friends and I have commented that our lives are like a prolonged television soap opera, with every week bringing a new crisis and drama. The scary thing is, this is reality.

This has been a really long season of losses. I may even say that we are all

grieving in one way or another, and some of us may not realise it. In my last column, I shared that it is okay to not be okay. Now, we have to learn to embrace the grief, and cope with it.^{9,10} On a lighter note, I realised something when I was rewatching Pixar’s *Inside Out*, and had to explain to a six- and four-year-old why Sadness and Joy had to join their powers to help Riley grow, and why the mother’s console had Sadness being the chairwoman. It is only when we learn to deal with the sadness – and find new strengths from within ourselves with the help of family and friends – that it transforms into joy, and we enter a new phase of learning and growth.

Whatever your grief and loss may be, you are not alone. *I wish you enough.*¹¹ ♦

References

1. Aravindan A, Chen L. Frustration with new COVID curbs as Singapore moves to open up. Reuters [Internet]. 1 October 2021. Available at: <https://reuters/3w4n5X2>.
2. List of cognitive biases. Wikipedia. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3mBd2Wb>.
3. Chung NN, Chew LY. Modelling Singapore COVID-19 pandemic with a SEIR multiplex network model. *Sci Rep* 2021; 11:10122. Available at: <https://go.nature.com/3w5eN10>.
4. Parks Advisory. Singapore Zoo. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3pZ0Q15>.
5. Safe Management Measures. Enterprise Singapore. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2YdCHek>.
6. Kok Y. 22 substantiated reports made against safe distancing ambassadors and enforcement officers. *The Straits Times* [Internet]. 15 September 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3CAMRod>.
7. Thong WTN. COVID-19 Rules and Restrictions in Singapore (Oct 2021). *Singapore Legal Advice*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3EEBegx>.
8. Discrimination of staff due to virus fears – TTSH chief nurse. *Tan Tock Seng Hospital*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3CEoelW>.
9. Grief and Loss. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2ZSRprV>.
10. Smith M, Robinson L, Segal J. *Coping with Grief and Loss. HelpGuide*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Ya1qJA>.
11. Dejan. *Inspiration story: The secret meaning behind “I wish you enough”*. Purpose Focus Commitment. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3w99NI7>.