

Obsession with Covid-19 news linked to higher risk of anxiety

Yale-NUS College study surveyed 1,145 participants, most of whom were Singaporeans, between March and April

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Constantly checking for news about the Covid-19 pandemic takes a toll on mental health, a Singapore study of more than 1,100 participants has shown.

People who spent more time checking the news – for example, more than two hours a day – at the peak of the pandemic in Singapore were at a higher risk of feeling depressed, anxious and stressed.

The study, conducted by Yale-NUS College assistant professor of social sciences (psychology) Jean Liu, was published in the journal of Medical Internet Research in September.

It is the first of five Covid-19-related projects she has been working on since March, to be published in an international academic journal.

Together with her collaborator, Associate Professor Eddie Tong from the National University of Singapore's psychology department, Prof Liu surveyed some 1,145 partic-

ipants – most of whom were Singaporeans – between March 7 and April 21.

During that period, the Republic recorded its first two deaths from the coronavirus, as well as a peak in daily cases – both imported and in the community.

Following the start of the circuit breaker on April 7, mask wearing became mandatory and safe distancing measures were tightened.

Nine in 10 of the study's participants spent two hours or less consuming news on Covid-19.

But the 10 per cent who spent more than two hours daily reading about the pandemic – and particularly those who constantly checked for updates – present a case for concern, said Prof Liu.

These participants reported increased symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress in an online questionnaire of 21 questions widely used by researchers to measure well-being.

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WHEN IT'S TOO MUCH

It's not to say that we must bury our heads in the sand and not get any updates at all, but spending excessive amounts of time getting updates is a problem... Anxiety has a lot to do with worrying and being afraid... So when you come across articles that tell you not to do this or that, it's scary to navigate a world where everything is suddenly dangerous.



ASSISTANT PROFESSOR JEAN LIU, from Yale-NUS College, who conducted the study together with NUS Associate Professor Eddie Tong.

She added that other studies have found that during crises, such as the social unrest in Hong Kong, spending more than two hours a day getting updates predicted worse mental health.

The Covid-19 pandemic is the first truly international public health crisis since the explosion of social media platforms, she said.

Previous health crises such as Zika or Ebola were not as prolonged and widespread, and social media chatter then was nothing compared with what was generated by Covid-19, she added.

Said Prof Liu: "This pandemic has generated a lot of content, both in terms of information and misinformation. People are exposed to a lot of updates and rumours from global and local sources. Increasingly, they get updates from traditional and social media sources.

"Anxiety has a lot to do with worrying and being afraid... So when you come across articles that tell you not to do this or that, it's scary to navigate a world where everything is suddenly dangerous."

But Prof Liu's study also found that accurate and timely information from official sources helps to allay those fears.

Participants who subscribed to the Gov.sg channel – which dis-

tributes official updates and debunks false information – reported less anxiety and symptoms of depression than those who did not.

Prof Liu said: "This shows that institutional trust can help to mitigate some of these negative effects, especially when the Government addresses rumours quickly, as it did about the country going into lockdown mode or about someone dying of Covid-19.

"If there is no trust, people may seek out other sources of information."

Noting that clinicians had earlier this year also urged governments to adopt technology to disseminate news, Prof Liu added: "My hope is that public health agencies can... deliver information in a timely fashion, and consider channels like WhatsApp and Telegram."

Messages on such platforms spread very easily as most people are already using such communication apps, and they can be easily forwarded to groups, she said.

Prof Liu, who runs the Social Neuro-Endocrinology Research Group – also known as The Synergy Lab at Yale-NUS – is also studying, with members of the lab, how Covid-19 has impacted people in different ways.

One study monitored people's usage of WhatsApp for a period of one week between March and May to see how pervasive the topic of Covid-19 was in their conversations.

The other studies are on topics such as the take-up of TraceTogether, Covid-19 rumours and how frequently people shared these, as well as behavioural changes due to the pandemic.

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