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COVID-19 SPECIAL

Flourishing in times of Covid-19

Take a lesson from positive psychology with five elements that contribute to well-being; be inspired by Arnold Schwarzenegger and bee hoon stall operator Lee Ray Sheng

Caroline Koh For The Straits Times

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Renowned psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, sharing his childhood experiences of World War II, once had this to say: "I noticed with surprise how many of the adults I had known as successful and self-confident became helpless and dispirited once the war removed their social supports. Without jobs, money or status, they were reduced to empty shells.

"Yet, there were a few who kept their integrity and purpose despite the surrounding chaos. Their serenity was a beacon that kept others from losing hope."

Dr Csikszentmihalyi's musings are reminiscent of the current pandemic the world is experiencing. In fact, some have compared the present situation to a "World War III", except that the perpetrator is a tiny mass of DNA surrounded by a protein envelope, as we used to describe a virus in secondary school science.

As Singapore and most other parts of the world advance into the later stages of a lockdown or circuit breaker, how does one preserve the serenity that is a beacon of hope to oneself and others? Dr Csikszentmihalyi and other researchers claim that people who retain their integrity in times of crisis are buffered by personal strengths such as optimism, courage, future mindedness, hope, perseverance and interpersonal skills.

In his book *Flourish*, Dr Martin Seligman, a leading authority in the field of positive psychology, suggests five elements that contribute to a person's well-being.

These are: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. This "Perma" model seems particularly relevant as a guide to how one can still thrive in the midst of the crisis situation created by Covid-19.

Indeed, as the pandemic unfolds, stories have begun to surface, of people who are able to flourish in spite of hardships and challenges. These ordinary folk are, in Dr Csikszentmihalyi's words, "not necessarily the most respected, better-educated, or more-skilled individuals", but they have been able to maintain a good measure of fulfilment, meaning and happiness in the face of adversity.

They "flourish" in the sense that they are able to maintain, in what psychologists call "a dynamic optimal state of psychosocial functioning that arises from functioning well across multiple psychosocial domains". In one way or another, they have demonstrated elements of Perma that we could emulate.

POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Emotions can vary in intensity (high or low) and valence (positive or negative). Although both positive and negative emotions have their role to play in the normal functioning of an individual, a positive effect is known to be associated with overall well-being. Such emotions as joy, contentment and positivity are found to contribute to flourishing, and life satisfaction.

Hence, someone who spends most of the time grouching about lack of freedom, boredom, frustrating family members, and missing friends and parties, is more likely to have his or her well-being compromised during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Instead, one should perhaps learn to find joy and contentment in the little things in life, insignificant events that bring their fair share of joy to an individual, such as a child's innocent laughter, a pet's caress or the wondrous sight of a new bloom in the garden.



People singing from their balcony during a flash mob in Rome's Magliana district in March. Amid strict lockdowns in Italy, flash mobs were circulated on social media to make people "gather" on balconies at certain hours, to play music or to get a round of applause. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

I recall a video that has gone viral of Arnold Schwarzenegger at home during the lockdown. In it, I saw not the Terminator or the former governor of California, but an ordinary human being, enjoying a simple meal in what appears to be his kitchen, in the company of his pets - although I do admit that these, a donkey and a miniature horse, are no "ordinary pets".

ENGAGEMENT

Engagement may be defined as a combination of emotional, cognitive and behavioural immersions in a task or an activity, requiring concentration, absorption and focus on the part of the individual. At its most intense, engagement may lead to "flow", when the individual is fully immersed and optimally involved in the endeavour, and experiences a feeling of being energised, and of enjoyment in the process.

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Secondary school student Angel Chew shared her experience of home-based learning in a Forum letter to The Straits Times ("Many benefits to learning at home", April 27). She found the process "beneficial in more ways than one" as she was able to "focus better on the content that teachers deliver" and "teachers can teach more efficiently without having to do as much classroom management as usual".

Home-based learning need not be confined to those in school. There is a plethora of massive open online courses on online learning platforms, such as Coursera, Skillshare, Udemy and LinkedIn Learning, that offer academic, skills-based and professional development courses at the click of the mouse. For those at the crossroads of their career, this is the time to engage in exploration and upgrading.

RELATIONSHIPS

An opinion editorial by Ms Lea Kabiljo for the Montreal Gazette has the title: We may be separated, but Covid-19 is bringing us closer.

There are many examples of how this is happening: families being forced to stay home and having the rare opportunity to spend extended quality time together, employees working from home and "Zooming" across the world to connect with colleagues, town folk in Italy coming out on balconies to sing, and of course, the initiative by the Voices of Singapore Virtual Choir to unite the country in singing the nation's favourite and defining song Home.

My personal experience of relationship strengthening during the circuit breaker is that of a kind neighbour who, out of goodwill, takes orders for fresh food delivery for our "lorong". She collates and places orders, sorts out the goods and arrange for contactless delivery.

MEANING

Professor Michael Steger, whose research focus is on meaning in life, defines a sense of meaning as having a purpose and direction in what one does, an ability to connect with something larger than oneself, and a recognition of the value and worthiness of one's life.

A crisis such as Covid-19 has made people reflect and evaluate their purpose in life. Those who had close encounters with the disease would often emerge with a heightened awareness of the fragility of life and learn to treasure it more.

Then, there is the story of Dr Tam Wai Jia, who returned to the front line after seven years away from medical practice. While tending to migrant workers in a dormitory under lockdown, she managed to overcome the feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt that have haunted her as a result

of traumatic experiences during the early years of her medical career.

To her, the experience at the front line enabled her to regain confidence, and rediscover meaning in practising medicine and the realisation that she still had much to offer.

ACCOMPLISHMENT

A sense of accomplishment can be defined as a feeling of competence, mastery and efficacy in completing tasks or attaining goals. It is often associated with the satisfaction derived from achieving what one has set out to do.

Among the many small and medium-sized enterprises that were affected by Covid-19 was a certain bee hoon stall operated on the Nanyang Technological University campus by 20-year-old undergraduate Lee Ray Sheng. Barely three weeks after its opening, Raydy Beehoon had to close at the onset of the circuit breaker.

Undaunted, Mr Lee and his partners decided to turn their setback into an opportunity to do good, and started cooking bee hoon for the needy, with ingredients and other costs sponsored by donors through an online fund-raising campaign.

To date, they have raised sufficient funds to deliver up to 50,000 meals for needy families.

For others, however, the sense of accomplishment could be experienced through more modest means, such as tidying a room, cooking a new dish, mending broken furniture, finishing a piece of homework, and for me - completing this opinion piece.

These are extraordinary times, but given the will, ordinary people can achieve extraordinary things and flourish.

• **Associate Professor Caroline Koh is head of psychology and child and human development at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.**

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