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Panelists in one of the discussions on youth mental health at Temasek Shophouse yesterday included (from left) National University Hospital senior consultant John Wong, Institute of Mental Health chief executive Daniel Fung, the Ministry of Health's Office for Healthcare Transformation assistant director of integrated health promotion Priyanka Rajendram and Duke-NUS Medical School assistant professor Sharon Sung. The discussion was moderated by KK Women's and Children's Hospital's Adolescent Medicine Service head and senior consultant Elaine Chew (right). PHOTO: BRIDGES M&C

Public urged to help develop kids' mental health programme

KK Hospital to use input to train community workers such as school counsellors in future

Ang Qing

School counsellors and social service agencies are poised to get more training to treat young people with mild mental health issues.

Members of the public can now help KK Women's and Children's Hospital develop a new programme for those aged 10 to 18.

This follows an open call from the hospital for volunteers ranging from educators to grandparents, during an event held at social

impact hub Temasek Shophouse yesterday.

More children and adolescents have been seeking help for mental health difficulties since the Covid-19 pandemic hit, said Dr Vicknesan Marimuthu, head and senior consultant at the hospital's Child and Adolescent Mental Wellness Service.

He said: "The main thrust (of the programme) is to identify people early enough, so we don't wait for

their symptoms to get too severe."

Through online or in-person focus group discussions, volunteers can contribute to an intervention framework the hospital will use to train community workers and possibly peer supporters in future, said Dr Marimuthu, who moderated one of the panel discussions on youth mental health during the event.

Attended by more than 600 participants and Minister for Manpower Tan See Leng, the event, which was streamed online, aimed to foster discourse surrounding mental health among youth and explore ways to improve support and access for communities at risk.

In his speech, Dr Tan said his ministry is looking into committing more significant resources to ensure that the workplace is a safe and welcoming environment.

Panelists highlighted the need to go beyond relying on medical services to tackle youth mental health in Singapore.

Dr Priyanka Rajendram, assistant director of integrated health promotion at the Ministry of Health's Office for Healthcare

Transformation, pointed out that stigma, which can come from oneself or from society, is systemic.

She said: "Perhaps instead of seeking to destigmatise an issue, which implies the action of undoing something that might be wrong, which is always hard, maybe we should think about how we can seek to normalise conversations about mental health, which implies an action of creation that is more hopeful and more positive."

Associate Professor John Wong, senior consultant at the National University Hospital's Department of Psychological Medicine, noted that an increasing number of young people, especially from secondary school, have been seeking help from professional services.

"But a lot of times, it is challenging that their parents, who may not have the equivalent level of mental health literacy, are very resistant or very hesitant," he said, calling for mental health education for the population at large.

Minister of State for Social and Family Development and Education Sun Xueling said the education and well-being of children depend on the relationship they have with their parents, teachers and peers, which the Ministry of Education has been trying to support.

She said: "We need to make sure that there are sufficient layers of support and it's not the case (that) when young people have mental health concerns, they feel that there is only one help channel, which is the Institute of Mental Health."

This is one area that an inter-agency task force set up last year to tackle mental health and mental well-being has been looking into, she said.

Addressing the struggles of youth also has to be tailored to their needs, panelists said.

Ms Tasneem Abdul Majeed, ambassador for the Beyond the Label movement, which addresses the stigma of mental health conditions, said: "Not everyone is comfortable with sharing their experiences through a verbal medium or sharing with someone at all.

"We could shift towards the provision of safe spaces for youth who prefer to handle their mental distress independently or are not willing to share their distress with others."

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