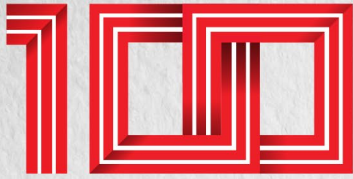


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Re-imagining 100: The pandemic's impact on healthy ageing



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**ECONOMIST
IMPACT**

While most Singaporeans say their physical health has remained stable or improved since the onset of covid-19, more than a third say their mental health has deteriorated in this time.





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Introduction

In the past decade, living to the age of 100 has become a realistic prospect for many Singaporeans. Not only has the quality of healthcare in the country improved, but so has citizens' awareness of disease risk factors and how their lifestyle choices can reduce or increase risk. In 2021 Singapore still boasts one of the world's longest average life spans (83.9 years).¹

The protracted covid-19 crisis might be expected to dent Singaporeans' prospects of living into their 90s and beyond, or at least their hopes of doing so. An Economist Impact survey completed in June 2021, however, indicates that this is not the case. In fact, a higher percentage of people surveyed (31%) today feel prepared to live to 100 from a

health and wellness perspective than was the case in a similar survey conducted in 2018 (23%).² A combination of factors is likely behind this optimism, including what appears to be people's sustained attention to maintaining or improving exercise levels and dietary practices, and possibly the country's success at keeping coronavirus infection and fatality rates relatively low.

About the research

This report analyses the health-related findings of a survey of 1,218 residents of Singapore conducted in May-June 2021. The survey explores how the pandemic has impacted Singaporeans' prospects of living to 100 in terms of their personal health and well-being and their financial situation. The respondents fall into five age cohorts: 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64 and 65-74. The sample is split evenly between males and females and almost evenly split between people earning less than S\$50,000 annually (49%) and those earning more than that (51%). For more details on the wider survey and the sample demographics, see *Re-imagining 100: The pandemic's impact on longevity*.

Respondent perceptions of their physical health outlook have largely remained stable during the pandemic. The same is broadly true of mental health, but the share reporting a deterioration is higher than is the case with physical health. A challenge for public health authorities, as for Singaporeans themselves, is to reduce the chances that the mental and emotional toll of the pandemic leads to physical health problems later in life.

¹ 2020 data from Singapore Department of Statistics.

² See *Ready for 100: Preparing for longevity in Singapore* for the 2018 survey results.



A pandemic stress test

One explanation for Singaporeans' improved view of their physical health, according to Dr Janil Puthuchery, Singapore's senior minister of state for health, and communications and information, is the country's success in containing the coronavirus outbreak. "We've been fortunate," he says. "Health outcomes have been good with a low fatality rate. There's no reason that a person who hasn't contracted covid-19 should consider it a factor in their potential life expectancy."

Daniel Fung, chief executive officer of the Institute of Mental Health, also notes that people have sought to maintain a physical exercise regimen during the lockdowns. This

is supported by the survey results, which show that respondents' physical exercise patterns remain largely unchanged from 2018. In 2021, 55% report taking 20 minutes or longer of exercise several times a week, compared with 57% in the earlier survey. Today, 38% say their level of physical exercise has remained unchanged during the pandemic while 31% say it has improved. The analogous figures for their diet are 53% and 27%.

Overall, a large majority of Singaporeans say their physical health has remained stable (52%) or improved (22%) since the onset of covid-19. There is some variation across age groups: respondents between 35 and 54 are more likely than those of other ages to report

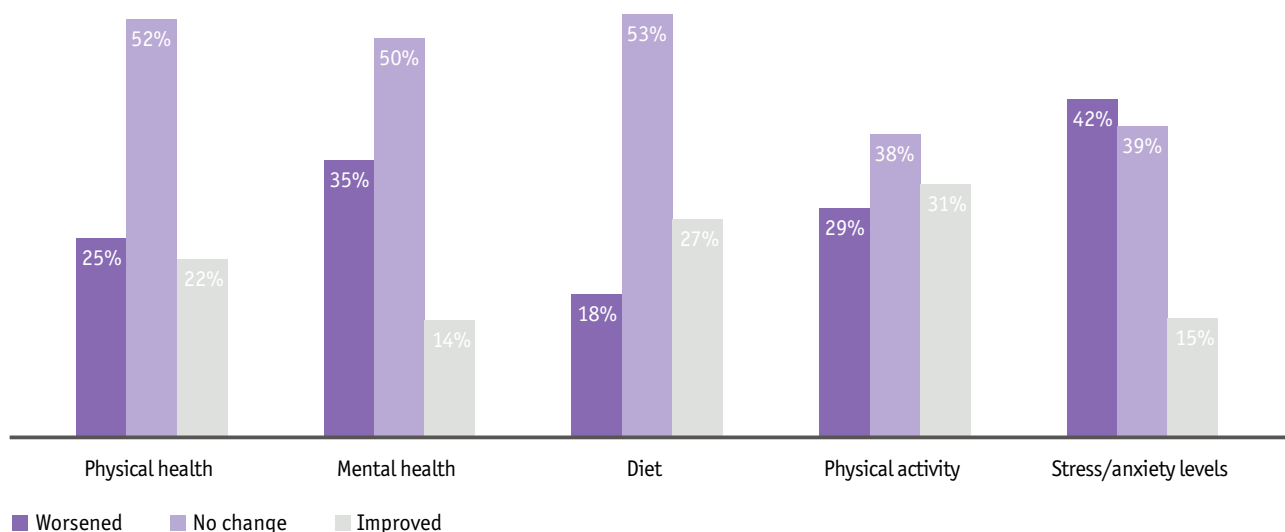
a deterioration in their physical health—28% compared with 25% in the overall sample, and 18% in the 55-64 age group.

As Figure 1 shows, the picture is somewhat darker when it comes to mental health: 35% overall, and as high as 41% among 25-34 year-olds, say it has deteriorated. This is likely linked to the 42% who report increased stress and anxiety levels as a result of the pandemic.

Increased mental health issues in the population are expected, according to Dr Puthuchery. "They are a result of people's social isolation, their loss of contact with family and friends, the economic fallout, and their anxiety over livelihoods," he says. "These

Figure 1: The pandemic's impact on personal health

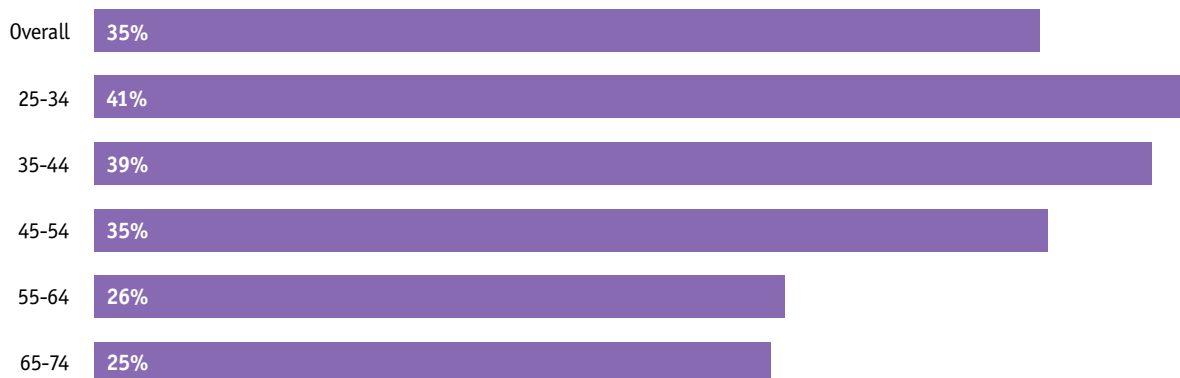
How have the following changed as a result of covid-19?



Source: Economist Impact

Figure 2: A heavier mental health strain on younger Singaporeans

% of respondents reporting that their mental health has deteriorated as a result of covid-19



Source: Economist Impact

are all known stress factors for mental health and have all intensified during the crisis.”

Dr Fung attributes the greater problems experienced by younger people partly to the reduced opportunity for social interactions, which are very important at younger ages. “Young people are struggling in our practice,” he says. Eighteen months since covid-19’s onset, says Dr Fung, “there remain a lot more people seeking our help than had previously been the case. The effects are still being felt.”

Stress levels are likely to subside provided the effects of covid-19 remain contained, but mental health problems are likely to

linger. These could have knock-on effects on people’s physical well-being, says Angelique Chan, executive director of the Centre for Ageing Research & Education at the Duke-NUS Medical school. “Mental and physical health are very much interrelated,” she says, “and the former can affect eating behaviours and physical activity levels.”

To their credit, public health authorities have recognised the strains the pandemic has placed on people’s emotional and mental health and taken actions to address it. For example, the Health Promotion Board (a statutory board under the Ministry of Health) has introduced initiatives

during the crisis to help citizens recognise and deal with these strains. One example, the “Brave the New” campaign—which ran from August 2020 to March 2021 and was launched together with the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth—sought to reassure the public that it was normal to feel stressed or anxious during a pandemic and provided them with tips on coping. Another example, Hi! #JustCheckingIn, an initiative conducted in January-March 2021, encouraged people to check-in on their loved ones and provided advice on how to conduct supportive conversations.³

3 Information on these and other government programmes was provided to Economist Impact by the Health Promotion Board.



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Relationship strain

Pressure on personal relationships is also likely a factor in heightened mental health problems, as relationships are critical to helping people cope. Although 62% of survey respondents say they are happy today in their most important relationship, this is a considerable drop from the 92% who stated this in 2018.

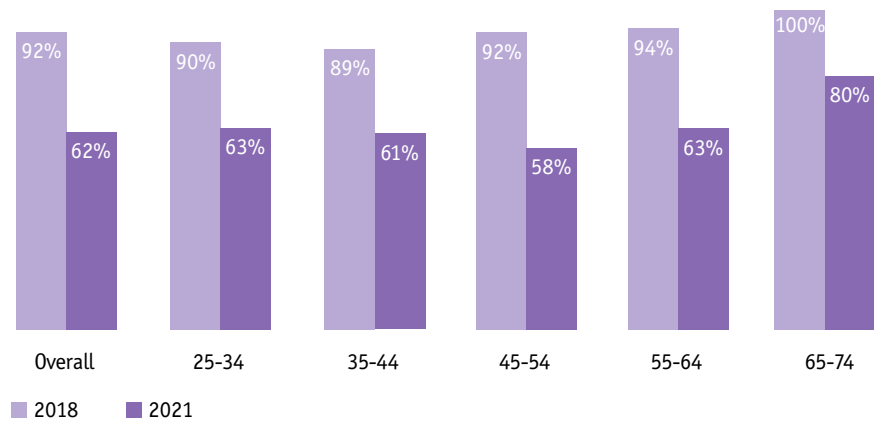
The causal factors for some people may be long periods living with families in tight quarters and for others isolation. For example, Ms Chan says that her team has seen considerable distress from many seniors as a result of isolation. “This has especially been the case during lockdown when relatives were unable to visit them, and far from all could use online platforms to connect.

The deterioration in relationships seems most marked among the 45-54 year-olds in our survey, where the drop is 34 percentage points between 2018 and today in those indicating happiness in their most important relationship. A possible factor may be the higher work-related stress reported by people in this age group (exceeded only by those aged 35-44—see discussion below), which could lead to tensions in relationships.

Another indicator of relationship strain is the doubt expressed by many Singaporeans that they will be able to find emotional support should a major life event occur, such as a death in the family or the loss of a job. The figure harbouring such doubt that they will find support (and in some cases even certainty that they will not) has risen from 25% in 2018 to 39% today.

Figure 3: The pandemic’s impact on relationships

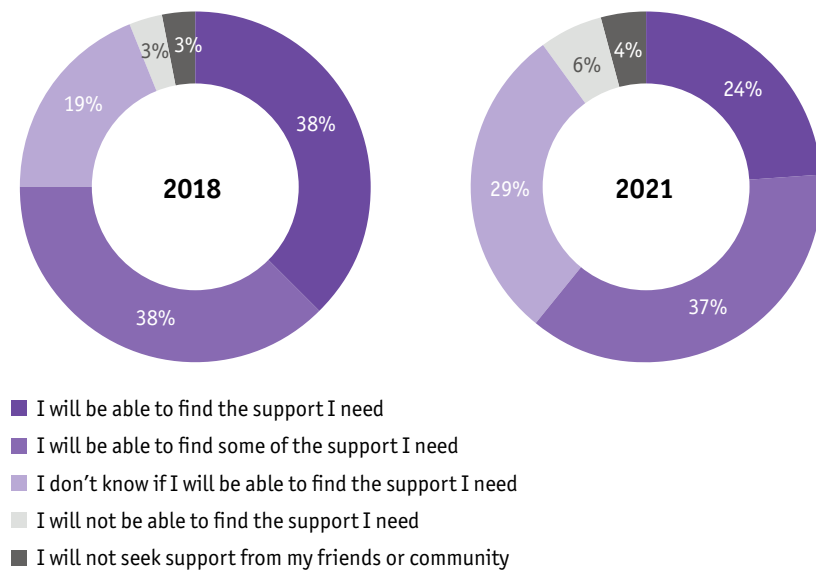
% of respondents agreeing that they are happy in their most important relationship



Source: EconomistImpact

Figure 4: Finding emotional support in times of hardship: 2018 and 2021

In an unexpected life event (loss of a job, death of a loved one, sudden illness, etc) that requires emotional support, please describe how you would feel.



Source: EconomistImpact

Balancing work and personal

Another contributor to mental health issues is likely to be work-related stress. According to Ms Chan, many working-age people in Singapore are “languishing”: “They are experiencing difficulties in terms of focus, the ability to concentrate and losing interest in things.”

Almost half (47%) of survey respondents say their work-related stress levels have risen since the start of the pandemic. This is partly a result of challenges balancing professional and personal or family demands when working at home. It may also be linked to anxiety

about job safety or income levels: 43% of respondents say the crisis has negatively impacted their salary or wage-earning prospects. The figure is highest (47%) among those in mid-career, aged 35-44, and almost as high (46%) among 45-54 year-olds.

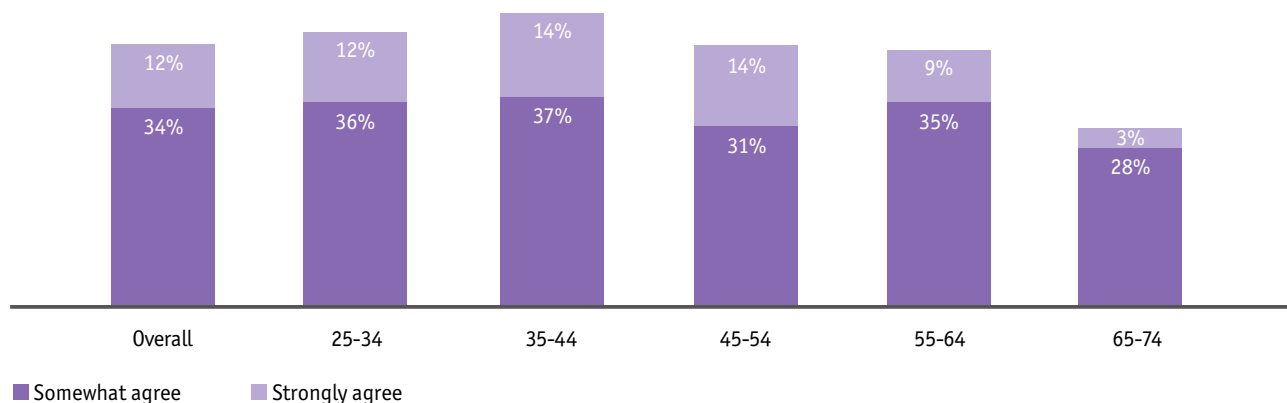
Dr Fung believes the home-working experiences of people in these age groups may be tougher than for others. “They’re likely to be middle or senior managers, often in the most productive phase of their career. They have to manage their teams in a very different setting than they were used to. And they’re

also likely to be looking after older children in a tight home environment.”

Remote working has not been a universally positive experience in Singapore. Half of the survey respondents (50%) say they’ve enjoyed the experience, but many others (36%), are neutral or negative about it. About one-quarter feel that their overall well-being deteriorated during remote working. Hybrid-working is a bright prospect for 56% of survey respondents, who say they look forward to working both remotely and in the office in the future.

Figure 5: Income anxiety

% of respondents agreeing that their salary- or wage-earning prospects have deteriorated since the onset of covid-19



Source: Economist Impact



As wrenching as the covid-19 crisis has been, in Singapore as elsewhere, it may have served a useful public health purpose of making clear to citizens the importance of disease prevention through hygiene, exercise and other personal health and lifestyle measures.



Opportunities for action

As wrenching as the covid-19 crisis has been, in Singapore as elsewhere, it may have served a useful public health purpose of making clear to citizens the importance of disease prevention through hygiene, exercise and other personal health and lifestyle measures. People are likely to be more aware of some health risk factors than they were previously, and possibly more receptive to information and advice about prevention from public health authorities and other bodies. This could improve people's chances of living to 100 and enjoying their later years.

Our research, including the insights gained from interviews with experts, points to a few areas in which the public health authorities and other healthcare bodies can act to take advantage of the unique circumstances existing today:

Mental health literacy. Important strides have been made in increasing Singaporeans' awareness of the importance of personal hygiene as a means of warding off communicable diseases and of other disease-prevention measures. That needs to be matched by efforts, led by public health bodies, to increase citizens' awareness of the mental health issues that can arise in periods of crisis. For example, mental health literacy is taught in schools but could also become part of workplace training.

Community-level initiatives. Health-awareness initiatives are often effective when conducted at micro-level, within communities. The use of peer groups among seniors, for example, can do much to raise awareness of diabetes risk and motivate people to control their diet more carefully. Mental health training in communities can similarly teach people to recognise problems their neighbours may be experiencing.

Institutional trust. Singapore's public health bodies provide plentiful disease-prevention and lifestyle-improvement information and advice across a wide array of channels, says Dr Puthuchearu. However, he adds, it is not always co-ordinated. "The messages need to be synchronised on the different channels to avoid creating confusion. Clarity of message helps to build trust in the institutions delivering it," he says, "and this helps persuade people to take ownership of their health."

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