

MIND OVER MATTER

Overwhelmed by the pressures of adjusting to the new normal? Maybe it's time we hop on our feet and sweat it out. It's more therapeutic than you think

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THE TOPIC OF MENTAL HEALTH isn't new. However, there is greater and more widespread concern about mental wellness now that almost everyone is experiencing the compounding stresses precipitated by the pandemic. According to a Channel News Asia report, 71 people between the ages 20 and 29 committed suicide this past year.

Back in March, early on in the pandemic, one positive way to view lockdown measures to mitigate contagion was that they forced us to slow down and take stock of our lives and offered a small respite from the seemingly ceaseless rat race. By and by, economic issues and social isolation brought about a new set of stresses and the world scrambled to find solutions to problems it never experienced, at least on this scale, before.

Locally, the Ministry of Health reported that the number of calls made to the IMH Mental Health Helpline increased by 60 per cent between April and July this year, compared to the number of calls made during the same period last year. Statista also shared that even though 70 per cent of the nation claimed that their mental state was unbothered during the initial stages of the Circuit Breaker, 20 per cent of Singaporeans noticed that the state of mental health was on the decline.

This may not be an official report, but while following over 2,000 people between the ages of 20 and 45 on social media, we noticed that the number of people who were openly complaining have significantly increased, mostly lamenting about fatigue from frequent digital meetings and work from home arrangements. What used to be a platform for sharing happy moments with friends and family have now transformed into a moshpit of misery. This seemingly confirms the reports that we've seen on society's poor state of mental health.

Give Them A Voice

Whether it is to come to terms with COVID-19-related confusion or mental health disorders, many turned to exercise as a solution. One such person was Michael, who declined to reveal his full name. To give a backstory on the 27-year-old graphic designer, he was first diagnosed with depression at 19, during his final year in polytechnic.

"I noticed that I found it increasingly difficult to get out of bed and had to drag myself to school as the pressure to score well in tests and projects grew," he recalled. "My friends shared that they felt the same way too, often brushing it off casually. But it felt really

off in my case. And what made it worse was that it was as if no one was listening to what I had to say."

It wasn't until he realised that he was toying with the idea of suicide that Michael realised that he had to seek professional help. He broke the news to his mother, who then supported his decision to defer his studies and focus on getting better. After countless counselling sessions and being disciplined with taking Prozac prescribed by his psychiatrist, things seemed to improve. And if there's one thing he didn't want to repeat, it's taking the medication.

"The Prozac helped me somewhat," he said. "But the sense of peace and contentedness it brought felt artificial. It's hard to explain in words. But my world felt very hazy and dream-like while I was on it. It was uncomfortable."

For those who don't know, Prozac is one of the many brand names for fluoxetine. It is an antidepressant that falls under the class of drugs called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI). How it works is that when the mood-regulating neurotransmitter serotonin is travelling between two neurons, fluoxetine blocks the pathway of the serotonin-transmitting neuron, preventing its reuptake. Over time the concentration of serotonin builds up, and studies have shown that this causes an improvement in mood. However, inaccurate dosages of fluoxetine can cause dizziness, brain fog, nausea and even worsen your mood.

Michael was willing to continue with counselling. But his resistance towards taking pills urged his psychiatrist to find alternative holistic solutions to help him balance his mood, should he encounter depressive episodes in the future. And one piece of advice he offered was to exercise.

"Initially, I thought it was lazy advice for a professional to offer as a solution to something as serious as depression," Michael admitted. His mother, who was by his side throughout the entire journey, urged him to give it a shot, but to no avail. It was during a depressive episode during his first month in an internship, did he decide to give running and yoga a try. He was 22.

"I was restless but lazy, and I knew I needed an avenue to channel all this anger and frustration. I was never athletic while growing up, so I found something as simple as running and stretching quite a challenge at first," he recalled. But he kept on keeping on, and before long, he was doing yoga almost every other weekend, and was

running every alternate day.

Today, Michael spends mornings lifting weights either at home or in the gym, alternate evenings on the running tracks, and weekends stretching his muscles with yoga sessions at home. Of course, there are days where he is unable to clock in exercise in his schedule due to work commitments. But he doesn't beat himself up too hard, and does a quick home workout should he have some time to spare on those days. Michael recognises that mental health isn't something that men talk about openly, so he hoped that his story could change our perspective on the topic.

"Fitness has given me a sense of fulfilment and allowed me to channel my frustration into a healthy avenue," he shared. "It's not a cure, of course. But it certainly helps with bringing my mood up."

A Fighter's Battle

Local jiu-jitsu world champion Constance Lien feels similarly about fitness. Unlike Michael, Lien is a public figure who hopes to use her platform to not only share her journey and victories with the sport, but also shed light on mental health.

The 21-year-old grew up with an active lifestyle as a swimmer in her youth. You would think that all the physical activity packed in her schedule will bring about a surge of serotonin. Yet she still battled depression, anxiety and an eating disorder.

"I was attracted to martial arts, particularly jiu-jitsu, so I gave it a shot after I quit swimming," she shared. "The idea of fighting for myself gave me the motivation to want to fight these mental and emotional issues off."

At about 16-years-old, Lien began her jiu-jitsu training at Evolve MMA. Incidentally, it was also a period where her eating disorder was at its peak. "You'd expect me to be frail and weak, but practicing martial arts gave me strength and focus instead. As a result of jiu-jitsu training and practice, I managed to develop a healthier relationship with food."

Unlike Michael, who functions better solo, Lien also found support in her fitness social circle. "One of the positive outcomes of picking up the sport was that I was building bonds with people. So aside from the adrenaline rush while training, and feeling better about myself through having a healthy diet and working out, I found that

these friendships that I've build added to the element of fun to the sport. These were all driving forces, at least for me," she shared.

Trigger Happy

A 2020 study by *Frontiers of Psychology* confirmed that physical activity, namely aerobic exercise, provides numerous health benefits including that of mental health. The paper cited that a recent finding proved that even low- to moderate-intensity aerobic exercise had some positive effects on the severity of depressive symptoms.

This is brought about by the release of neurotrophic growth factors during physical activity. The growth factors then "induce nerve growth and synaptic plasticity in the brain, particularly in the brain regions that display significant changes in neural activity and structural changes during depression".

In short, exercise helps repair dysfunctional areas of the brain, which were formerly responsible for emotional and mental imbalances. This is likely what we observed in Michael's case.

Stay Strong

Edgar Tham, chief sport and performance psychologist at SportPsych Consulting, shared a term called "mental toughness" during a conversation. According to a 2018 paper from *The Journal of Science and Medicine In Sport*, this is necessary to fend off the negative effects of stresses linked to psychological health complaints. This seemed to be what Lien developed while she battled her mental issues and eating disorders when she applied herself to jiu-jitsu.

A Path Towards Better

As Michael said, fitness is not a cure. But both his and Lien's experiences, as well as science, have proven that exercise plays an important factor in lifting our spirits in miserable times like this. Some days are worse than others, leaving us crippled in bed. But what we fail to realise while indulging in negativity is that there's a whole lot of life to look forward to outside the four walls we're confined in.

The next time you feel unmotivated, don't get upset. Take a long, deep breath and stretch those muscles out instead. You'll never know how far that can take you in improving your day. **AM**