

## SUPPORTING THE POLICE PSYCHOLOGICALLY IN A PANDEMIC: THE SINGAPORE EXPERIENCE

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**Abstract:** Policing has been known to be a highly stressful and challenging vocation. In peacetime, police officers and leaders are faced with operational and organizational stressors that affect their operational ability and psychological well-being. During periods of uncertainty, as presented by policing in the COVID-19 pandemic environment, the added stress of operating in an environment with an unknown biological threat and with deadly consequence poses unique challenges to the operational and psychological resilience of police personnel. Apart from the operational and legal considerations of policing in a pandemic, there is a need to consider the psychological preparedness of officers for policing in such a unique environment. This paper highlights the role of police psychological services in the Singapore Police in supporting police officers, units and leaders policing in a pandemic using a bespoke 3 x 3 frame in planning and delivering psychological support services to the police.

**Keywords:** Operations Psychology, Singapore Police, Pandemic, Psychological Support

### Background

The Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first identified in December 2019, in Wuhan, Hubei, China. Since then, COVID-19 has spread worldwide. The first case of COVID-19 in Singapore was announced on 23 January 2020, when a 66-year-old Wuhan resident on holiday in Singapore tested positive for the virus. As Singapore saw a rise in the number of cases, in particular locally transmitted cases with no links to previous cases, the risk assessment was stepped up from Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON) Yellow to DORSCON Orange on 7 February 2020. The number of cases continued to rise as overseas Singaporeans returned back home and local clusters emerged. In particular, there was a spike in the number of COVID-19 cases in several foreign worker dormitories in early April 2020. In response to the developments of the situation, a Circuit Breaker was implemented on 7 April 2020 in a bid to curb the spread of COVID-19. As of 14 April 2020, Singapore has 3,252 cases and 10 deaths.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has been regarded by the United Nations (UN) as the worst global crisis since World War II. In Singapore's fight against this crisis, the Singapore Police Force (SPF) is substantially involved, with police officers being deployed at Government Quarantine Facilities (GQFs), at the foreign worker dormitories across Singapore managing lockdown operations, at the frontline performing day-to-day duties with members of the public or in contact tracing operations. Police officers and civilian officers in the staff departments have also been working tirelessly to support crisis operations in the background, such as coming up with contingency plans, business

continuity plans as well as standard operating procedures for the COVID-19 situation.

In such challenging times, crime does not stop and thus, policing cannot stop either. Rather, on top of the challenging demands of policing, the added challenges of policing during a pandemic places exceptional stress on police officers, units, and leaders. For the policing function to be effective, it is critical that police officers and leaders are duly supported. In Singapore, the Police Psychological Services Division (PPSD) has developed a comprehensive plan to provide all-rounded psychological and practical support for the police officers. These interventions are important in enhancing, maintaining, and restoring the psychological readiness of police officers, units, and leaders.

### Stress in Policing

Police work is almost universally acknowledged to be stressful (Bishop, et al., 2007), with police officers at various times required to intervene in situations of conflict (Lee, et al, 2017), apprehend violent criminals, face hostile members of the public and deal with the inevitable political pressures of public life (Violanti, et al., 2018) – these are the commonly known operational stressors faced. Operational stressors are often highlighted in police work, although many studies of police stress have consistently found that organizational stressors, those related to the context in which officers perform their duties, are very common and have deleterious effects (Biggam et al., 1997; Brown, Cooper, & Kirkcaldy, 1996; Evans & Coman, 1993). Challenges with manpower shortages, being passed over for promotion, long hours, job overload, and changes in supervisors have been found to be among the

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most common organizational stressors. These stressors can lead to psychological distress, depression, alcoholism, burnout, cardiac disorders, and suicide as well as family and marital problems (Alexander, 1999; Biggam et al., 1997; Kop et al., 1999; Loo, 1999; Territo & Vetter, 1981; Violanti, 1992).

On top of these stressors, the nature of COVID-19 operations threatens not only the police officers but also their loved ones and colleagues, who may be at risk of infection from human-to-human transmission. Additionally, given the insidious nature of the virus, infected officers may be asymptomatic and may therefore unknowingly infect others. This unknown, unseen, and insidious nature of the virus poses unique challenges to policing during this pandemic.

### 3 x 3 Psychological Support Intervention Plan

In response to the challenges faced by police officers in COVID-19 operations, PPSD has drafted a psychological support intervention plan. The principal components of the psychological support interventions during the pandemic operations are largely concerned with:

- (1) Psychological Readiness Management,
- (2) Morale Management, and
- (3) Operational Resilience Management.

In Psychological Readiness Management, PPSD was focused on providing schemas, scripts, and cognitive maps to help officers and leaders understand the context of the situation and what they can and should do to prepare themselves and protect their loved ones. Working with communications experts from SPF Public Affairs Department (PAD), the police psychologists developed various psychological preparation materials and guides to mentally prepare and equip officers for the challenges they may face. These challenges include dealing with anxiety, stress and fatigue, maintaining sleep hygiene, and preparing their families about their involvement in the COVID-19 operations.

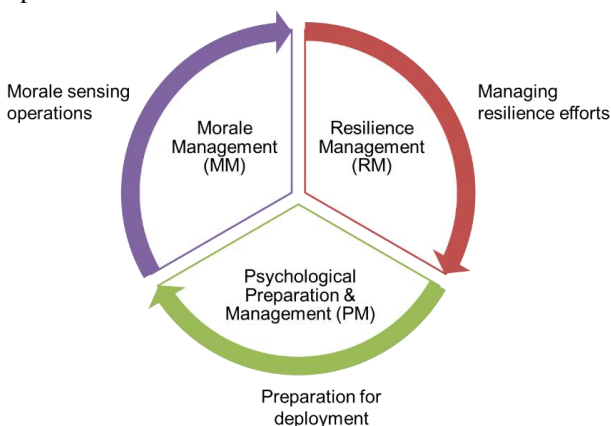


Figure 1: Principal components of psychological support interventions

In the area of Morale Management, PPSD provided support in morale measuring, morale

monitoring, and morale motivating efforts. For morale measuring, PPSD liaised with the Unit Morale Sensing Teams (UMSTs) to conduct e-morale sensing every two weeks. The findings from the morale measuring efforts were then shared with unit and Headquarter (HQ) leadership to calibrate the ground support required and shape the guidance to officers. Police Psychological Services Division (PPSD) continued to monitor the operational morale of the units across the deployment and highlighted sharp dips to unit leadership for timely investigations and interventions. For morale motivating, PPSD highlighted areas that officers appreciated and the concerns that they had. Unit and HQ leaders were then able to look into the concerns and take steps to boost the morale of the officers at the frontline. Some of the interventions included provision of sanitizers, masks and Vitamin C supplements.

The police psychologists were also concerned with enhancing, maintaining, and restoring operational resilience, especially when officers are infected. For Resilience Management, a standby plan was developed early in anticipation of officers in the following three scenarios: (1) being potentially contaminated in the line of duty, (2) having family members and loved ones infected, and (3) being infected themselves. Psychological support plans and reassurance operations were prepared and approved early in the deployment. These proved useful when officers eventually came across contaminated subjects as well as when they had loved ones infected and when they themselves were infected. Having the operational resilience plans ready ensured a thorough and effective response in crisis.

Drawing from the Operations Psychology Framework (Ang et al., 2011) and the Resilience Framework (Khader, et al., 2007) in the SPF, which were modelled after the public health intervention model, the aforementioned interventions have been organized into three main tiers: (1) primary, (2) secondary, and (3) tertiary. Primary intervention aims to reduce the risk involved, secondary intervention aims to influence the interpretation of risk, whereas tertiary intervention aims to restore normalcy. In the context of the pandemic situation, primary interventions involve measures to reduce the risk of infection among all officers, secondary interventions involve measures to reassure the officers who are at a higher risk of infection, whereas tertiary interventions involve measures to restore normalcy for infected officers and those in close contact with them. Unlike other planned operations with a long lead time, the nature of the COVID-19 operations meant that the police were quickly thrust into action during the viral outbreak, therefore rendering much of the psychological preparation before deployment challenging.

The psychological support interventions at each tier are further categorized into three different levels: (1) individual, (2) unit, and (3) force-wide, and executed with the support of police officers and leaders at all levels. This is illustrated in the 3 x 3 psychological support intervention plan shown in Figure 2.

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Figure 2: 3 x 3 Psychological Support Intervention Plan

	Individual	Unit	Force-wide
Primary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Weekly messages and infographics to boost morale, self-care, and provide tips on managing stress from the COVID-19 pandemic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership tips for unit leaders</li> <li>Commander and command team ground visit and reassurance engagements</li> <li>Support tips for paracounsellors</li> <li>Morale sensing exercises of all officers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provision of vitamin Cs, thermometers, hand sanitisers for all officers</li> <li>Commissioner, Deputy Commissioners ground visit and reassurance engagements</li> </ul>
Secondary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Messages and infographics to reassure officers at higher risk (e.g. quarantine ops) and provide psychoeducation or relevant medical information</li> <li>PPSD helpline for emotional support, if required</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>COVID-19 Ops electronic morale sensing exercises for quarantine operations officers, officers deployed to foreign worker dormitories, frontline officers and staff department officers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provision of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and alternative accommodation, where needed</li> <li>Clear Rules of Engagement (ROE) from HQ on measures in policing during pandemic and for protection</li> <li>Message from Commissioner of Police</li> <li>Video call engagement by Commissioner of Police with officers deployed on the ground for COVID-related operations.</li> </ul>
Tertiary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PPSD helpline for emotional support, if required</li> <li>Provision of psychoeducation and reassurance materials</li> <li>Family reassurance or assistance</li> <li>Check-ins by PSPD psychologist and paracounsellors</li> <li>Leadership check-ins by unit leadership and Commissioner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>COVID-19 Ops electronic morale sensing exercises for close contacts with infected officers</li> <li>Provision of psychoeducation materials</li> <li>Team reassurance by Unit leaders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personal check-ins by Commissioner of Police</li> <li>Message from Commissioner of Police</li> </ul>

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## Primary

### (1) Individual Level Interventions

At the individual level, PPSD created and disseminated psychoeducational and morale-boosting messages and infographics for all police and civilian officers. These materials are disseminated through various means, such as internal communications (i.e., email broadcast message to all SPF officers), Workspace or via WhatsApp. The varied means of dissemination ensures that the materials will reach officers who may be away from office with no access to their emails. These messages and infographics provide practical tips on coping with the COVID-19 situation and remind officers to stay resilient and support fellow officers, family and friends (refer to Figures 3 and 4). Self-care tips for leaders are also included, given that leaders may experience stress from leading in a novel and dynamic threat environment.



Figure 3: Psychoeducational infographic disseminated to police officers



Figure 4: Morale-boosting message disseminated to police officers

### (2) Unit Level Interventions

At the unit level, leadership materials and resources are sent to unit leaders. These provide unit leaders with useful information on how to manage the morale of the team in these challenging times as well as the signs of burnout and stress to look out for in their officers. The paracounsellors nested within the units are also provided with infographics and materials on how best to support fellow officers who may be exhibiting the signs of burnout and stress (refer to Figure 5).

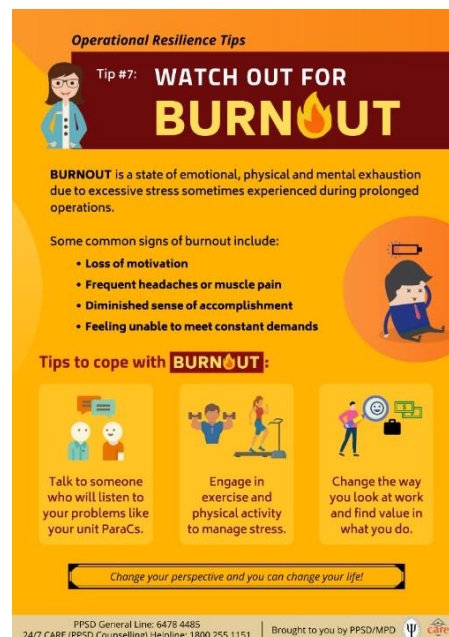


Figure 5: Psychoeducational infographic disseminated to unit leaders and paracounsellors

Apart from the leadership tips, the primary intervention at the unit-level involves peacetime morale sensing operations. This includes the Employment Engagement Survey (EES) that happens once every two years, as well as the Pulse survey that occurs at every six months interval. The peacetime morale sensing operations provide a baseline for comparison against the morale and confidence of the officers during specific operations, such as the current COVID-19 operations. Unit Commanders and leadership teams also provided frequent reassurance and information updates to their officers.

### (3) Force-wide Level Interventions

At the force-wide level, to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection among the officers, all police and civilian officers have been issued items such as vitamin Cs, thermometers, and hand sanitizers. These items allow the officers to boost their immune system and take the precautions as recommended by health agencies (e.g., sanitizing hands before eating). Commissioner, Deputy Commissioners, and senior leadership also provided visits and frequent reassurance updates to officers.

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## Secondary

### (1) Individual Level Interventions

At the individual level, PPSD has created reassurance materials for dissemination through internal communications as well as informal channels such as WhatsApp (refer to Figure 6). The Police Psychological Services Division (PPSD) helpline, a 24/7 helpline manned by PPSD psychologists, and trained senior paracounsellors, is also available for all officers should they require further emotional support beyond the reassurance materials.

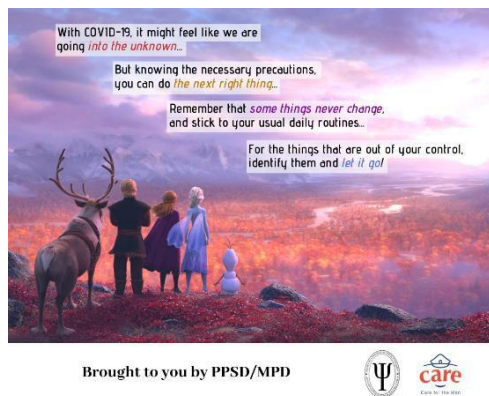


Figure 6: Reassurance material disseminated to police officers

### (2) Unit Level Interventions

At the unit level, to assess the impact of COVID-19 on our officers, PPSD has conducted regular PPSD Electronic Morale Sensing (PEMS) exercises to gather feedback on COVID-19 deployment and operations. PEMS exercises are conducted via FormSG, a form-builder tool developed by Singapore GovTech to create online forms that capture classified data. There are three main target groups, namely (1) officers deployed to the GQFs, (2) frontline officers, (3) officers from Staff Departments and Specialist Staff Departments, as well (4) officers deployed to foreign worker dormitories. Quantitative morale assessment is derived through officers' ratings on a 10-point Likert scale on two questions regarding current morale and overall confidence in fulfilling their operational duties. Additionally, three qualitative questions are asked to ascertain the officers' concerns, the support they may require during this period, as well as the areas that were executed well during the deployment.

PEMS exercises have allowed PPSD to assess how the morale and confidence scores of the officers evolve in relation to the developments of the COVID-19 situation locally and internationally and the impact on COVID-19 police operations. Apart from that, these exercises further function as a feedback channel by highlighting the concerns that officers have in relation to their roles in the COVID-19 operations (refer to Figure 7). Some common concerns include the risk of infection during deployment, manpower constraints, the provision and use of PPE, etc. Following each PEMS exercise, the morale and

confidence scores, as well as the concerns raised, the support required, and the areas done well are consolidated into a report and sent to the respective unit leaders for follow-up action. For concerns that warrant greater attention force-wide, they will be raised to police higher management whenever necessary.

Figure 7: Communications to police officers about PEMS exercises Force-wide Level Interventions

At the force-wide level, PPEs have been made available to the officers where needed. Alternative accommodation plans have also been put in place for officers who may require such arrangements, such as officers who have concerns about getting infected during duty and risk infecting their families if they were to return home.

Clear Rules of Engagement (ROE) from HQ on measures in policing during pandemic and for protection. This include when officers were advised to put on PPEs and masks as well as procedures for handling high risk persons while policing in a pandemic. These ROEs were frequently updated when new information on the virus was obtained and also aligned with the practices within the government. These as well as clear staff guidance to units helped allay much of the anxiety officers had policing in a pandemic.

Apart from this, the Commissioner of Police

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has also sent a message to update all officers about the COVID-19 situation as well as to assure them on the measures that have been taken to ensure their well-being. An update about the situation also serves to manage officers' expectations regarding the COVID-19 operations. The message also recognizes the officers for their efforts by highlighting and appreciating the areas of work that different units are engaged in. In addition, the Commissioner of Police will also be personally engaging with the officers deployed at the ground (for e.g., officers deployed at GQFs and foreign worker dormitories) via video calls.

## *Tertiary*

### *(1) Individual Level Interventions*

At the individual level, when an officer is infected with COVID-19, the Police Psychological Services Division (PPSD) helpline is made available to provide emotional support. If necessary, the officer will also be provided with a dedicated helpline which will be manned by a PPSD psychologist. The dedicated helpline will be used by the psychologist to conduct a personal check-in with the officer on his or her concerns and to provide psychological reassurance, if required. This will be done via either phone call or through WhatsApp. A trained paracounsellor will also be assigned to the officer to provide psychological support and address concerns. This includes providing psychoeducation on the possible psychological symptoms that the infected officer may have as well as a comprehensive guide on how to cope with his or her anxiety during this challenging period. Unit leaders are also encouraged to touch base with the infected officers' family members to check on any concerns they may have and provide reassurance.

### *(2) Unit Level Interventions*

At the unit level, when an officer is tested positive for COVID-19, PPSD conducts PEMS specifically for the officers who were in close contact with the infected officer, as well as the teammates and supervisors of the infected officer. These PEMS exercises allow PPSD to better understand how the news of the infected officer would affect the morale and overall confidence of the officers around him or her, as well as the specific concerns they may have after receiving the news.

Apart from the PEMS exercises, PPSD will also provide psychological reassurance materials to officers who were in close contact with the infected officer. These materials will be disseminated by paracounsellors in the unit.

Police Psychological Services Division (PPSD) will also be in touch with unit leaders to encourage them to provide timely reassurance to officers, such as information about disinfection works, identification of close contacts, availability of psychological support, and clarifications on work rearrangements.

### *(3) Force-wide Level Interventions*

At the force-wide level, the Commissioner of Police has made personal video calls to officers who had tested positive for COVID-19. An internal communications message has also been sent to update all officers about the situation as well as brief and reassure officers of the measures that have been taken. Apart from that, the message includes the psychological support services available for all officers, such as the availability of paracounsellors as well as the PPSD helpline.

## **Discussion**

### *Being Prepared*

This plan concerning infected officers was first conceptualized on 14 February 2020, which was less than a month into the COVID-19 operations and prior to the spike in local transmission cases as well as the first few confirmed cases within the police force. The early planning gave PPSD sufficient time to explore different options on how best to support the officers and to identify and work with the various stakeholders involved in the support plans. Examples of such stakeholders include PAD, which worked with PPSD on morale messaging, and the Operations Department, which worked with PPSD on information gathering for the COVID-19 Ops.

### *Prompt Response*

Conceptualizing the plan systematically at the different tiers and levels also allows PPSD to promptly identify what should be done when a new situation arises. For example, when the first two police officers were tested positive for COVID-19 in March 2020, PPSD was able to act swiftly to ensure that the psychological and physical needs of the infected officers, their units, and all other officers were taken care of. The systematic conceptualization also allowed for ease in assigning roles to the team (e.g., one officer to be in charge of the individual level plans, another in charge of unit level plans).

### *Being Flexible*

Beyond the initial conceptualization of the psychological support intervention plan, the PPSD team also convened every two weeks for a During Action Review (DAR) to discuss on three aspects, namely:

- (1) what has been done well,
- (2) what has not been done well, and
- (3) suggestions for improvement.

The fortnightly meetings empowered PPSD to adjust and update its plans and respond accordingly to the developments of the COVID-19 situation in Singapore. The flexibility of the plan ensures that the psychological needs of the police officers are fully and duly met.

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## *Insights from Past Operations*

PPSD drew insights from past operations, such as the quarantine operations for Monkeypox infection, in the planning and execution of the current COVID-19 operations. One insight would be the trend of morale and confidence scores. Based on past operations, the morale and confidence scores of the officers tend to be lower at the start of operations, as officers grapple with teething issues such as role clarity or logistical issues. As the operation progresses, the morale and confidence scores tend to stabilize when these issues get resolved. These past trends allowed PPSD to better manage expectations about the morale and confidence scores in the current COVID-19, which were eventually shown to be aligned with the trends of the past operations.

## *Using Technology*

PPSD has upgraded its morale sensing tools after a review of past morale sensing exercises. Traditionally, morale sensing exercises were conducted either on the ground (i.e., psychologists went on-site in person) or through the phone. Both methods were tedious and time-consuming, as it involves individually approaching or calling the officers to be sensed, and manually recording and collating their responses into an excel sheet. Apart from that, both methods were resource-intensive, requiring several psychologists and vehicles for transport to the site. The current COVID-19 operation is the first operation where PPSD conducted morale sensing exercises online (i.e., PEMS). With PEMS, PPSD psychologists can collect more responses within a shorter duration and with lesser manpower and logistics as compared to traditional morale sensing methods. This ensures that the morale sensing reports are sent to the respective unit leaders in a timely manner and enables swift follow-up actions to be taken.

## **Conclusion**

Crisis can strike anytime, and when it strikes, it strikes fast. It took only a month for Singapore to have its first case of COVID-19 following the emergence of the disease in China. Despite the tight timeframe, SPF has responded readily in the fight against COVID-19. PPSD developed a timely and comprehensive 3x3 psychological support intervention plan to provide all-rounded support for these officers. Regardless of the length of the operation, the psychological support plan helped ensure officers and leaders are supported while policing during a pandemic.

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