

Teaching Connections Podcast

Episode 11

Title: Perspectives on Mental Wellbeing in NUS:
A Panel Discussion (Part 1)

In this episode, we are pleased to have a panel comprising current NUS students and recent NUS alumni, all of whom are passionate about issues related to mental wellbeing:

- Tasneem Abdul Majeed, Year 3 Psychology/Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences (FASS), Autism Advocate, and “Beyond the Label” Mental Health Ambassador
- KHOO Yi Feng, Class of 2017, Southeast Asian Studies/FASS, Social Worker (Youth Mental Health) with [Limitless*](#)
- LIM Wei Jie, Class of 2017, Psychology/FASS, Founder of [Foreword Coffee**](#)

During this conversation, they will share their personal mental wellbeing stories, how these have impacted their student experiences at NUS, and the ways in which one can maintain one’s mental wellbeing in order to have an enriched student learning experience.

This episode is chaired by Dr Lee Li Neng, Associate Director of the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL).

* [Limitless](#) is a non-profit org which provides mental health support and therapy for youths aged 12-25, as well as public education and training for youths, parents, educators, and helping professionals.

** [Foreword Coffee](#) is a social enterprise that seeks to empower persons with intellectual disabilities through training + employment in specialty coffee industry)

Intro Music & Voiceover

“You are listening to the Teaching Connections podcast, brought to you by the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning, CDTL, National University of Singapore. Teaching Connections is an online teaching and learning space that aims to advance discussions and share effective practices and ideas related to higher education.”

In Part 1 of this episode, we meet our three guests who share their respective mental well-being journeys, and how it has informed and enriched their student experiences in NUS.

This episode is chaired by Dr Lee Li Neng, Associate Director of the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL).

Welcome/ Intro (00:52):

Lee Li Neng (LLN): “So hello everyone. My name is Li Neng and I am an Associate Director here at CDTL. Now in this episode we are so pleased to have with us three guests, all of them are, or were, students here in NUS so they are part of this larger family of NUS. And they have all one thing in common: they're all very passionate about issues that are related to mental well-being and in different ways, they are doing and contributing to this particular area. So now, I will let them introduce themselves first before I go further in this conversation, which we're going to have them so let's start with Tasneem, over to you.”

Tasneem (Tas): “Thanks so much Dr. Lee. So hi everyone, my name is Tasneem Abdul Majeed, but everyone just calls me Tas, it's easier to remember and pronounce. I'm a fourth year student here at NUS studying Psychology. I'm also a member of NUS College, and outside of school, I'm attempting to be a peer advocate for youth mental health. I used to struggle with high anxiety and panic attacks myself, and now I try to support other young people who are also struggling. So currently, I'm a youth ambassador with the [Resilience Collective](#) (or RC), and [Beyond the Label](#) (BPL). I'm also a [Peer Student Supporter](#) with NUS. So I basically befriend and offer support to students at the PitStop weekly, right, back to you Dr. Lee.”

LLN: “Thank you so much, Tas, for joining us today! And then, our second guest is Yi Feng. Yi Feng, over to you to introduce yourself.”

Yi Feng (YF): “Alright, hello everyone! My name is Yi Feng, and friends call me the mental health guy, for doing many things relating to mental health for the past 10 years. I graduated from NUS in 2017. I guess I had a bit of that lit because I always believed that I'm still a student and a lifelong student. And I can't really leave that NUS community because I really love the community. And I've met many great friends who are on this podcast together as well. So I graduated from 2017 with a Bachelors of

Arts Honours in Southeast Asian studies, with a minor in Psychology. And I seem to show the love I have [for] NUS I came back again in 2020 and graduated again in 2020 with a Graduate Diploma in Social Work. I'm currently a registered social worker working in the community, especially with young people with mental health issues, working with them to be able to find work and support them to live destiny-conscious. Some of the things that I've done in NUS previously, one of which, which we're going to talk a little bit more about as well, is that I founded a group in NUS where, in between 2015 to 2017, called the NUS Mental Health Wing, with the vision to achieve mental wellness for all undergraduates in NUS. So that's a little bit about me and over to you, Li Neng.”

LLN: “Okay, and our very last guest for today as our guest is Wei Jie, and we do want to tell us more about yourself.”

Wei Jie (WJ): “Yeah, hi everyone. My name is Wei Jie, I graduated from NUS in 2017. And I did Psychology back then. Currently, I'm the co founder and director of my social enterprise [Foreword Coffee](#), where we train and hire persons with disabilities, special needs as well as mental health conditions to work in our cafes, which are currently in eight locations in Singapore. In fact, there's also one at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music. Yeah, so people can find us there to have a cup of coffee and you know, get to learn more about people with disabilities, which we deal with day in and day out. Back in NUS, I was also in CAPT, College of Alice and Peter Tan, and also involved in many community projects. So I'm happy to be here to be part of this podcast to talk more about mental wellness.”

Part 1: On Personal Mental Well-being Journeys & Managing Emotions

LLN (04:30): “So thank you all so much for taking time out just to come here and share with us your experiences. And Foreword Coffee, as Wei Jie has shared, is located at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music at NUS. So for all those in NUS, if you're hearing this, pop over for a cup of coffee, it's a really nice place, I've been there.

So now after that commercial plug is over. Now, you all of you have been actively involved in so many different things down on the ground, right. And part of it is also that you were doing this as a student when you were here, and also outside and after that.

Maybe you can tell us a little bit more about some of the initiatives and things that you're doing on the ground, right, you're doing on the ground. So maybe tell us and elaborate a little bit more because what I'm hearing just now was a long list of different things. So maybe Tas, you want to start us off and tell us a little bit more about some of these initiatives and what you are doing a little bit more on the ground?”

(05:27)

Tas: “Thanks, Dr Lee. So I'll just give everyone a bit of context because I'm still a student, I still have one more year of undergraduate studies to go. So just maybe give everyone a bit of context about my student learning experience because it contributed a lot to what I did in the mental health sphere.

So my uni journey did start out a little rough. So as I mentioned earlier, I was part of an extremely competitive academic programme here at NUS. So it only admits about 2% of each student cohort. And my classmates were people who wore many hats. For example, one person will be a CCA leader, have a part time internship and have a double degree or double major all at once. So I really struggled with finding my way in that programme, especially since I came from a lower-performing JC (junior college). I mean, truly the programme also has its perks, for example, it taught me to be independent leader and learner, and also introduced me to a really great community of peers who were very driven. So when the pandemic hit for me, it was a very difficult time. Because back in JC, I struggled a lot with test anxiety and experienced high anxiety, panic attacks, insomnia, and I was still recovering from that experience.

And, little bit about my home life. I'm also the secondary caregiver to my severely autistic brother. So when school shifted to virtual learning, it was very difficult for me to balance my responsibilities as a caregiver with my education, because my brother, he's non-verbal number one, and he's also extremely aggressive. So he tends to lash out and my parents or myself, it happens about like four or five times a day. And when he does, he draws blood, because he is 180 centimeters and he's very strong. And also, because of his high level of needs, it was a highly stressful experience my parents and myself to juggle our work and school life and also look after him, especially after we lost our domestic helper who had been looking after him for a good five to six years of his life.

So, by the time it was the pandemic, my mental health kind of at the lowest point that it was. And then I used that experience because I had to like, live and learn and also discover new coping techniques. And in that process, it prompted me to speak out about my mental health journey to the Resilience Collective (RC). And subsequently from there, I think when I share my mental health journey through a Human Library, I think it was just like a slow like, uphill journey with different public speaking events where I spoke about youth mental health, my personal experience as a caregiver. And I also got to meet personnel from Beyond the Label, and also Caregivers Alliance Limited. I also began to volunteer for them as well. I did a few social media campaigns, and I feel very lucky to have gotten the opportunity. And subsequently, two semesters ago I decided to apply for the PSS (Peer Student Supporter) position at NUS.

So if the pandemic really taught me anything is that a lot more goes on behind the scenes than we think. So not all students have the luxury of focusing solely on their education, we'll never know what's going on in their private lives as well. And if all someone needs is a safe space or someone to be there for them, I was more than

willing to provide that emotional support, knowing my personal background and what I had to go through. I felt really alone, and I would have appreciated someone who was there for me. So what happened was that I went through six months of intensive training with the Office of Student Affairs (OSA). Then I started my first semester of duties in January (of 2022), and I will be continuing all the way until graduation. And I'm very lucky for that opportunity as well. Thanks so much, Dr. Lee, back to you."

LLN: "Thank you so much for sharing, it seems like and I'm hearing that you really went through a difficult period of time. And one of the things that you shared just now, maybe I just want to ask a little bit more so I can get to understand a little bit more. You shared about part of your journey of recovery was that you were able and was given the platform to share about your experiences through the Resilience Collective, right? Would you like to tell us a little bit more about that?"

(09:20)

Tas: "Sure, Dr. Lee. Actually it's quite a funny story, because I started being an advocate for autism when I was around 17. And that was when my mental health kind of deteriorated significantly for the first time. So prior to that I was nervous, high-strung. My parents didn't think anything of it. I didn't think anything of it. But it really dipped when I was in JC. It was awful; I was dealing with panic attacks every day, insomnia, I was sick 10 times (during) the school year, I took 10 MC(-days) off school because of anxiety.

And because I had a background in drama, and also public speaking was a hobby and I took classes and I took exams outside of secondary school, my parents suggested that I give a talk about my experience as a caregiver and sister to my autistic brother when I was 17 just for fun, and just to advertise on Facebook and maybe just reach out to family members. We expected about 10 people to show up. In the end, I think about 50 people showed up, which was terrifying but also exciting.

So I got to meet other special educators, people in the mental health and disability sphere. And I think when that happened again for a second time—when my mental health deteriorated again during the pandemic—you know, I thought, "Okay, what is something that would help me get back on my feet again? What is something that would give me a sense of motivation and sense of purpose? Because I really enjoyed that [sharing my mental health journey and engaging with those in the mental health & disability sphere]. It really gave me this confidence and hope in my personal abilities and strengths, when I did that when I was 17.

So when RC [Resilience Collective]. I think they advertised to the NUS website, they were doing a Human Library event at the CLB [Central Library] and they wanted individuals to share about their mental health journey, those that have survived it and wanted to share it with a public audience to raise awareness. So I thought, "Hey, why not?" It was a few months down the road, so I just signed up for that. I shared about my personal journey through a Google form; and I was made to attend a workshop

with the Resilience Collective, where they taught us how to engage an audience and how to share in a way that is appealing, but at the same time also helps the audience understand mental health, in its totality is a subject that one should be educated on.

So I went through that. It was a very scary experience, but I think it was very cathartic. And it was very interesting to hear the questions other youths had and other NUS students had about mental health, and also answering those, and also finding out more information and in reflecting further about my journey. And what they asked also helped me realise how much, like, gave me a good sense of how much people knew and what people are interested to find out about. So subsequently, that's the approach that I use for every, like all the mental health events that came subsequently. Thanks, Dr. Lee.”

LLN: “So I mean, you said something where we were sharing and people are asking you questions. Now, as you shared about your life, and that was cathartic for you, right? It seems to have helped you in terms of that sharing.

You also said that there are people who are asking, what some of the common questions that came when you started sharing about these different aspects of your life?”

(12:30)

Tas: “Oh, my goodness, there were some really strange questions. For example, “Can you tell me whether I have depression or not?” And when I first got that question, I'm like, “I don't think I'm authorised to answer that. I'm not a therapist!” But I think a response that I think really helps—because a lot of people have that question—you'll be surprised, and it's directed at me, someone who has no clinical experience whatsoever. So I say, “Okay, this is what I noticed when I was first diagnosed and leading up to my diagnosis. It may or may not be the case for you, and these are just the general symptoms of depression, from the DSM [the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#)], based on what I learned in [Abnormal Psychology] which was very helpful there. So and perhaps, if you were to look into it, here are some resources.” So that is one common question.

Another common question is, like, “How did your parents react?” I always get the question about the parents—“How did your parents react?”—and unfortunately, in my case and I think for a lot of young people, the parents usually don't have the most sensitive response to the first announcement or declaration that you you're struggling mentally and emotionally. And I really share with them the importance of, you know, open communication, and also being patient with yourself and your parents, because it's also a learning curve for them. And also, my personal journey—my friends and how they responded to my diagnosis and how I would like to be supported—which is really important, because there are a lot of young people who are experiencing mental health conditions, and also friends who want to support their peers who are struggling.

So I think in a nutshell, I would say questions about parents, about friends. I do get questions about how schools can better support students. But it's a very daunting question to answer. And social media, that's also a big one: How does social media affect my mental health? And how did it affect my attitudes towards recovery? And I have a really controversial answer to that I probably won't share today. But so generally, these four [questions]. Back to you, Dr. Lee.”

LLN: “So thanks for sharing with us the different questions that you have. I'm really curious about the the controversial answer that you might have to social media, but maybe we can talk a little bit more later on when we stop recording. But anyway, at this moment of time, right, another thing that we've been hearing very much is how the pandemic has hit you very, very hard, especially in this time, right? Maybe I'd also like to hear a little bit from Yi Feng.

Yi Feng, in your work, in working with the youth on the ground, I mean, tell us a little bit more about your work and what you do. And maybe also this observation about how the pandemic has changed things, right? Considering that this current generation of youth, we can consider them to be actually “ultra connected”, right, especially you know, through social media, and through other forms, whereby they are digital generation.

Do you think that the pandemic has really affected them in terms of their connection and how has that affected, maybe in terms of their mental well being, in other areas of their lives? Based on your interactions and your observations so far, so over to you.”

(15:40)

YF: “Yeah, Li Neng, that's such a great question.

I think COVID-19 has not spared any of us. I think let's put it out first in that space. It has claimed every one of us. I think whether we know, each of us, I think know, one another, I think [someone who] was gone through not only perhaps the difficulties, right, [whether] physically or biologically, but more so, I think also mentally, right? It really created a lot of, I think, anxieties surrounding COVID. [COVID] Anxiety was a very real thing, especially at the earliest phase of the pandemic, where many people did not know what was actually happening: “Will I get it or not? Or if I had been exposed, will I infect my family?” There were a lot of anxieties and with anxiety, it is often about the fear of the unknown.

Interestingly, I think in [the] COVID-19 period, we've seen about a two-time increase in terms of the youths seeking help at [Limitless](#), where I work as a social worker. And when we provide case work and counselling support services to youths between 12 to 25 years old, [it was a] two-time increase between 2020 to 2021.

A surge in mental health needs in that period was not something, in every pandemic, is not something that is unexpected. At the same time, even while it was not unexpected, it's a very real and very painful thing because people are suffering. It could be even if they are very well-connected online, loneliness—the epidemic of loneliness—is real. People could still feel very isolated.

In that period of time, we were using this term, right, “social distancing”. A lot of times I was thinking about changing the word, I was advocating for the change of the word, not social distancing, but “safe distancing”.

Because in that period of time, more than anything, we must not be socially distant. We need to be socially connected. And social connections can take off in different areas as well. Definitely, one of the silver linings that emerged from COVID-19 was the adoption of tele-health. Essentially, [the pandemic] just kind of like, push it forward, the whole telehealth movement, right? People are using [and are] very much more open towards a tech-based services, seeing their therapist online [and] virtually, as compared to the past where there might be a bit more traditional approaches to say that, hey, you know, privacy and confidentiality methods we need to meet face to face in a room. But right now, COVID-19 really kind of accelerated the shift towards the adoption of tele-health measures.

And I think, based on what you mentioned earlier, on social media as well. Social media has been a platform where people can use it, right? Well, to support some people, I always say that [social media] has both sides: it's a friend and foe as well. Often, too much usage of social media, too much time spent on that can really disrupt a lot of the day-to-day processes. But how can we also “rent” social media, or use social media as a tool that can support us in supporting ourselves and our peers? And that's a question that I really want to leave with the listeners to critically about.

I share an example. At Limitless itself we use Discord, which was traditionally a platform that people use for gaming, right, to connect over gaming. And we use that for mental health support, [where] we create a community peer support platform, using Discord for people to connect with one another where they could share stories, right, especially like what Tasneem has shared. Real stories, authentic stories that could connect with one another. And not just that, they could reach out to one another for support, and also receive the validation, and also reach out towards professionals who are on the platform itself, [like my] colleagues who are on the platform.

[Looking] at that itself. COVID-19 has really spared none of us. We have all, I think been really going through it really tough [*sic*]. But there has also been lessons that we can learn for COVID-19, if we see as a teacher. And one of which was certainly the movement towards the adoption of tele-health. And with that, I think that question is, how can we use social media as offering?”

LLN: “So I mean, this great thing that you’re talking about, like people are becoming much more open to different and new ways of just receiving support for both their physical and also their mental health.

But one of the things that you talked about was this, you mentioned this term—an epidemic of loneliness. I just want to open this up to every one of you here that is joining me today. Do you all feel that there’s an epidemic of loneliness, especially among NUS, even when you were studying here in the NUS, right, or you were here or when you’re still studying here, right? So, do you feel that there is an epidemic of loneliness happening? Maybe Wei Jie would like to share with us a little bit?”

(20:29)

WJ: “Um, personally I feel that this this term—epidemic of loneliness—perhaps perpetuate even more so during COVID-19. But I would say that it also exists in, you know, college life, when we’re staying in the hostels, in the [student life] in NUS. Sometimes, when you are really expected to participate in many activities, in your Halls, in your College and things like that, but sometimes you really just want to be alone as well, you know, to recover your energy and your personal time by yourself. There’s this conflict that you may face, “I don’t want to be left out of the of the groups”. But yet, you know, I may not have the energy to go for all of it, how do I balance that?”

So I think there’s definitely a balancing factor that we need to take note of, especially when we are living in community life. And for myself, I’ve stayed in the College of Alice & Peter Tan (CAPT) for three years: Year One, Year Two, and Year Four. And I do experience this personally, also, you know, I’m there to, you know, be involved in groups. But being an introvert, I also want to have my own personal time. And then that is a tension that I need to navigate with. And even though you know, it’s all about the community, you know—CAPT talks about community engagement and things like that. But then within the College, sometimes there can be just too much activities.

LLN: “So you talk about, like, there’s a lot of demands on you, especially socially. But that may or may not always help you as an individual, depending on your inclination and personality-wise, right? So in this case, you’re talking about even when you are involved in so many things, you can also feel isolated, like is loneliness an issue for you, Wei Jie, or among your friends, when you were staying on the [Residential Colleges]?”

(22:22)

WJ: “I think that came up more when I’m a returning senior in Year Four, right, because I had that disconnect in my third year where I wasn’t in the College, and then the people that I know are no longer there, or I need to make new friends again. And these are people from the new batches of Year Ones and Year Twos. So I needed to put in more effort, you know, in terms of getting to know new people. And to get to know new people, I need to participate in more activities.

At Year Four, you know, you also have other priorities. So for myself, I was looking into starting my business already: getting to understand, you know, the social enterprise ecosystem and things like that. So, there's definitely conflicting interests down there, and you know, putting in more effort and energy, and that saps up my energy during those periods.”

LLN: “So thank you for sharing. I mean, Tasneem, you were sharing like, you know, your ability to share seems to open up for people to connect. Do you think this whole idea of isolation was something that you experienced as well, that you were sharing [earlier], [that] it was hard for other people to understand?”

(23:30)

Tas: “Yeah, definitely. Dr. Lee. I think the isolation...although I do agree with Wei Jie, when I was in my USP dormitory before it became NUS College, I experience a lot of loneliness. Because there's also that, apart from the fact where sometimes you can live in a community and because of your personality—I am a huge introvert; I'm a 97%. Introvert actually—so it was very difficult for me to participate in all the big activities, although I was living with people constantly.

I think the isolation really hit when I began schooling from home. Because as I mentioned earlier, I had to balance my responsibilities as the caregiver and a student at the same time. And I was in my second year, and usually in your second year, there's a bit more independence compared to your first year. There's a bit more support, especially in the USP community when you have a mentor in your first year. And people check in on you a little bit more because they know you're new and you're still figuring things out. When you're in your second year, you're expected to be more independent, and you're expected to lead as well, for some individuals.

And for me, it really hit when the lines between a working space and a resting space were blurred. Because if everyone's working from home, there's really no work space and play space and rest space. So for me, when my parents heard that I'll be staying at home and when we lost our domestic helper who would look after my brother. I have two working parents: my mom is a part time lecturer, my dad is a chief psychologist, extremely busy people. So I had to take on additional responsibilities, although my workload did not change, in order to meet my brother's needs because he was on HBL [home-based learning] as well and his needs are extremely high. So we constantly need someone to be supervising him, to be looking after him, making sure he does not injure or put himself in danger. So I [had] to take on responsibilities, for example picking him up after school with my mum, because he's aggressive. So if he hits her and she's down, there's no one out there who can help us. And sometimes I'll even have to help him directly with his HBL and, my chores at home increased like, four fold, you know, doing the laundry, cleaning the dishes, sweeping, mopping the floor, all of that, sanitising all my brother's belongings.

I think, because I had to take on additional responsibilities, I believe I was late for tutorial about four times, because I had to pick up my brother from school and his dismissal time clashed directly. So, [missing] 30 minutes in a let's say one-hour tutorials, basically half your learning is kind of stagnated. And I have to do the embarrassing thing, where I'm going to a [Zoom] breakout room, everyone's camera and mics are off and ask, "Can you update me on what just happened? Because I have no idea what happened! I had to email that profs in advance multiple times saying "I'm sorry, I'm gonna be late again, you know, this happened." And it got so bad to the point where I was doing chores the whole day, and then I would have to study from 12 midnight to like, 5am at night to get peace and quiet in the house.

So I remember actually and it was quite funny; this was in Dr. Lee's class, because this was just a fresh memory. What happened was that I had to do a presentation in class. And because it was fasting month and we had all these responsibilities, everyone in my family and I also had school to take care of because it was exam period. So all of that culminated, and I only got one hour of rest before that presentation. So I thought, "Okay, let me just like, power through this for the sake of my group, and just go home, and rest." That did not happen because it was a laboratory module and we were presenting a dataset, and we did something completely wrong. So after the presentation, we had to go back and fix it for another three hours. So at the end of the whole thing, I couldn't even like stand up straight. I walked out, I just found a bench [and] I passed out on it for like, one hour? I just don't know what happened. I think I fell asleep, or I passed out, I don't know what happened.

I was just there and the thing is, I can't really talk to anyone about such experiences. Well, not in a way where someone can empathise fully. Because whenever I did try to speak to my peers about it, they will just go on about, "Oh, my parents are annoying too. Yeah, school is stressful, everyone goes through it, you know, you study at NUS for a reason. so and so." And after a while I just get frustrated, so I would just direct the conversation somewhere else. And I think when you are looking after someone with a disability, it's something you really have to experience to understand. So that's when the loneliness really hit me the hardest.

Yep, so in a nutshell, it was it was a difficult experience. But I think you know, we live and learn. Back to you, Dr. Lee."

LLN: "So I mean, thank you so much for sharing this, Tas. And I'm so sorry that this module really caused you some stress!

But I think one of the things that you articulated that that seems to be the case is whereby when you sometimes, when we share your experiences with other people, that people actually don't know how to respond, and they may actually give well-intentioned comments to try to make you feel better. But instead, it comes across as dismissive of what you're going through, instead of actually establishing a kind of connection. And then somewhat actually indirectly contributes to this sense of

isolation. You are part of a group, you are in a group intensively. Yet at the same time, you feel alone because people cannot really understand.

Now, maybe I'll ask Yi Feng this. Yi Feng, is this what you mean, when you talk about epidemic of loneliness?"

(29:20)

YF: "I think the idea of which is that, we can feel lonely even when we are around others. And exactly like what you mentioned, Li Neng, is that people could say things to you and be kind in that sense, but they will never be able to exactly walk in our shoes. And relating to that, then, even though, even if people can't walk in our shoes, we could still have that connection, right? If we're willing to come towards the same level, towards speaking with one another.

But generally speaking, I think we can acknowledge that we will never be able to entirely know the other person's world. We all live in different, we have really unique lives. And if there's one thing that really gets to me a lot as well, I think, among many of the students is that—and even I think among us as professionals, right—we wear the badge of busyness almost like it's something to be proud of. And it is not, and our worth is not just based on our work or achievement. We are just worthy, period, right? Instead of just thinking about the fear of missing out, instead of thinking about not enough, we are enough, we are worthy. And I think that's something to think about that internally, we may not feel as lonely, that if we are connected in feeling this way, we may not be alone, we may not be that alone in going through that."

Outro Voiceover

"Thank you for tuning in to the CDTL podcast."

Outro Music
