



On COVID-19 and Racism

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020, after the virus was reported in over 100 countries with potential risk of global spread. Fear of the virus lurks in the heart of the public. But, more insidiously, there lies another problem behind the mask of this fear – *racism*.

COVID-19 was first reported in Wuhan, China, and was labelled by many as the “China-virus” and the “Wuhan Virus”. On 26 January 2020, French newspaper *Courrier Picard*, published an article with the title “Alerte jaune” (Yellow alert). More recently, US President Donald Trump called the virus “Chinese Virus” in multiple tweets. Even after the official virus name was announced by WHO on 11 February 2020, news reports continued to label the virus with such racial undertones.

Unlike its labels, COVID-19 does not respect Chinese borders and has since spread globally. News reports on COVID-related racism have increased alongside the increase in infections. People of Asian descent have become targets of these violent acts, merely because they are, or resemble, Asians. A recent case was of a Singaporean student assaulted in London, where the attackers yelled, “I don’t want your coronavirus in my country”. This unfortunate example of violence and hate crime has indeed felt too close to home for many Singaporeans.

Yet, aside from the overt displays of violence and hate crimes, there are also many other subtle discriminations and “microaggressions” that have unfortunately become a part of our daily lives.

Why does racism come hand-in-hand with pandemics?

Racism does not happen overnight; it is ever present and often results in division among our global society. In a pandemic, racism can be seen primarily as a psychological defense mechanism in response to feelings of fear, anxiety, and insignificance arisen from the pandemic.

During a pandemic, people generally have one thing in mind – to survive. There is a tendency to affiliate one’s own self to a group to seek a sense of security and belonging when faced with threats to survival. Unfortunately, self-protection at the cost of others leads to a sense of hostility towards other groups to a point where there is complete withdrawal of empathy and compassion. In this



instance, hostile behaviours and aggressive attitudes are targeted at all individuals with Asian ethnicity.

This overgeneralisation that all “Asian people have coronavirus” occurs as a result of “in-group” individuals projecting their own fears and flaws onto the “out-group” to avoid responsibility and blame. It is natural to have such a tendency, but it should not be at the expense of others. Instead, this situation must be managed collaboratively as one human race.

How do we stop racism?

As much as racism is wreaking havoc amidst this outbreak, there are still genuine and altruistic acts all over the world with people working together in the face of this crisis. Here are some suggestions to move away from racism:

1. Acknowledge that our emotions are valid. As pandemics typically bring up feelings of fear and anxiety, it is important for us to first notice and validate our own fears before making a conscious choice not to perpetuate acts of racism.

2. Reach out and show support. As much as we are worried and concerned, others would feel the same in this crisis. Reach out to others who may need your support. Sometimes, speaking up for someone or simply listening to another person’s concerns can be a great help to those who may feel targeted and overwhelmed.

3. Embrace differences. It is necessary to see beyond our “in-group”, as differences among us can serve as a good teacher. All of us are different and unique in our own special ways and there is no need to push another down to make ourselves feel elevated. Ignorance, in this case, is not bliss.

4. Educate to prevent potential stigmatization. Anxiety and fear tend to hook onto false news, which feeds into uncertainty and stigmatization. Education on how the virus is spread, being conscious about not making risk determinations based on race or nationality, and speaking out on racism will go a long way towards reducing discrimination.

5. Stand together and seek help. Anyone who has experienced any acts of racism, not only those in the face of COVID-19, can stand up and speak up. No one should ever have to go through these acts alone. Reporting to management and the authorities should you notice these acts occurring could be a big step towards empowering change.

Every step against racism is a step forward, regardless of how small it is. Together, we can stop racism, one step at a time.