

LIFE

Emotional response

As well as overcoming the physical challenges posed by COVID-19, there is a need to tackle the psychological fallout from the pandemic, **Li Yingxue** reports.

Five days after Wuhan, capital of Hubei province, was locked down in January, Liu Zhengkui and his team started an operation of psychological assistance and psychological crisis intervention to help people at the epicenter of the pandemic.

"Usually we start the operation right away when an emergency happens, but the pandemic is different because it's an infectious disease, so it took us a couple days to figure out how to proceed," Liu, a researcher at Institute of Psychology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, explains.

Liu spent almost three months in Wuhan providing psychological assistance to local medical workers, recovered COVID-19 patients and community staff since March. At the end of August, he will return to continue his work.

Initially, the operation was planned to last for a year, but recently Liu's team has managed to secure the funding and support to extend it by two years.

"Large-scale disasters always have long-term influence on people. For people in the core area of the Wenchuan earthquake, its influence has lasted for five years," Liu says. "The influence of the pandemic may last as long as three years for people in Wuhan."

Liu says when a disaster happens, the public's attitude usually goes through three steps — nervous and terrified first, then angry, before gradually going back to normal.

"In the first phase, people think their lives are threatened, and then, when they realize their lives or work are unaffected by the disaster, society needs an emotional release and the anger will gradually fade away over time," Liu explains.

In Liu's mind, as transmission prevention has become the norm, the public's mentality also flows into a new phase.

"Social distancing is still required, which will affect people's emotions. There are occasionally new cases showing up in some places in China, which will still make people in those locales feel nervous again," Liu says.

"The prompt reaction to control the spread of the pandemic when it reoccurs will calm local people more quickly than the first wave, such as the cluster of cases which originated at Beijing's Xinfadi wholesale market," he says.

A seven-day self-help online training camp was launched by Liu's team at the end of January. A special version of the training camp for medical workers went online on Feb 23 followed by a version for parents and children.

The training camp takes one person 10 to 20 minutes each day to learn how to cope with stress and manage their emotions.

According to Liu, the core content of the training camp is based on the courses and intervention plans that are recommended by the WHO and the Chinese Psychological Society, and have been widely applied in many post-disaster psychological rebuilding operations worldwide.

"The content is combined with psychology research literature and also experiential decompression training," Liu adds.

"We also have an online psychological counseling team. If there are situations that the person who takes part in the camp cannot deal with alone, the specialists will



Top: Gao Yongzhe (center), a doctor with the department of neurology at Zhongnan Hospital of Wuhan University, conducts psychological counseling for visitors with problems related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Hubei province on May 14. ZHAO JUN / FOR CHINA DAILY **Above:** Medical workers at Shenyang Anning Hospital call on a hotline for psychological issues related to the pandemic in Liaoning province on Feb 12. YU HAIYANG / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

offer help," he says. So far, around 250,000 people have finished this online training camp, Liu says.

Liu's team was founded in 2008. They helped people affected by the Wenchuan earthquake. The team includes six tutors and a dozen students.

Liu says the strength of one team is not enough. Therefore, their team produced a list of more than 800 psychology service institutions across the country and trained them

to be able to help their local communities.

Technology has also played an important role in this operation. More than 1,000 smart bracelets have been distributed to medical workers, recovered COVID-19 patients and community staff.

"The bracelet can warn people if he or she has a violent mood swing and push some information about how to manage the emotions," Liu says.

Besides helping in Wuhan, Liu's team has also opened a nationwide

hotline for people to ask for help. More than 400 experienced psychological counselors take shifts to answer the calls.

Li Huijie, a member of the National Alliance of Psychological Aid, is one of the volunteers manning the phones for the hotline.

Li stresses that it's normal for the public to experience feelings of worry, fear and anxiety, and people should understand and accept this situation.

"When a crisis happens, some peo-

ple will exhibit certain emotional and physical behaviors they would otherwise not display. It is a normal reaction for people in an abnormal situation," Li explains.

Li says the pandemic has affected the five basic needs of people — a sense of safety, trust and control, self-esteem and affinity. As the pandemic is brought under control and the economy begins to recover, the psychological impact of the pandemic is fading.

"Each person should have a little knowledge about psychological crisis intervention and learn some scientific methods to self-regulate when a crisis happens," she says, adding that once people feel they can't live their normal life, with regular social contacts or a feeling of happiness, they can ask for professional help.

According to Liu, so far there are more than 6,500 cases of people who have contacted the hotline asking for help.

Jiang Changqing, chief physician at department of clinical psychology, Beijing Anning Hospital, Capital Medical University, says that the tension in intimate relationships and parent-child relationships is a prominent problem alongside anxiety and fear for the public during the pandemic.

"For people, the social functions include work, interpersonal communication and also family life, and if people only put focus on one aspect, it's easy to cause problems," Jiang explains.

Jiang says a key rule to regulate the relationships between parents and their children or couples is to

maintain self-censorship and ask whether the goal and the action are consistent.

"Usually, in most families, the intention is good, so people need to reflect whether their behavior is good or bad, and make sure to act in a way that is conducive to accomplishing what they want," Jiang says.

"For example, if you want your child to make progress, by making too many negative comments, you may not achieve the desired goal," he says.

During the pandemic, for people who live alone, Jiang says they need to keep in touch with their family and friends, as close family contact and social support is an important foundation to a sense of security.

Jiang says that, even though the pandemic has limited people's sphere of activities, the public should try to maintain their regular schedule and get their life back to normal.

"Rules and a sense of control is a dose of good medicine for anxiety and panic," Jiang says.

He advocates for people to "self-check" by communicating with friends and family to find out whether or not they are exhibiting any change in their behavior, or acting more — or less — cautious than they should be.

"For example, if someone is wearing a protective suit, an N95 mask and goggles to go out while others are just wearing masks, it shows signs of over cautious behavior," Jiang says.

As well as learning the procedures for, and scientific reasons behind, the various pandemic prevention measures, practice is another way to strengthen the sense of control.

"This can be seen with medical workers in Wuhan. They may have felt a bit afraid when they entered the negative pressure ward to treat the COVID-19 patients, but after practicing for several days, they became sure that if they followed the necessary safety measures step-by-step, they wouldn't be infected," Jiang says.

Jiang arrived in Wuhan on Feb 20, to help the medical assistance team from Beijing. According to him, around 28 percent of the medical workers often have insomnia or their sleep is restless and filled with vivid dreams, and less than half of them have problems with their appetite or digestion due to the pressure and nervousness they experienced.

Liu and his team arrived in Wuhan on March 3. Their main focus was the medical workers and the COVID-19 patients.

Liu later noticed that the city's front line community workers were also under a lot of pressure during the pandemic, so his team decided to expand their scope of help.

According to Liu, Zhang Dingyu, head of Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital, arranged for all front line medical workers to take turns in taking two weeks' leave.

"The break can help them to deal with their emotions," Liu explains. "Zhang also asked our team to arrange training for them to enhance their psychological resilience, as well as to learn how to help the patients manage their emotions if there is a second wave of the pandemic," Liu says.

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US ginseng farmers hit hard by trade tensions, COVID-19

CHICAGO — Jiang Mingtao, a ginseng farmer in Marathon County in the US state of Wisconsin, has maintained the daily routine of taking care of his ginseng fields, weeding and spreading hay to prevent small animals from digging and eating the crop.

Harvest will start in less than a month, but Jiang is a bit worried. Trade tensions between China and the United States have dealt a big blow to his ginseng cultivation business, and now the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic has further plunged the operation into uncertainty.

"As there is still inventory on the market, we have postponed many harvests until next year, and will probably harvest between a quarter and a half of our ginseng field (this year)," Jiang says.

Jiang launched Marathon Ginseng International in 2010. With China being a leading consumer of ginseng, Jiang has been targeting the Chinese market from the beginning. As of 2015, the company exported half of its production to



Left: Ginseng farmer Jiang Mingtao at his company in Marathon County in the US state of Wisconsin. **Right:** Jiang inspects his ginseng field on Thursday. PHOTOS BY LIU YA'NAN / XINHUA

the Chinese market.

The stay-at-home orders imposed at the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic reduced the number of workers at the farm. Then Chinese buyers and US producers could not travel freely. "We have not received any Chinese purchase orders so far, so the export

side of the business has been severely hurt."

Jiang attended the China International Import Expo in 2018 and 2019, where he got acquainted with many Chinese businesses and clients and signed letters of intent for cooperation.

"Due to quarantine policies, I



cannot attend this year's CIEE," Jiang says sullenly. "But our distribution partners in China may attend the fair."

Wisconsin ginseng enjoyed a good reputation in China. In 2017, before tariffs started, the state exported 14 million dollars worth of ginseng to China alone, up more

than 16 percent from 2016. The US' total ginseng exports were valued at about 30 million dollars in 2017, and China was the biggest buyer.

Now there are few flights between China and the US, and Wisconsin's ginseng export to China has decreased dramatically. "Many ginseng farmers (here) plan

to retire this year, and are selling their tractors, planters and ginseng-picking machines," Jiang says.

As for Jiang, he is shifting focus to sales within the US. At the early stage of the pandemic, he provided ginseng tea free of charge to more than 1,500 local households. He also promoted wearing masks and introduced Chinese experiences of quarantine on the company's social media accounts.

"Our Chinese partners sent us protective masks. We also bought some. Together we donated these masks to local hospitals and nursing homes," Jiang says.

As for the prospect of the ginseng industry, Jiang says, "Until the pandemic is under control, and until China-US relationship improves, I am not optimistic about the ginseng industry."

He notes that ginseng is a niche product and has a unique presence in China and the world, and ginseng cultivation in Wisconsin will continue, albeit on a smaller scale for now.

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