

Praise for *Pandemic Minds: COVID-19 and Mental Health in Hong Kong*

‘The almost three-year-long COVID-19 pandemic was difficult for many, especially amongst low-income families. We are still suffering from the long COVID of mental health. Mental wellness of the population during COVID-19, particularly amongst those who had been quarantined, was overlooked by authorities. *Pandemic Minds* provides many insights to prevent repeating mistakes again.’

—**Paul S.F. Yip**, director, Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention,
University of Hong Kong

‘*Pandemic Minds* is a vital and telling book, with moving stories of the huge impact of COVID-19 on people in Hong Kong. This book also offers the prospect of a silver lining from this collective disaster, namely that it is now more possible to speak about mental health problems, and that COVID-19 may in fact have helped to reduce mental health stigma.’

—**Sir Graham Thornicroft**, professor of community psychiatry,
King’s College London

‘A thoughtful and well-researched account of the many different facets of the COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong. Kate Whitehead’s engaging narrative and case studies bring back to life memories of a time that challenged the mental health and well-being of so many of us and will help us all to reflect upon and learn from the experiences that we shared.’

—**Hannah Reidy**, clinical psychologist

‘*Pandemic Minds* delves into the profound psychological aftermath of the global crisis and how it has reshaped our understanding of community and mental health care. This book is an essential blueprint for anyone committed to the cause of mental health in a post-pandemic world that will resonate with readers long after the last page is turned.’

—**Candice Powell**, CEO, Mind HK

‘The Hong Kong COVID-19 response was characterised by a top-down, disease-based approach with little thought given to psychological and social well-being. The power of this book lies in the individual narratives. I would encourage anyone with an interest in those times to take a walk in some other Hong Kong shoes.’

—**David Owens**, honorary clinical assistant professor in family
medicine, University of Hong Kong

Pandemic Minds

COVID-19 and Mental Health in Hong Kong

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Introduction

As COVID-19 spread across the globe, it took the lives of millions of people. Technology and social media at our fingertips, we watched in real time as countries scrambled to respond to this unprecedented crisis. But there was no playbook for a pandemic of this scale, and governments were forced to prioritise physical health above all else. Yet, as the months wore on, it became clear that the virus was taking a toll on our mental well-being too. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), rates of anxiety and depression surged globally by 25 percent in just the first year of the pandemic (WHOa, 2022).

Hong Kong's battle with COVID-19 was a gruelling one. The first case was reported on January 23, 2020, and the government swiftly implemented measures such as social distancing, mask mandates, cross-border travel bans, and mandatory quarantine regulations. For two years, these efforts kept the virus at bay. However, in March 2022, Hong Kong was hit hard. The financial district's streets were deserted, restaurants and bars were closed, and supermarket shelves were empty. Many elderly residents remained unvaccinated, and the

city recorded the highest number of COVID-19 deaths per capita globally.

The WHO defines mental health as ‘a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community’ (WHOc, 2022). Yet for many in Hong Kong, the pressure of prolonged isolation, repeated school closures, business closures, job losses, and the ever-present fear of infection severely challenged their mental well-being. The tension on the street was palpable, as masked people hurried to and from home. Tempers flared on short fuses. As the demand for mental health care surged, the public mental health care system buckled under the pressure. Patients faced years-long waits for an initial consultation.

In March 2022, a study by the mental health charity Mind HK found that 38 percent of respondents reported their mental health had worsened in the preceding two months. Almost half (49.9 percent) showed symptoms of mild to severe depression, and 41.3 percent showed symptoms of mild to severe anxiety (Mind HK, 2022).

It wasn’t until a year later, on March 1, 2023, that the city’s three-year mask mandate was finally lifted. But many people continued to wear face masks in public. Officially, the pandemic was over, but the mood on the street didn’t match the government’s HK\$100 million ‘Hello Hong Kong’ campaign to welcome back tourists.

Rather than rising phoenix-like from the ashes, Hong Kong emerged battered and bruised. The city was still reeling from the 2019 protests when the three-year pandemic hit. Businesses closed, more than 200,000 people left—the biggest population drop in more than 60 years—and many were struggling financially. Hong Kong needed time to recover from a tumultuous four years.

Mental health professionals had been warning of a looming crisis for years. The signs were there: a surge in suicides, studies revealing alarming levels of anxiety and depression throughout the city. Yet it was only after the mask mandate was lifted that the true extent of the crisis became apparent. In a series of shocking incidents that shook the city to its core, a wave of violent stabbings left residents reeling. On June 2, 2023, a man with a history of mental illness fatally stabbed two women at a shopping mall. Just a week later, another man attacked a woman near an MTR station, leaving her with serious injuries. And on June 18, a 29-year-old McDonald's worker was arrested after he assaulted his store manager with two knives following an argument about his work performance. As people laid flowers for the victims, calls grew for an overhaul of the city's mental health services and greater support for those in need.

This book delves deeper than the cold, hard data found in scholarly articles about the toll of the pandemic on mental well-being in Hong Kong. With compassion and curiosity, it seeks to reveal the human side of the crisis. Rather than pointing fingers at the government's policies, it serves as a record of Hong Kong's journey, for future reference. For those still grappling with the aftermath, it offers a chance for reflection and healing, providing both a sense of solidarity and practical tools for coping. By going beyond the numbers, we can glean insights from a city that endured one of the longest COVID-19 pandemic periods and be better prepared for whatever may come next.

One of the positive outcomes of the pandemic is that it's brought mental health to the forefront of public conversation. While there is still a stigma about mental health in Hong Kong, perceptions are slowly changing, and it is becoming more acceptable to discuss these issues openly.

This book presents a rich tapestry of perspectives, of both men and women of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds. While the majority of narratives come from Hong Kong Chinese residents, reflecting the local population, the experiences of eight other nationalities are also represented for a more inclusive picture. These accounts are genuine and told in the individuals' own voices. To foster candour, contributors were given the choice to use their full name, first name, or a pseudonym, as indicated at the beginning of each section.

Speaking openly about mental health takes courage, and I'm grateful to those who shared their personal stories for this book. They did so in the knowledge that their experiences could help others. When we are open about our struggles, it makes it easier for others to come forward. Many of those interviewed said that talking about their experiences helped them process what had happened, and for some, reflecting on those tumultuous years allowed them to reframe their experiences. One pilot even reached out after the interview to say that sharing his story gave him the courage to seek counselling. Such is the power of voicing your struggles and being heard. Though the stories are personal and specific to Hong Kong, the emotions they invoke are universal, and the insights on mental health can be applied worldwide.

The pandemic laid bare a stark divide between the haves and have-nots in Hong Kong. Those with means were able to weather the storm with relative ease, buoyed by their resources. They transitioned to remote work, ensconced in spacious homes that accommodated comfortable work and study set-ups. They could afford extended hotel quarantines and travelled when the rest of the world opened up. And if they needed mental health support, private therapy was readily available. That is not to say the affluent were immune to

mental health struggles—far from it—but the odds were tipped in their favour.

But for the working class, especially those in manual labour and the service industry, the pandemic brought job losses and financial insecurity. Many lacked savings to fall back on and were forced to endure cramped living conditions that strained family relationships. Those who sought mental health support through the public system faced a daunting 40-month waiting list.

As a mental health counsellor during the pandemic, I saw mostly clients who were fortunate enough to afford private practice fees. Many had never experienced mental health issues and were alarmed at how the prolonged disruptions were affecting their well-being. There was an increase in anxiety and stress-related issues, and some people were struggling with panic attacks for the first time. As the pandemic continued, mental health and relationship challenges stemming from stress, fear, anger, and loneliness became more common. Without intervention, early symptoms can escalate to depression and PTSD and lead to substance abuse.

I provided support to cargo pilots who were struggling with the intense pressure of their airline's demanding closed loop system, which kept them away from home and loved ones for six-week stretches. These men, accustomed to maintaining emotional control and clear thinking in crises, were now pushed to their limits.

In mid-2022, I saw the growing demand for mental health services and decided to offer *pro bono* counselling at a community centre for migrant domestic workers. This was a group with no access to mental health support. These women faced high levels of stress, primarily due to financial concerns and worries about their families back home. Despite their incredible resilience, they were in urgent need of emotional support.

I also taught small groups Trauma and Tension Releasing Exercises (TRE) to help them better self-regulate and manage stress. Some clients used TRE to cope with the three-week hotel quarantine. While none of the individuals who shared their stories for this book were my clients, my professional experience undoubtedly influenced the content.

I have called Hong Kong my home since the age of seven. Through the good years and the bad, my love for this vibrant metropolis has never faltered. I bore witness to the SARS epidemic as a staff member of the *South China Morning Post*, when overnight, everyone donned masks and touched elevator buttons with their elbows, fearful of a mystery virus. I was in Hong Kong through the COVID-19 years, save for three fraught trips to the UK to support a family member. Those return journeys ended with extended hotel quarantines. I got through them by employing all the strategies I'd been advising my clients to use to maintain good mental well-being during self-isolation.

In an ideal world, mental health support would be within everyone's reach. Regrettably, that's not the reality we live in. Lengthy wait times in the public system deter many from seeking help, and private therapy is often prohibitively expensive. But there are things we can do to take care of our mental health daily. It's just as important as physical fitness and health.

At the end of each chapter are healthy coping skills and strategies designed to help manage distress and tackle problems before they become overwhelming. Mental health isn't static; it can change over time, with periods of stability and difficulty. By talking openly about it, we make it easier to seek help when we need it. Therapy isn't just for those who are struggling; it's for anyone who wants to improve their mental well-being.

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Ways Forward

Access to Mental Health

In the face of adversity, Hong Kong has proven time and time again to be a resilient city. It always bounces back. As we emerge from the shadow of the pandemic, it is only natural for people to be eager to move forward. However, to do so without reflecting on the lessons learned would be a missed opportunity. Another pandemic is inevitable—it's not a question of if but when. As such, preparation for such an event should be treated as an ongoing priority. The insights gained from our recent experience with COVID-19 can and must inform our response to the next pandemic.

During the pandemic, Hong Kong, like the rest of the world, saw a surge in rates of anxiety and depression. The lifting of the mask mandate in March 2023 may have marked the official end of the pandemic, but mental health issues continued to rise. In the wake of a brutal stabbing in a shopping centre that claimed the lives of two women, the government acknowledged the need for enhanced mental health support. In a meeting in June 2023, the government's Advisory Committee on Mental Health recommended action in 10 areas. However, many of these recommendations echoed those made

August 2023. With more than 100 ambassadors sharing their mental health struggles, the campaign aimed to challenge misconceptions and encourage open and honest conversations about mental health. Initiatives like this help to chip away at the stigma and create a more supportive and inclusive society.

Communication

The importance of clear and timely communication cannot be overstated. Having access to accurate and transparent information is essential in managing the fear, anxiety, and panic that can take hold during a pandemic. Technology-based information-exchange platforms can play a crucial role in facilitating this.

In Chapter 2, Siu-hang, who was 22 weeks pregnant when she was sent to Penny's Bay quarantine camp, shared her experience. She said that if she had been able to speak to a human during her isolation, her fears wouldn't have escalated like they did. Similarly, new mother Monique, mentioned in Chapter 5, said that clearer communication and explanation about what was happening would have greatly reduced her stress. For her, the hardest part of the pandemic was not knowing what was happening. She believes that the uncertainty could have been better managed if there was one place where current regulations and information were posted so that everyone—parents, doctors, and nurses—could be on the same page and informed. Bobo, a nurse who served on the COVID wards through the pandemic, shared her story in Chapter 6. She said her stress came not from the virus but from constantly changing guidelines. She too said that more consistent and clearer guidelines would have reduced a lot of anxiety.

In Chapter 2, Kelvin recounts his experience of being under compulsory lockdown at his home on the Kwai Chung Estate. Despite feeling isolated from the outside world, Kelvin and his family found solace in the support of their neighbours. United by their shared circumstances, they saw themselves as being ‘in the same boat’ and their bond with nearby families grew stronger. During this trying time, they shared information and resources, drawing closer together as a community. The strength of their connections with their neighbours helped them navigate a stressful experience.

In Chapter 10, Ma Jeuk echoes a similar sentiment, expressing her appreciation for the psychological support provided by her small but strong network of friends and family living nearby. They shared food and resources, but it was the emotional support of this tight-knit community that proved most valuable.

With a sense of community and the understanding that we are all in this together, compassion naturally arises. We no longer see our neighbours or those around us as ‘other’: We are all humans going through a shared experience. Small gestures of kindness can have a profound impact, bolstering resilience and helping us navigate uncertain times. The beauty of kindness is that it benefits both the giver and the receiver, providing a positive psychological gain for all involved.

Kindness and compassion need not be grand gestures—they can be as simple as a smile or a few words of encouragement. In Chapter 7, Laura Hazlett shares how the kindness of a nurse helped her manage the devastation of being separated from her daughter. Though the nurse could not change the facts of the situation, her empathy and compassion changed Laura’s outlook. In times of hardship, small acts of kindness can ripple through a community, providing comfort and support to those in need.

Chapter 5, expectant mothers who were equipped with knowledge on how to prevent COVID-19 infection were less fearful of the virus.

In Chapter 10, Winnie Cheung recounts her experience of spending hours poring over the news online, only to be left feeling anxious and overwhelmed by the constantly shifting narrative. Wary of which news sources to trust, she eventually stopped following the news and delayed getting vaccinated. Cheung reflects that more accessible information and better education about the virus and vaccines would have helped to ease her fears.

More and better education also leads to compassion and kindness. As Ms Li notes in Chapter 10, if more people have a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by those undertaking unpredictable quarantines, they are more likely to be empathetic. An appreciation of what she was going through from those far away would have helped her better cope with her isolation.

In an age when social media has given rise to a cacophony of voices, all vying for attention, it is essential that we educate people with the skills and knowledge to identify fake or inaccurate news. Knowing what a trusted news source looks like and when information is unreliable is crucial in preventing the spread of misinformation and the panic that often ensues. By empowering people with the ability to discern fact from fiction, we can promote a more informed and rational discourse.

Social Vulnerability

The pandemic exposed the stark reality of life for Hong Kong's most marginalised communities, revealing deep-seated inequalities in the city. Vulnerable groups such as low-income residents, women, elderly people, and minorities were hit hardest by the crisis, their

those from more privileged families had widened during the pandemic. Children from working-class families were limited in their social connection with peers and teachers due to inadequate digital devices and poor internet access. While better-off parents with more resources were able to help their children catch up on missed schooling, those from low-income families had fallen even further behind.

To enhance our resilience against future pandemics, it is crucial that we prioritise reducing inequalities. Improving the accessibility of services and facilities for the vulnerable during times of crisis is essential. By doing so, we can contribute to better recovery capacities, helping communities to bounce back more quickly from the impact of a pandemic.

Support / Mental Health

The ongoing struggle to meet the mental health needs of patients and their families is exacerbated by a chronic shortage of qualified staff. A comprehensive review of mental health policies is urgently needed, its findings made public and funds allocated for action to be taken. This issue will not resolve itself—it demands immediate attention and resources. The longer it is neglected, the more dire the situation will become. It is time for decisive action to address this pressing concern.

In addition to the general public, frontline health care workers—including doctors, nurses, and staff in elderly care homes—urgently require psychological support. They have been at the forefront of the pandemic, bearing the brunt of its effect. It is essential that we maintain a psychologically healthy workforce, not only for their well-being but also for the sustainability of our health care system. Failure to support them may result in even more doctors and nurses