SPEECH BY SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR COMMUNICATIONS & INFORMATION DR JANIL PUTHUCHEARY AT TOUCH CYBER WELLNESS SYMPOSIUM, 25 SEP 2021

Mr James Lim, CEO of TOUCH Community Services

Parents, youths, and educators

Introduction

1. Good morning everybody. Thank you for inviting me to join you here today.

2. Let me first congratulate TOUCH Cyber Wellness on its 20th anniversary. Over these many years, you have been a strong advocate for cyber wellness education, helping our community navigate online spaces safely and securely.

Strengthening Digital Literacy and Wellness

3. Your work has been especially important for our youth. These are digital natives – they are growing up immersed in the online space from a very young age. I'm glad that many of them are here with us today.

4. You learn in ways that are quite different from previous generations. You have access to large amounts of information right at your fingertips, and you can choose how, where and when you consume information.

5. Social media apps and video conferencing tools are also changing how you develop relationships and interact with each other.

6. The technology that we have today connects people across boundaries and brings us closer to each other. But it also throws up challenges as a result. There are problems with how the norms on how we behave with each other have been less well defined compared to real life.

7. So, many people – children, youths and adults – encounter what we call online harms: challenges and problems when they go into cyberspace

8. The Government takes this issue of cyber wellness seriously, as it is linked to mental health and well-being. We recognise that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought mental health issues to the fore, and we need a whole-of-government and whole-of-nation strategy to address these challenges.
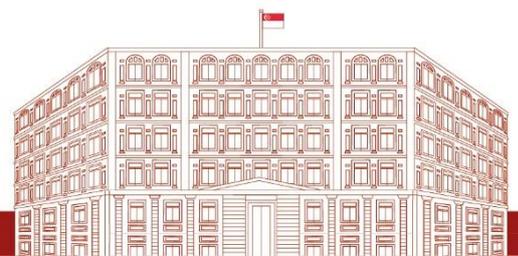
9. Hence, we have the Interagency Taskforce on Mental Health and Well-being, which I chair. We will work on recommendations and strategies on how to address these challenges, including a one-stop portal on mental health resources on HPB's HealthHub. Next year, the portal will have resources for youths, including topics on cyber wellness. This is an important step we are taking, to link cyber wellness and mental health broadly and trying to address the challenges.

10. Even as all of us adopt a "digital-first" mindset, we have shared values of responsibility, respect and looking out for one another. This must remain the same online or offline.

11. We need to develop in our children a sense of responsibility– not just to protect themselves, but also so that they can play a role to protect the dignity and privacy of others around them.

12. Schools have an important role, and educators have taken important steps to promote digital literacy and wellness.

13. As part of the revised Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum, there is a greater emphasis on cyber wellness education. This applies to students across all levels – from primary to pre-university – and it teaches our students how to use technology safely and responsibly, using authentic and current scenarios as well as tools like interactive video discussions.

14. Students need to learn to maintain a healthy balance of online and offline activities, and how to develop meaningful relationships online and offline.

15. Schools can also play an active role in helping parents support our children – and parents will need resources to develop good cyber wellness habits.

**Partnering the Community for a Safer Cyberspace**

16. Parents are a key partner in helping our children stay safe online. We complement schools' efforts by guiding our children to be more discerning in the use of technology and online interactions.

17. We know that we may not be the savviest with TikTok or Snapchat – some of these, we will need to learn about as well. But we can do so with our children and be part of their digital journey. As we do so, we can model good habits – online and offline – and have conversations to understand what they are doing online.
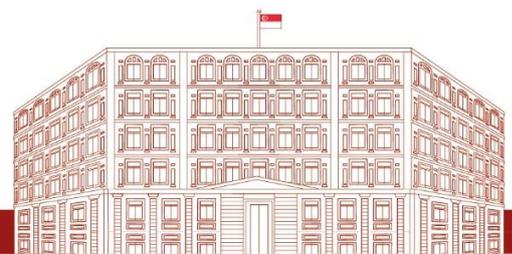
18. We are not doing this alone. There are resources and support available. For example, last month, TOUCH and Facebook taught parents and seniors how to connect better with their children and grandchildren on WhatsApp and Instagram!

19. Today, we are launching the e-Conversations for the Family programme. This is a practical toolkit for parents to kickstart meaningful conversations with our children.

20. These resources show how much we can do and achieve together with the support of community organisations like TOUCH. As one of the pioneers in cyber wellness education, they have worked closely with the Government and partners like the Media Literacy Council to empower parents and youths to navigate the online space safely and responsibly.

21. Over the last two years, TOUCH Cyber Wellness, together with Facebook, was roped in by IMDA to conduct a series of online classes, called Digital Pods, to equip the community with the knowledge and skills to navigate the online space and digital age safely and effectively.

22. Our youths also play an important role in building a safer and more responsible online community. As youths, you will need to embody our shared values of being responsible, respectful, and actively looking out for one another. In fact, many of you are already doing so, and doing so very well. If you would like to go even further, I would like to encourage you to volunteer with the Youth Mental Well-being Network. You can contribute your time, efforts, ideas and enthusiasm to projects that improve the mental well-being of those around you – "by youths, for youths".

Conclusion

23. The work of strengthening digital literacy in Singapore is an ongoing effort – and it will be for a long time.

24. Today's theme is "Empowering the Community in the Digital Age". It takes all of us in the community – schools, parents, youths, and community organisations like TOUCH – to ensure that our children can go online safely, securely, and learn how to protect themselves against online threats.

25. Earlier this year, the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) started the Digital for Life movement because we recognise that a whole-of-society approach is necessary. We hope this movement, will catalyse more ground-up initiatives and build on the momentum and interest in the years to come.

26. Together as a community, we can all play a part to make the Internet a safer, more responsible, and more respectful space for all.
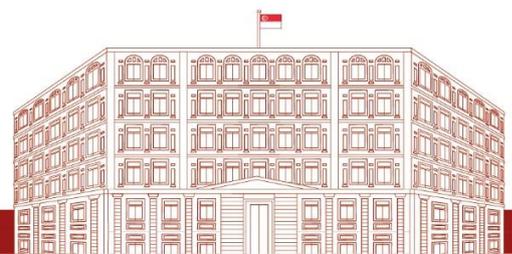
27. I look forward to hearing your views in the discussion later.

Thank you.