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The Plant-demic: Indoor Horticulture and its Influence on Mental Wellbeing

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I was only able to view Mr. Shaun Shyen's balcony garden through a constricted six-inch display of my phone. Yet, the 18-second video he posted on TikTok aptly captured its tranquil ambience. The video, accompanied by a mellifluous background music, begins by presenting thin stems that carry variegated leaves with scalloped edges crawling down onto rows of smooth ceramic pots that various sturdy plants are rooted in. Coming into frame as the camera pans across Mr. Shyen's transformed balcony is a snugly-looking couch that sits in the middle where one could be comforted by the company of majestic leaves that would rustle gently when the warm breeze whistles through the window. In the corner, clouds of gentle mist spiralled upwards from the multiple humidifiers he installed, wafting along a sense of peace that diffuses throughout the balcony. That was the final clip before the video ends and while the background music gradually retreats, the calmness of the garden persisted.

For Mr. Shyen, however, keeping house plants brings more than just tranquility. Facing retrenchment amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, he found himself in a hapless state and often woke up "to the guilt of not having a job and without any sense of a purpose." However, it is at this profound

stage of his life that he took the opportunity to revamp his balcony and added more plants to his collection. The outcome of this is not only a vibrant botanical paradise but a more contented Mr. Shyen as well. He adds, "I think intrinsically, one of the joys of working is to see growth in what we do. It can be in the form of targeted sales being met, (turning) an angry customer ... satisfied or helping out a colleague who is going through a rough patch. Seeing growth in a plant you are nurturing has pretty much that similar effect."

Now that Mr. Shyen has found a job, his garden provides him with solace whenever he needs a break from his intense workload. Like Mr. Shyen, I have seen many others (Lee, 2020) including my friends who became indoor plant caregivers during the pandemic. What I found to be intriguing was that most of them would agree that they felt more fulfilled and less distressed than before; they are in a healthier psychological state. Looking at these transformations then raises a question: Why does indoor horticulture positively influence mental wellbeing?

According to a study conducted by Dzambov et al. (2021), a person's mental health state can be enhanced by the viewing of greenery. Working on

laborious and time-consuming tasks requires sustained voluntary attention (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1982 as cited in Dzambov et al., 2021). However, when this type of attention is prolonged, it drains our cognitive resources such as working memory and problem-solving skills, thereby impeding our productivity. The persistent inability to complete urgent tasks can then induce anxiety and feelings of remorse which take a toll on our mental health. Dzambov et al. presented empirical data that the viewing of greenery combats this problem through the concept of “being away.” As plants are inherently interesting, viewing them requires no effort, allowing a person to be present in the moment and “be away” from demanding everyday routines. This allots a period of recovery which replenishes a person’s attention reserves and depleted cognitive resources. Consequently, it effectuates an improved mental health state denoted by the reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety in the study.

The findings from Dzambov et al.’s (2021) study is undoubtedly applicable to the current Singaporean work-centric society. For many corporate workers, returning to their homes provides a form of mental respite and “being away” from their workload and job routines. Given the current climate of unpredictability that the Covid-19 pandemic generated, working from home becomes a default arrangement for many corporations. Homes then can no longer serve as a form of mental respite when demanding workload intrudes these safe spaces. Hence, it is no surprise that people working from home reported higher levels of anxiety and stress (Rajah, 2020). Dzambov et al. reveals how keeping indoor plants can mitigate the harmful psychological effects of working from home. The

versatility of small potted indoor plants means that they can be placed in proximity to work desks, providing an accessible form of “being away.” However, keeping indoor plants is not merely a matter of possessing one, these plants require specific needs to attend to as well. Would the burden of nurturing these plants then add on to our daily stresses and negatively impact our mental health?

Adevi and Mårtensson (2013) diverge from this view and instead note that the act of gardening can foster better mental health conditions by enhancing an individual’s self-esteem. In the study, responses from participants of horticultural therapy were recorded. One of the participants expressed that “it was a really bad feeling not to be needed and to know that I will never be able to come back (to work). Nobody wants me. I’m over fifty and burned out! Here I was needed. The plants needed me, they needed water, they needed to be planted.” This suggests that when plant caregivers are able to witness how their own effort allows these plants to thrive, it reinforces the self-belief of their own capabilities and generates a sense of fulfilment—both of which are integral to a healthy self-esteem. Indeed, a better view of oneself ultimately leads to an improved mental health state.

Adevi and Mårtensson (2013) provides us a greater understanding of why many (Lee, 2020) especially those who experienced retrenchment, including Mr. Shyen, chose to turn to nurturing indoor plants to cope with the pandemic. Many of us tend to tie our self-esteem to the job we do and how much we earn (Gan, 2018). Hence, it is undeniable that retrenchment can be disastrous for mental health as it undermines the confidence in our competence

and skills. Nurturing indoor plants provide an alternative way to validate our abilities and a steppingstone to mend our self-esteem. If we can observe how our indoor plants are able to flourish as a result of our own actions, then it is not too far-fetched to perceive that we are capable of succeeding in other areas including finding other career opportunities. This restoration of self-esteem through the act of nurturing plants positively influences mental wellbeing especially during a challenging time like retrenchment.

Though I concur with Adevi and Mårtensson (2013) that nurturing indoor plants can improve a person's self-esteem by reinforcing their confidence in their capabilities, there are other reasons to believe why indoor plants can positively influence mental wellbeing. Reflecting and finding meaning within the processes of nature can allow us to gain clarity of the issues we encounter in our lives. This can help us put our problems into perspective and reduce its impact on our mental health. Furthermore, by pondering on the processes of nature, we are also diverted from any current stressors, acquiring the benefits of "being away" as endorsed by Dzambov et al. (2021). Besides, when Mr. Shyen reflected and compared the growth of his plants with his experience during employment, he was able to understand that a sense of progress is needed for him to feel good about himself, touching on the concept related to self-esteem brought by Adevi and Mårtensson.

While the worst of the pandemic may be behind us, its detrimental effect on our psychological wellbeing is enduring and extensive ("WHO warns of 'long-term' Covid-19 impact on mental health", 2021),

highlighting a compelling need to mitigate this mental health crisis. Indoor plants may not directly resolve our problems, but they can provide an accessible form of catharsis to Singapore's ever increasing stressful lifestyle. Whereas drastic lifestyle changes may be too big of a step to alleviate this crisis, nurturing indoor plants can be an appropriate initial approach towards improving individual mental health. Moreover, what else would we imagine paradise to be—a place that would be free of stress—if not in the presence of plants and nature. Would it not be better if we could bring that into the comfort of our homes?

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