

The threat of self-radicalisation looms large in a digital age, as extremist propaganda spreads online.

What can family members and friends do to keep their loved ones from being influenced by radical ideology, and how do you spot the warning signs?

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What are the signs to look out for?

FOLLOWING the recent arrests of two self-radicalised youths, there have been calls for the community to play a part in identifying persons who might have been influenced by extremist propaganda, and to alert the authorities.

Experts said there are telltale signs that family members and friends can look out for.

Dr Munidasa Winslow, a psychiatrist at Novena Medical Centre, said this could be a sudden change, like spending more and more time on religious practices.

Typically, the individual is also likely to be withdrawn, secretive and spend a lot of time online.

Said psychologist Carol Balhetchet: "Family or friends or neighbours would say something and they would walk away or get very aggressive about it, and be very opinionated about something... The main sign is they isolate themselves and don't seem to have many friends."

Dr Lim Boon Leng, a psychiatrist at Gleneagles Medical Centre, said most of these individuals "are marginalised" and probably

neglected by their parents. "They don't have people to turn to or mentor to turn to," he added.

Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP Zainal Sapari, a former school principal, said the "trigger point" to report someone to the authorities is knowing that he or she is sympathetic to the ideas of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). "Sympathising with the ISIS cause is, I believe, the first step in terms of wanting to join in the terrorist cause," he added.

The Ministry of Home Affairs told The Straits Times that when a report is made, initial investigations will be carried out. In appropriate cases, the person may be referred for counselling and other mitigation measures without the need for arrest.

Counselling or rehabilitation programmes are tailored to the person's specific circumstances, including age, it said. Should it be necessary, the person could be arrested for further investigations. But this will depend on the extent of radicalisation, and the risk and potential threat the person poses.

What is the typical profile of a teen vulnerable to being radicalised?

TEENAGERS who are isolated from their families, who do not feel close to their loved ones, or who are detached from their social communities such as schools, can be easily influenced by radical ideology from terror groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, said Dr Carol Balhetchet, a clinical psychologist and senior director for youth services at the Singapore Children's Society.

"These are the same sort of young people who would join gangs, because they do not feel committed or feel like a part of their social group," she said. "They may be loners in school or loners in their family unit. These teens are the ones who would easily fall prey to outside influence."

Dr Kumar Ramakrishna, head of policy studies at the S. Rajarat-

nam School of International Studies, said some young people who are unemployed or bored may also be susceptible as they seek adventure and excitement abroad.

Psychiatrist Lim Boon Leng added that teenagers can also lack the ability to understand the consequences of their actions while acting on impulse.

"The immediate gain that they see from joining an extremist group, such as the sense of glory or the reinforcement they get, are very attractive to them. They do not think about what is going to happen to them in five years or even in one year," said Dr Lim.

"It is this impulsiveness that sometimes tips them over and makes them decide to do something to prove themselves to these extremist groups."

What can parents and others do?

PARENTS play a key role in keeping their children on the straight and narrow.

For a start, they can take greater interest in what their children are doing and pay more attention to what they are exposed to on the Internet, experts say.

Dr Lim Boon Leng, a psychiatrist at Gleneagles Medical Centre, suggested: "Keep the computer or devices out in the open, so that the parents can see what they are doing."

Parents also have to sit their children down for a talk if they suspect that something is amiss.

Dr Munidasa Winslow, a psychiatrist at Novena Medical Centre, said they can start by asking open-ended questions such as what they think about radical beliefs, for example.

"It also depends on how much they trust you to talk to you about it. It is a bit like having a conversation about sex. There must be a safe place, a safe time and a safe person," he added.

However, in doing so, experts said parents should not judge or victimise their children.

"Try to understand what is the reason he is being radicalised. Is it because the parents are not paying enough attention, or is there bullying in school, is he being ostracised or having other social issues at hand?" Dr Lim said.

There could also be other reasons, for instance, the individual may have psychiatric conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or depression.

Nevertheless, the "best thing" to do is to seek professional help as family members may not be able to deal with the issue, said Dr Carol Balhetchet, senior director for youth services at the Singapore Children's Society.

"Bring them to the family service centre, bring them to a government agency or authority who is equipped to refer them to more professional help or the right authority to contain the situation," she said.

Why is extremist propaganda so attractive to teens?

PROPAGANDA put out by ISIS to sell concepts like the Islamic State, the Caliphate and their call for Muslims to migrate to Syria is portrayed in a jazzed-up manner that captures the imagination of some youth, said Mr Mohamad Alami Musa, the Head of Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme at RSIS.

These ideals are not part of mainstream Islamic teaching, but have been made even more appealing by the high-quality videos uploaded and widely-shared online by the terrorist group.

"The ideology has been packaged with such gloss, sound and colour. The content is also being distributed with the clever use of social media, which resonates with young people," he said.

"These things are attractive to young minds who have this idealism of wanting to change the

world. Such content makes it very tempting to be swayed by such virulent ideology."

Psychiatrist Lim Boon Leng says the violent images shown by ISIS can also be a reflection of the power the group has, and this might attract youth in search of strong and protective figures.

"Marginalised youth who feel that they are vulnerable within their own communities may think that these extremist groups can help protect them," he said.

The promise of having a better life by joining a terrorist group may also appeal to some youth, especially if they are isolated from their families or society, added Dr Carol Balhetchet.

"It is the promise of things to come, versus what they have right now," she said.

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