Mental Health of University Students in Malaysia

Are university students the healthiest when it comes to mental health? According to the World Health Organization (2014), mental health is characterized as the level of well-being in which each person is able to deal with their usual life stresses as well as having the ability to work efficiently and meaningfully while realizing their own potential and contributing positively to the society. A healthy state of mind can positively impact a person's overall wellbeing and when it comes to people like university-going students, it plays a major role. Going to University is perhaps one of the most challenging phases in a person's life as it can be both physically and mentally demanding and often leaves one drained in every aspect. University students have to continuously confront exam and other stresses, all while being in the early stages of learning to cope with all the difficult situations life throws at them. Malaysia is one of the countries providing some of the best higher educations in the world and it is home to more than a million students in both public and private universities as well as community and polytechnic institutions. Presently, almost everyone is voicing their concerns about the mental wellbeing of students especially those in universities in Malaysia. The mental health of university students in Malaysia has been deteriorating for the past few years and there are several reasons as to why these students develop mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety and stress.

Firstly, one of the primary reasons for poor mental health among most university students in Malaysia is the inability to cope with the high level of academic stress in higher education institutions. In most tertiary education establishments, there is a continuous demand for high performances from students as they have to face stressful situations regarding assessments and their overall score. The culture of competition, prevalent among students in Malaysia, which, aside from the usual positive outcome as having an overall higher class of students, can also impact their mental health negatively. According to a national survey conducted in Malaysia, about eighteen percent of teens suffer from depression while forty percent and 10 percent suffer from anxiety and stress respectively (Chonghui, Menon & Rajaendram, 2018). Stress like these often leads to students withdrawing from studies, as early as first or second year. In other cases, the mental illness situation can be so severe that it even leads to students committing suicide.

Secondly, another leading cause for mental illnesses among university goers is the inability to cope with the new social setting. The beginning of university is a crucial time in a person's life

and most students are unable to readily adapt into a new social circle, make friends and communicate effectively with their educators as well as guardians. The constant need for socializing, be it in class with peers to fulfill group project needs or group study sessions to maintaining class attendance, can easily stress someone out, especially those who are introverted and result into making them feel inadept or inadequate. The case is even worse for international students, who might not even speak their peers' native language, added that they simultaneously are far away from their close ones. There is an existing perception that university life is supposed to be the time when people have the time of their life, engaging with people of same age and socializing. When students are unable to meet these standards set by the society, they feel pressurized and hence develop social anxiety and depression. A study conducted by Saleem, Mahmood and Naz (2013) found that when students put the level of performing as required by a competitive and exposed environment like university as the bar, the stress from this performance inability can cause the students to negatively evaluate themselves, as in depression.

Thirdly, most students have unresolved mental issues from before, which further contribute to their declining mental health, once they are in university. As teenage is the common timeframe for the early onset of mental health conditions, especially among students, it is possible that the existing stress and anxiety continue on to their university years, worsening their condition. The occurrence of mental health problems among students and teenagers are caused by many reasons. According to Sakinah (2019) these reasons are family problems, strict style of parenting and influence from classmates among others in Malaysia.

Fourthly, university students undergo pressure due to high expectations from themselves and their family and friends. It is common for university students to have future expectations such as a secure job with good salary, etc. However, these expectations can be the very cause of one's mental downfall when put more emphasis on, rather than the mental wellbeing. Students become too invested in the process of overachieving, especially in the modern world, where everything is deemed as competition and one would surely need to be the best in order to stay ahead of their peers. Furthermore, some parents worsen the scenario with their unreasonable demands stemming from wanting to see their child succeed more than others. Such actions can often lead to self-insecurity and negatively impact the student's mindset, resulting into depression.

In order to build a better future for Malaysia, there is a need for able minded adults who will be able to function competently and skillfully. To do that, it is imperative to take measures to help improve the mental conditions of the present university students, who will be leading the country in the future. In order to tackle the factors that lead to mental illness among students, including the ones stated above, there needs to be sufficient support from both the government and higher education providing institutions.

There are several ways to improve the current state at which the mental health of university students lie. Firstly, we need to identify the cause from ground zero – that is the early stages of these students' life. Since few of the reasons point out that a person's mental health starts getting affected in their teen years, we can educate their family as well as these students on how to better cope with their situations so that they do not go on to develop mental illnesses in the future. This can be done in a way that will be engaging to both the students and those around them, including their family members and close friends. Hassan, Hassan, Kassim, & Hamzah, (2018), states that "greater awareness about mental health and early diagnosis can reduce the statistic of suffering from mental health related problems". There needs to be ample anti-mental illness campaigns, specifically those that target the early onset of illnesses such as depression and anxiety. Once the general public, including the students themselves have garnered the knowledge required to know and detect the signs of these mental health conditions, the job in tackling these issues will become much easier.

Secondly, universities should work on creating more projects and taking on more campaigns that specifically target the mental wellbeing of the students studying under them. Certain administrations can be created in these institutes of higher and tertiary education in order to fulfill the mental health requirements of their students. As more and more university students face anxiety during their studies and are unable to manage the social competency that is demanded by the universities, the institutes should be working on creating special needs programmes , similar to that of the ones provided to disadvantaged students, that will cater to the mentally ill students. There needs to be more emphasis on mental health counselling, those that do not just tend to the symptoms but also keep the ability to cure mental illnesses.

In this fast-paced modern world, everyone has been brought in closer by the help of technology while also distanced by the very same technology that we are unable to assess the mental

wellbeing of those around us. University students in Malaysia stand at a higher risk of incurring mental illnesses. There are several factors that have the ability to negatively impact their mental health, resulting in illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and stress. Among these, the primary ones are high life-stress, inability to cope, existing mental issues, high expectations from family as well as oneself. When left undealt with, these illnesses can have serious consequences, starting from poor performance in life to even committing suicide. Therefore, in order to avoid those, it is necessary for Malaysia to move forward as one in identifying, rehabilitating and resolving the problems caused by deteriorating mental health. There are several ways to do these and the government, universities, and families, all have the governing role in this situation, especially by providing building awareness and providing special services to the mentally unhealthy university students.

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