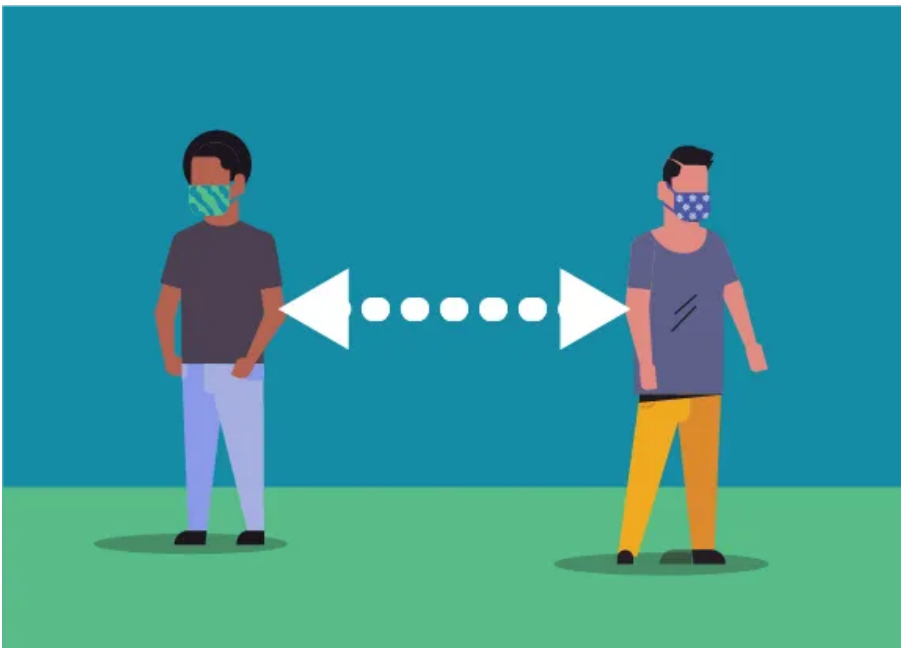


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Time to live with the new normal

Guest Submission May 3, 2020 No Comments

By Zeti Azreen Ahmad

The government's decision to implement the conditional movement control order (CMCO) has received mix reactions from netizens and public at large. Some applauded the decision as it will enable them to continue working, while not few are worried that such decision would trigger COVID-19 cases to spike again. Similarly, health experts have also voiced their concern that this abrupt move might lead to third wave of infection.

The CMCO has allowed almost all economic sectors to resume operation beginning on Monday (4 May). However, companies

have been told to conduct all activities in a controlled manner by taking the necessary precautions and adhering to the standard operating procedure (SOP) provided by the authorities.

The relaxation of the movement control order (MCO) is intended to restore the economy but not at the expense of public health and safety. In his Labour Day address to the nation on Friday (May 1), Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said that the country had lost RM63 billion since the MCO came into force almost two months ago. He said it is estimated that the loss will reach RM98 billion if the control order continues for another month.

How far have we achieved?

The first wave of COVID-19 in Malaysia began in January this year and by 26 February it recorded 22 confirmed cases. The country has braced for the second wave when the number of infected cases increased exponentially. By mid-March, the number of COVID-19 cases jumped to triple digits and Malaysia became the worst hit nation of the pandemic in Southeast Asia.

A day after (on 16 March), the Prime Minister announced a control movement order (MCO) that was enforced under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 and the Police Act 1967. The National Security Council (NSC) has been entrusted to manage the pandemic during the MCO period.

The MCO directive that took effect on 18 March was the first ever partial lockdown implemented in the country. JP Morgan's Asia-Pacific Equity Research group applauded Malaysia's action to implement the MCO to contain the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. The international investment bank, in its report on 23 March, projected that Malaysia would reach its peak of COVID-19 infections with 6,300 cases, at around mid-April.

The ultimate goal of the MCO is to break the chain of infection and subsequently reduce the number of cases. The common term used by the public health experts was 'flattening the curve'. By flattening the curve it will ensure that health services would be able to cope with the inflow of patients during the pandemic situation. This involves spreading out the spread over a longer period of time to ensure healthcare system and facilities will not be overwhelmed.

Flattening the infection curve is instrumental to support hospitals across the country to cope with the inflow of patients and to provide quality treatment. The MCO requires the public to practice the new normal that include staying at home to mitigate the infection.

Practicing the new normal as simple as staying at home has not been easy for many people.

On the first day of the imposition of the MCO, the public compliance was only 60 percent. However, the rate of compliance has gradually improved with stringent and drastic actions taken by the government in enforcing the order. Nonetheless, according to media reports there were more than 21,000 individuals who have been arrested for defying the MCO by end of April.

The success of the MCO was evidenced when the number of infected cases on 14 April was at 4,987 which was a lot less than projected. Almost a month after the enforcement of the MCO, the number of new cases has dropped to double digits. On the day when the relaxation of the MCO was announced, Malaysia has recorded a cumulative number of 6,071 COVID-19 cases with 69.3 percent (4,210 cases) fully recovered and 1.69 mortality rate, according to a press statement by the Director General of Health, Malaysia on 1 May 2020.

The battle continues

The CMCO is another phase that will challenge Malaysians in their ability to embrace the new normal. Practicing the new normal demands both high discipline and integrity from all individuals. We need to train ourselves to adjust to the new work style and life order. Malaysians need to be familiar with the guidelines provided by the authorities and should apply them strictly in their daily life to survive the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prior to the CMCO, we were asked to stay at home to break the chain of infection. It is worth noting that the CMCO has allowed us to go back to work but in a controlled and vigilant manner to prevent further infection and outbreak. The Ministry of Health has repeatedly advised the public to embrace the new normal in life and work practices to break the chain of transmission of COVID-19.

Here are nine new norms that the public should strictly adhere to:

1. Observe safe social distancing (at least 1 meter from others)
2. Regular hand washing with water and soap or hand sanitiser
3. Use face-mask
4. Conduct health screening at the entrance of premises
5. Prioritising protecting at-risk groups
6. Early treatment for people with symptoms
7. Enforcing public safety in public transportations
8. Encouraging online or cashless transactions
9. Reporting of COVID-19 cases

(Source: Director General of Health Malaysia, 1 May 2020)

All sectors that are allowed to resume operations must refine their work methods and approaches by complying with the SOP provided. Applying the SOP at work will keep ourselves and others safe. In this pandemic context, the priority is not only to revive the economy but to continue to break the chain of COVID-19 infection that is far from settling.

Living with the new normal requires each one of us to act responsibly to ourselves and also to others. The Director General of Health, Datuk Noor Hisham Abdullah has emphasised on the new strategy to fight COVID-19 that include social responsibility and social discipline. He said, "We need to be a socially responsible member who cares to protect ourselves and others from the pandemic." He further said that "we need to discipline ourselves and comply with guidelines set by the authority".

The media to reinforce the right practice for the new normal

The media role has been instrumental since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. A consistent coverage on the pandemic has helped the public to understand what was going on and what to do to mitigate harm.

Information has been flowing from both the mainstream and social media providing current updates of the pandemic in the country. The authorised agencies such as the National Security Council (NSC), Ministry of Health (MoH) and the Crisis Preparedness Response Team (CPRC) have used multiple online (official websites) and social media platforms (e.g., Instagram,

Facebook, Twitter, Telegram applications) to reach out to the masses.

Numerous forms of information like news update, infographics, posters, motion graphic, diagrams and YouTube video alike have been crafted. Interestingly, an animation studio company, Monsta, had taken the initiative to produce a series of animated PSA videos to educate children about COVID-19. Using their popular animated duo Papa Pipi, the PSA video has featured to millions of subscribers from all over the world.

Constant exposure to the new norms and the right guidelines are important at this point. The ultimate goal of communication is to ensure that public from all walks of life are aware and understand the message to empower them to make the right decision and do the right thing. Similarly, the media audience should refer to the trusted sources or official media platforms, and not be deceived by fake news or information from unauthorised sources. Relying or sharing dubious information received from social media or *WhatsApp* application will create confusion and might lead to making wrong decisions.

In short, each one of us needs to be ready and practice the new normal. As the pandemic is here to stay, the new normal is now a reality that should be our strategy to continue with life. ***

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