

Source : <https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2020/10/632068/ensuring-coping-skills-all-age-covid-19-pandemic>

Ensuring coping skills for all in the age of Covid-19 pandemic



By **Dzul kifli Abdul Razak** - October 14, 2020 @ 12:02am



The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. - Bernama pic

THIS year's World Mental Health Day, on Oct 10, came with a unique feature associated with it. Population the world over (at least the majority) have face masks on as part of their everyday precautionary wear. It only goes to show that "health" is holistic and integrated.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".

It's a reminder that the person is greater than the sum of his or her parts — physical, mental and socio-emotional or spiritual.

This cannot be better illustrated than by the Covid-19 pandemic where, apart from the respiratory system, the virus is taking a toll on the state of social and emotional wellbeing despite the absence of physical symptoms.

Yet in reality, "physical health" (read: heart, guts, lung, kidney, etc) took the cake with the most developed, money-raking facilities and specialisations.

The other two were almost left by the wayside where imbalance and bias all-round were most apparent even until today. Based on the 2015 National Health and Morbidity Survey in Malaysia, the prevalence was highest in Sabah and Labuan (42.9 per cent), followed by Kuala Lumpur (39.8 per cent) and Kelantan (39.1 per cent).

Overall, mental health problems were more prevalent among younger adults. Children at risk of mental health problems were young boys from rural areas. It was also revealed that the more prevalent cases among children were emotional problems (15.7 per cent) and conduct problems (16.7 per cent).

Good mental health in childhood is vital and characterised by the achievement of development and emotional milestones, healthy social development and effective coping skills — such that mentally healthy children have a positive quality of life and can function well at home, school and in their communities. This is known as lifewide learning.

Thus, it is not surprising that the theme of World Mental Health Day 2020 is "Mental Health for All: Greater Investment— Greater Access".

However, it is not limited only to access, but also affordability and appropriateness within the local context where the overdue services are purportedly available. This is challenging in terms of the appropriate human resource mobilisation in the most needed areas.

While it is "normal" to experience fear, worry and stress as responses to "daily" threats, these can get exaggerated when the situation turns volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) just like it is today. The Covid-19 virus is the wildcard and invisible factor that drives VUCA to the hilt with new waves of transmission emerging.

Add to this the restricted movements, the anxiety to socialise for fear of contracting the virus, the loss of steady income and eruptions of potential violence as a result, the threat to mental health and socio-emotional wellbeing is daunting. Suicides are on the

rise globally when the power and skills to cope and being resilient are unmatched against the onslaught of the pandemic.

As WHO and its partners are busy providing guidance and advice to help look into the issues of mental health locally, it makes sense for Malaysia to assist in expanding the concept of "*sejahtera*" to combat and prevent mental health problems.

After all, the word has been widely used but with vague and narrowly understood terms, usually economic and materialistic. This is in stark contrast to what is mentioned in the Falsafah Pendidikan Negara as "*kesejahteraan diri*" — the social and emotional wellbeing that WHO is referring to.

Juxtapose this to the finding of the survey implicating children at risk of mental health problems, with cases of emotional and conduct problems (like bullying) and the attainment of "*kesejahteraan diri*" or as "*insan sejahtera*" through education seems to be a more cost-effective long-term solution towards a positive quality of life post-pandemic. In other words, we can get started without any unwarranted barriers to save and educate an entire generation for the immediate future.

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