



The psychological effect of the pandemic in Malaysia

Dr Loheswary Arumugam offers some advice on how the country can cope

Extended stay-at-home measures due to COVID-19 are affecting peoples' mental health. What is the current situation in Malaysia and how is it affecting psychological well-being?

A partial or conditional lockdown in Malaysia continues, with interstate travel still banned. I can see that there's been an increase in psychological disorder cases as a result. For instance, I've been seeing and hearing clients report symptoms of very high anxiety and depression during the movement control order (MCO). Some have also presented themselves with panic attack symptoms, sleeping problems, and also relationship issues.

What policies and services that should be rolled out to face these issues?

To make available more psychological services, the government should work more closely with mental health professionals and offer subsidies so that people can also go to private hospitals for treatment. Insurance companies should introduce new policies to cover mental health assessments and treatments to deal with the rise in mental health-related problems.

What are the services available at KPJ for people suffering from psychological issues? Have you introduced any new services for people with psychological problems, like online consultation?

To deal with the current situation, we at KPJ Sentosa have introduced online counseling sessions at an affordable price -- RM 80 per hour for the public and RM 10 for frontline medical staff. We also have online parent support groups for children with special needs, autism spectrum disorders, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (ADHD). We also have online assessments and consultation sessions for all age groups.

Can you talk about the psychological impact of the pandemic on healthcare professionals? What are the most common problems and how do you address them?

The most common symptoms are sleeping problems, anxiety, burnout, and depression. It's important that frontline workers practice self-care, understand the signs, and take breaks when they're tired. It's also important for them to check in with their loved ones via video calls or chats. Having good leaders and constant briefings and debriefing sessions is also key. They should also have access to in-house counselling sessions and support.

Do you have any advice for people who are struggling with isolation, loneliness and financial problems?



This is a very tough time for many people around the world as many have lost their jobs, had pay cuts, and may be in lockdown away from their families. It's important, therefore, to stay connected with family via social media and online chats and video calls and to also seek help or resources to sustain themselves financially during this situation. They can also use available services, for instance, online counselling sessions to manage their mental health.

What are the at-risk groups in Malaysia we should reach out to in order to prevent serious psychological problems?

The elderly, children, women with a history of being victims of domestic violence, and special needs children and adult groups. We also have to reach out to those groups prone to abuse (sexual, physical, emotional) as the home may not be safe for them. Neighbours should play an important role in reporting if they suspect a risk of abuse or any sign of active abuse.

Some people may also benefit from the restrictions by taking a break from busy and stressful routines. What are the lessons we should learn from the difficult experience of the pandemic and Movement Control Order?

There are basically four lessons we should learn: be prepared at all times; understand the signs and symptoms of mental health problems and the importance of maintaining good mental health; strengthen family bonding and support; and practice good hygiene.



Dr Loheswary Arumugam is a registered consultant clinical psychologist in Kuala Lumpur. She graduated from HELP University, Malaysia and completed her specialty training with nearly 2000 hours at the University Malaya Medical Centre and the Bentong Hospital in Malaysia. She became a full registered member of the Malaysian Society of Clinical Psychology in 2015.