

## Early detection of depression can avert suicide

The Borneo Post · 6 Jul 2021 · 7 · Soon Li Wei

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The relatively high number of suicide cases reported in Malaysia during the first five months of this year has set alarm bells ringing.

The suicide trend is worrying, more so now with the Covid-19 pandemic yet to show any sign of abating and no indication of when the first phase of movement control under the National Recovery Plan will transition to the second phase nationwide to allow most economic sectors to operate.

On June 16 alone, three cases of suicide were reported and just two days later, another case was reported. On June 28, a 56-year-old man in Balakong, Selangor, killed himself by hanging.

Concerned about the rise in suicide cases, Bukit Aman Criminal Investigation Department director Datuk Seri Abd Jalil Hassan, in a media statement issued on July 1, urged individuals facing undue stress due to financial, family or health problems to seek the help of their family and friends as well as professionals. He said 468 suicide cases were reported between January and May this year. A total of 631 suicides were reported in 2020 and 609 the previous year.

“There was an average of two suicide cases a day between 2019 and May 2020,” he said. It was also reported that between Jan 1 and June 18 this year, the Ministry of Health’s psychosocial support helpline received a total of 122,328 calls from individuals beset by issues such as job and income loss, family problems and pressure of working from home. Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah had also recently shared his concern over the mental health of Malaysians, saying that excessive stress and isolation from family and friends can cause depression which, if not treated, can lead to suicidal tendencies.

### Identify symptoms early

Senior lecturer in counselling at the Faculty of Cognitive Science and Human Development at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) Dr Amalia Madihie urged the people to learn to identify the signs of emotional stress and depression so that “psychological first aid” can be extended to those clearly in need of help. She said the physical and mental state of a person can potentially weaken when facing the pressures of life during the current movement control period.

“And, some of those who contracted Covid-19 may face poststress traumatic disorder after they recover, especially if they are ostracised by the public.

“They would have to grapple with the negative emotions of fear, worry, anxiety and depression which may lead to suicidal thoughts,” she said during an online seminar on Mental Health and Resilience organised recently by the National Institute of Public Administration Sarawak.

Amalia, who is also a certified counsellor at Unimas, said the early signs of a person contemplating suicide can be gauged based on his/her unusual behaviour and manner of speaking.

“For example, if they behave strangely in the office (or home) and seem a bit abnormal... at times, it may be a sign of self-harm, especially if it involves children.

“In addition to that, other early signs are losing interest in their daily activities and having difficulty focusing and carrying out their daily tasks, as well as isolating themselves from others and even expressing their desire to commit suicide on social media,” she said.

Amalia said co-workers and family members can extend psychological first aid to distressed individuals by giving them moral support and being good listeners.

“Be good listeners to them, encourage them to talk and don’t be judgmental. Let them cry and release their sadness, if its excessive, then take them to a counsellor or psychiatrist.”

Positive and negative stress

Meanwhile, the dean of UKM Graduate School of Business, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Prof Dr Zafir Khan Mohamed Makhbul, while acknowledging that prolonged stress can lead to depression as well as cause diseases such as heart disease and hypertension and suppress the body’s immune system, said stress does not have to be entirely negative.

“Stress should not solely be seen as a negative element as it can also transform into a positive element, especially when it comes to achieving yearly targets at work,” he said, adding that studies have shown that stress arising from work pressure can have a positive impact on one’s performance. This positive stress, also known as eustress, motivates certain individuals to perform better and be more successful in their careers.

“However, only certain individuals are motivated by stress. For others, stress can lead to distress if they cannot cope with it,” he said.

He said academics, for example, can make use of this work-from-home period to convert negative stress to positive by focusing on writing and publishing articles that will inspire the public to rise again following the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Cabin fever and depression

International Counselling Association of Malaysia president Datuk Dr Abd Halim Mohd Hussin said “cabin fever” resulting from long confinement or isolation indoors due to the Movement Control Order can cause depression.

“Cabin fever can unknowingly produce pronounced changes in behaviour... the isolation and resulting tension can also make people phobic. Apart from tension, a person with cabin fever will feel restless and have difficulty concentrating. He or she will also grow more impatient and lose their appetite for food,” he said.

Like other mental health problems, cabin fever must be treated by a trained professional such as a counsellor, therapist, psychologist or psychiatrist if medical intervention is needed, he added.

People in need of counselling or emotional support can contact the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry’s Talian Kasih hotline at 15999 or via WhatsApp at 019-2615999. They can also contact Befrienders at 0376272929.