Meet Assoc Prof Dr Amer Siddiq. He’s a consultant psychiatrist, advocate, activist and educator all in one – in both real life and online.

WORDS LIM TECK CHOON

"Hello, world! I am Dr Amer Siddiq, a psychiatrist from Malaysia, and I started this podcast mainly to share with you my thoughts on mental health and mental illnesses. I hope you will enjoy it."

On September 26, 2017, consultant psychiatrist Associate Professor Dr Amer Siddiq saw his first podcast uploaded into cyberspace. "I sounded awkward back then," he recalled with a chuckle.

Perhaps it was understandable that he was feeling a little awkward, as he was talking out loud to an empty room in order to produce a podcast. At the time of writing, there are already over 15 episodes in both English and Bahasa Malaysia in his podcast Dr Amer Siddiq on Mental Health. He has certainly become more natural at being a podcaster by now!
**CENDOL FOR THE SOUL**

**Adventures in Advocacy**

Dr. Amer Siddiq on Mental Health

is just one of Dr Amer’s independent efforts to spread awareness on mental health issues. In real life, he’s an active participant in various community education programmes, professional conferences and workshops on promoting mental health awareness as well as improved care and treatment for those affected by mental health issues in Malaysia. Of course, he also has his psychiatry practice in University of Malaya Specialist Centre. Additionally, he also volunteers his time and expertise to the Befrienders, the toll-free helpline for those who need emotional support. When it comes to online, he has been on Facebook and Twitter for quite some time now, again promoting tips and facts on mental health issues to fellow social media users. Dr. Amer may not be a millennial by definition, but he’s taken to social media like one as of late he has not only joined the tight-knit community of local healthcare professionals of #MedTweetMY, he is also embarking on his independent podcast venture.

When I caught up with Dr. Amer to learn more about this podcast venture, he was taking a well-deserved rest after tending to a University of Malaya event that he helped to organize. This event was one of the many that he was involved in during the last few months, and he joked that he was becoming a good organizer as well as marketer as a result.

When asked why he would put so much of his heart and soul into such advocacy, Dr. Amer simply smiled and shrugged. Perhaps it just felt right for him to be involved, and no further answer was necessary.

“I have always enjoyed both arts and sciences,” he confided. A part of him had wanted to be an art historian, but in the end, he chose psychiatry as his calling it combines both arts and sciences and, more importantly, it offers an opportunity for him to make a difference.

“Much work is needed to improve mental health awareness as well as treatment in Malaysia, and I don’t believe in waiting for someone else to step up to make the effort. I’m here, so I may as well put in my effort!”
The Art of Pursuing Happiness

Psychiatry has been around for a long time, but it is also one of the most misunderstood and maligned medical disciplines. It is easy to find quotes from real people condemning psychiatry for all kinds of reasons, most of them due to misconceptions about the nature of psychiatric medications.

He also credited his mentors in New Zealand for showing him a different perspective on psychiatry. “In countries such as New Zealand, mental health is taken as seriously as physical health,” he explains, “and I want to help create a similar mindset in Malaysia.”

Mental issues on the rise

- 3 in 10 Malaysians over 16 years old have a mental health problem.
- 1 in 10 Malaysian children (5-15 years old) is affected by a mental health problem.
- Among children, the main problems are peer problems, misconduct, emotional problems, social skill issues, and hyperactivity.
- Mental illness will be the 2nd biggest health problem in Malaysia after heart diseases by 2020!

(Source: National Morbidity and Health Survey 2015)

“There is much to do still. We need more research in psychiatry to be conducted, which is why I’m also playing an active role in the educational system. It’s both a platform and an opportunity to introduce psychiatry to undergraduate students and trainees.”

Dr Amer Siddiq and his good friend Mazran Zulkifly (who helps with the technical aspects of podcasting).
Facebook and Twitter confided that they shared his posts and tweets to family members, only to learn that those family members had difficulties understanding Dr Amer. The podcast is the ideal format to reach out to these people.

The podcast format also allows for listening at our own pace and leisure. We can listen to it while we are stuck in a traffic jam or let it play in the background while we are doing housework, and we can pause and play again whenever the need arises.

Dr Amer credits his good friend Mazran Zulkifly for helping him out with technical advice as well as editing his podcasts. Additionally, he proudly shares that a few similarly well-meaning colleagues and friends have come together to help him with his educational endeavours on social media.

"I think I'm becoming a social media brand!" he jokes.

His efforts are no joke, however. Mental health illnesses are still considered a stigma in this country, and considerable work needs to be done to improve Malaysians' accessibility to mental health treatments as well as reversing their negative perceptions of such treatments. Therefore, the unpaid, unsung efforts of mental healthcare professionals such as Dr Amer Siddiq should be lauded as they are helping us make the distance to achieve those goals.

Dr Amer uses simple language as much as possible, avoiding medical and technical jargon to allow even people without medical knowledge to understand mental health facts and tips as much as possible.

Each podcast is around 10 minutes - just the right length for people to tune in and get the most out of the podcast without their attention drifting away.

New Bahasa Malaysia episode is up every Monday, English episode every Thursday.

Let's Get the Show Started

Back to Dr Amer Siddiq on Mental Health, Dr Amer explains that a podcast is, basically, something like a radio show that we can play on our computer, phone, tablet and other audio file players. In fact, the word 'podcast' is a portmanteau word - the 'pod' comes from 'iPod' - for which it was originally intended - while 'cast' comes from 'broadcast'.

"Not everyone can read or understand English," he says, explaining the limitations of Facebook and Twitter, "and there are people in rural areas who may not even be able to read Bahasa Malaysia properly." He discovered this first hand when some of his loyal followers on
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