

# Good mental health practices essential

**KEY ROLE:** Teachers need to be trained to identify mental health issues among students



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**L**ABOUR Day today is celebrated in appreciation of people from all walks of life, who are in the civil service and the private sector. My focus is on the group called educators, the individuals who provide a sound foundation for the young ones to be educated and become future leaders of the nation in their own capacity and ability.

One of the aims of the National Philosophy of Education in Malaysia is to ensure that students are balanced in all aspects; physical, emotion, spiritual and intellect. Most often, the emotional domain is taken for granted and teachers nor school policies provide specific skills or curriculum to enhance positive emotions in students. The focus is generally on the intellect for academic excellence and physical aspects for sports. Spiritual knowledge is through Islamic Studies and Moral Education. The emotional domain is communicated informally through activities and talks or counselling, if issues arise. To ensure positive emotions develop among students, good mental health practices are essential.

The World Health Organisation says that half of all mental illnesses begin by age 14, disrupting not only children's education but also their ability to achieve their full potential. This means that until the age of 14, there is great potential to diminish the effects of the cause of mental health problems.

Ironically, while parents are always there, the individuals who

knowledge to help their students identify and resolve mental issues which are budding due to circumstances?

In Malaysia and many developing and even developed countries, mental health is not widely spoken about. When I was growing up, friends and colleagues from places like Tanjung Rambutan and Tampoi did not even want to disclose where their hometowns were because of the stigma attached to these towns as the mental health hospitals were located there.

Such stigma also made individuals not want to acknowledge their problem and shied away from seeking help out of shame. Worse, these individuals were losing out on life's potential due to delay in or not seeking treatment and help. Other stigmas included religious or spiritual beliefs such as being possessed or charmed, lack of knowledge on patho-physiology of mental illness, no effective treatment until the mid-1950s and the segregation of individuals into mental asylums.

But today with more progress in curing individuals with mental health issues, mental health departments have been absorbed into the main stream hospitals. But again, this is mainly for individuals who have severe mental health issues or have been identified.

What about students who are stressed or have temporary mental disorders because their pets have died, their parents divorced or they are unable to cope with academic pressure? Adolescence is a period of physical, psychological, emotional and personality change, which can lead to stress, and emo-

tional and behavioural problems. But as more challenges are faced, the age group is getting lower and lower.

It is therefore essential to provide every teacher and every educator the skill to identify and help students with mental health issues. At times, just a listening ear helps resolve the matter. At other times, students need to be referred to the counsellors, parents need to be called to schools and other actions need to be taken. If all alternatives have been trialled, then students are usually referred to the hospital for further treatment.

Thus, the role of teachers today is more than transmitting knowledge but also ensuring that every student is safe and comfortable in the teaching and learning environment. They will have to champion the role of including every child into the mainstream school. But teachers cannot do it alone just by attending courses or attending in-house training. They need the support of the government, the local community, parents, other teachers, the school heads and NGOs to ensure that their own mental well-being as well as that of their students is always the priority.

The importance of mental health is gaining status. It is increasingly recognised that schools need to promote positive mental health among their students and identify cases at an early stage to prevent it from escalating.

Have a blissful Labour Day break, Teachers.

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