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Held back by stigma

Even with trained professionals ready to help, sexual abuse victims do not always seek counselling.

STUDENTS in institutes of higher learning who have been sexually abused often do not reach out for help because they want to protect their secret.

"Some students may choose to remain quiet, preferring not to seek help for their problems. This may be due to them having preconceived ideas of what might happen if they talk to others.

"The individual may not appreciate the confidential nature of the support," said Taylor's University's head of counselling and psychological services centre and health services centre Marian E. Arumugam.

Fear of stigma and shame also deter students from seeking help, says clinical psychologist Cheng Yen Yee, who works with HELP University's counselling and psychological services centre.

"Some students may remain quiet about their history of abuse as they are embarrassed. While students have a choice whether or not to disclose their personal history, our role is to facilitate a safe environment to allow them to do so when they are ready."

In the past two years, 37 students have approached Cheng and her colleagues for help and support on sexual abuse issues. The victims are male and female, and they are mostly dealing with their history of abuse.

"We provide recommendations for further action such as lodging a police report or medical assistance if a victim's safety is at risk. If the victim is underaged, we will need to inform the parents or guardian," says Cheng, adding that counselling services are introduced to students and staff through orientations, on-campus events and workshops.

The centre also organises individual, group, couple, and family psychotherapy and psychological assessment for children and adults.

At Taylor's University in Subang Jaya, Selangor, three cases of sexual harassment were reported in the past year. The university's counselling centre adheres to a standard operating procedure (SOP) in dealing with sexual assault cases on campus.

First, the head of security and school management is informed. Subsequently, an enquiry and disciplinary hearing – led by counsellors and the school management – will be held.

"For a first time offender, the school provides a written warning, and the harasser is psycho-educat-



UPM holds art therapy workshops to encourage students to open up to the counsellors. — Photos: Handouts

ed on the inappropriate behaviour. For the victim, a counsellor is assigned and the necessary support provided," explains Marian, who holds a Masters in Education (guidance and counselling).

The university's counselling team comprises four counsellors and a visiting consultant psychotherapist who is stationed on-campus on a weekly basis.

"Counsellors must assess the victims' mental and physical state of mind, and work towards providing emotional support. We try to calm the individual and support them in making rational decisions. Victims are taught to handle and work through past experiences and cope with life," says Marian, adding the university had lodged a police report pertaining to a sexual harassment case earlier this year.

Even when students prefer to keep their sexual abuse a secret, their difficulties in dealing with the trauma could result in psychological issues.

They may then seek help from their college's counsellors for these problems without disclosing their history of sexual abuse.

Some may eventually do so after



HELP University's clinical psychologist Cheng (left) says counsellors are trained to handle cases ranging from academic and personal problems to sexual assault.

they trust that their confidentiality will be protected and that their counsellor or psychiatrist could help them.

At Universiti Putra Malaysia in Serdang, Selangor, over 500 students seek counselling each month, says its head of psychotherapy and intervention Siti Fatimah Abdul Ghani.

There is a stigma to seeking help because it's linked to mental health issues.

"This perception needs to be altered. Students should step forward and ask for help. As the saying goes, it's better late than never," emphasised Siti Fatimah.

To encourage students to share their problems, counsellors at UPM organise art therapy workshops, motivational sessions and career talks.

Taylor's University student council president Sarah Ngai said it's crucial for the counselling team to

be proactive and provide support to students who are in need of counselling. "Avenues like this are crucial to ensure students – especially in a time of transition – are well supported and able to assimilate into university life."

To gain students' trust, it's important that counsellors are well-trained and professional in providing support services.

"Counselling professionals must be adequately trained to support victims who have suffered traumatic sexual experiences. They must respect the privacy of the individual and explain the boundaries of confidentiality," says Marian, whose unit also provides help for students suffering from anxiety, depression and other psychological difficulties.

"We also have a student mental health service which supports students through their learning. We have an experienced consultant psychotherapist to offer assistance too," says Marian, adding the department promotes its services to students and staff during Orientation Week, annual mental health campaigns and student social activities.

UPM has 13 counsellors to cater to 21,000 students with all kinds of issues.

"Students face different problems, ranging from academic problems to time management, from family issues to heartbreaks. Cases regarding students with mental health issues like depression, bipolar disorder or mental breakdown are referred to psychiatrists or medical doctors," says Siti Fatimah, who adds her department has not dealt with sexual assault or harassment cases. But there are guidelines in place to tackle such scenarios.

"Counsellors must follow the university's SOP where each case is reviewed and presented to the vice chancellor of student affairs. If there are legalities involved, the police and the university's legal team will be roped in to assist."

Mass communication student Michael Kumar says counselling centres in higher learning institutions can guide students in academic matters and issues like mental health, family problems and sexual harassment.

"Students shouldn't feel shy or embarrassed to ask for counsellors' help. These trained individuals can assist us to overcome problems, including sexual abuse cases. Don't keep your problems under wraps. Get help when you need it most," said Kumar, a student at a private university in Kuala Lumpur.