Coping with student mental health

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JUST earlier this month, the country was shocked by a suicide of a 20-year-old, a former St John’s College Penang high-achiever, jumping from a building in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan.

It was reported that the tertiary student had just transferred to Seremban from an education institution in Kedah in the hope of doing better in her studies at the new place. Apparently she could not deal with the pressure to excel in her studies and succumbed to depression.

From suicidal tendencies to self-harm and sleepwalking disorders to no-shows at lectures and exams, such behaviours seem to be increasingly common at Malaysian universities, according to a psychiatrist. Why is this happening?

Stress Scale-21 inventory.

Many students report feeling overwhelmed with the demands of university life and the courses they sign up for. Join orientation week to get to know the university lifestyle, balance academic and non-academic activities, socialise with healthy peers and get in touch closely with the management of the university to improve personal, academic and career development.

For families, consider the child’s opinion in making decisions on the course to enrol in. Pressuring a child to enrol in a programme that is not compatible can cause the student to struggle, leading to the challenges at university and eventual academic achievement. Give children an opportunity to grow up in an environment that enables them to power their coping ability and resilience skills to ward off negative influences.

Finally, the university should do early screening of mental health at the recruitment level and the subsequent years of studies. Early detection may help the management to offer early intervention for students to reduce stress and optimise academic performance. Intervention programmes should be revised to improve their effectiveness, and university students may take such services for granted.

Coping with mental health

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The study concluded that the prevalence of anxiety is much higher than either depression or stress, with some differences in their correlates except for age. It was recommended that these differences be further explored for better development of intervention programmes and appropriate support services targeting this group.

The process of adjustment starts at the beginning of the semester or enrolment and when attending classes, making friends, moving into a new accommodation, living away from parents, and facing different attitudes of lecturers and the academic and university culture.

Therefore, it is important to expose students to mental health education such as stress management, emotion regulation programmes and coping skills training in order to identify and be aware of the symptoms of stress and related illnesses that may prevent them from functioning normally, she said.

Symptoms of mental health problems include difficulty in sleeping, lack of focus, inability to make decisions, lack of motivation, withdrawal from friends and activities, low self-esteem, sadness and fear for no reason.

“The earlier treatment is sought, the better,” Dr Firdaus said. Many students, who had sought the help of counselors, psychologists or psychiatrists, were able to finish their studies, graduate and hold a good post in their career. Once students aware of their illness, get treated and motivated to excel academically, nothing can stop them from achieving their dreams.

Students need to have rational expectations and a realistic perception of university life.

In summary, the following strategies can be suggested to improve mental health in university life and the courses they sign up for:

• Depression – older students (20 and above), those born in rural areas
• Anxiety – older students (20 and above)
• Stress – older students (20 and above), females, Malay, and those whose family had either low or high incomes compared to those with middle incomes.

The physical self

A common misconception is that the body is only the physical aspect, ignoring the mental and emotional dimensions. Many people associate stress with physical symptoms such as muscle tension, headaches, and fatigue, but these symptoms may have lower energy levels and there is a chance of developing physical illness if they are not relieved during the day.

Nobody can be affected. If you feel pressured, allowed. Awaken, slow down, breathe deeply. So, you know you are worth more than your work, life, and everything from that day on.

FEELING REMOVED

If you are experiencing a mental health problem, contact the university’s psychological stress centre. It is available from Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 5pm. For immediate assistance, contact a medical practitioner with whom you have a doctor-patient relationship.

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Arumugam, the head of Counseling and Psychological Services Centre and Neuropsychiatric Assessment Centre at Taylor’s University said students should take time to explore the university, understand the expectations of the programmes, be confident to ask questions and find out as much information as possible on the programme they are interested in from their advisors and faculty staff on campus.

“Time management is important. Maintaining a sense of routine for self-care, students should plan the course work. Learn to manage and limit communication technology, as it helps to form a strong foundation and equip the student and interfere with academic performance. Keep social engagements with peers. Be open-minded, accepting different cultural practices and strengths. It is important to have a sense of self-awareness and self-care, as well as in a crisis. Many a time, students neglect to take care of their own needs such as ensuring they eat well, eat healthy food, sleep adequately and remain physically active, when they are preoccupied with studies or when they are experiencing stressful life events,” she added.

“It is paramount that students take care of themselves especially during challenging times as it allows them to restore emotional energy which then boosts their capacity to deal with challenges more effectively. Dr Firdaus highlighted there are three roles that can help prevent mental illness during university life: students, family and the university. By working together, students can prevent the development of mental illness among university students.

• Depression

Many students undergo challenges in time and this is normal. Mental illness, on the other hand, is any condition that makes it difficult to function in daily life. It can affect your relationships, your job or prevent you from reaching an otherwise attainable goal,” she added.

“Believing a wide, definition, Siti Fatimah said it is because the human mind is complex.

Mental illness can range from anxiety and mood disorders, which have a severe and tangible effect on people’s psychological well-being to psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia, which affect perceptions or senses, with symptoms like delusions or hallucinations.

Living with any of these can be debilitating. We rely on our senses, emotions and perceptions to get us through the day. When any of these fail, it can make life difficult.

A study by researchers from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia’s Department of Community Health, Department of Psychology and Department of Family Medicine published in the Asian Journal of Psychiatry in 2013 sought to assess the prevalence of depression, anxiety and stress, and identify their correlates among university students.

It covered 585 students between the ages of 18 and 24 years from four universities in the Klang Valley, who answered an anonymous, self-administered questionnaire.

Analysis showed among all the respondents, 27.9 per cent had moderate, and 9.7 per cent had severe or extremely severe depression, 36.4 per cent had moderate, and 29 per cent had severe or extremely severe anxiety, and 16.4 per cent had moderate and 5.1 per cent had severe or extremely severe stress scores based on the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21.

Both depression and anxiety scores were significantly higher among males (20 and above) and those born in rural areas. Students who reported significantly higher grades in secondary school (GCE O-level and Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia high achievers) were found to have significantly lower stress scores.

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