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AFTER a generally protected and mostly regimented secondary school life, furthering one's studies at an institute of higher education is an exciting move for many school leavers.

But while university life can be an enjoyable experience, some students may find the transition to campus life challenging, especially when the novelty of settling in wears off and the demands and expectations of the foundation, diploma or degree programme become a reality.

Marian E. Arumugam, the head of Counselling and Psychological Services Centre & Health Services Centre at Taylor's University, said the first year in higher education could, for some students, feel particularly overwhelming and stressful, which can then affect their emotional and psychological well-being.

"Due to the increased study load, critical periods of assessment, such as assignment deadlines, presentations and exams, student referrals to the counselling centre are inclined to rise. For some students, the struggle to learn to be independent, take responsibility for themselves and be socially engaging can be a struggle to maintain.

"Signs and symptoms of stress are irritability, overwhelming sadness, poor peer relationships, disengagement, absenteeism, and poor self-care. Taylor's University students can contact or walk in and seek support from counselling and psychological services staff," she said.

Marian said it could be suggested that many students were not emotionally and socially prepared for tertiary education.

"Cognitively, they may be inflexible in their thinking, attitudes and expectations, and are not always self-aware of their emotions and behaviour."

Lee Siok Ping, director of Student LIFE at Sunway Education Group, said many issues could impact a student's mental health.

"The student's own ability to manage and deal with their feelings, thoughts, behaviours as well as daily stressors affects their mental health. Students who are born with physical or learning disabilities increase their likelihood of experiencing mental health challenges, as they need more support in managing their everyday activities.

"Some students may experience mental health issues due to lack of positive family and peer relationships, or lack of family or community support during times of crisis, which may lead to feelings of loneliness and helplessness. Alcohol and drug use, poor social skills, continually experiencing significant traumatic life events - these are all factors that could contribute to poor mental health as well," she said.

According to Lee, Sunway University provided on-campus individual counselling sessions to students, with the aim of creating a safe space for students to seek emotional support and advice from a team of qualified mental health professionals.

"Apart from individual counselling, we also organise group counselling sessions, workshops, and talks with topics related to mental health.

"Some of the workshops and talks which we have conducted were on transition to university life, suicide prevention, stress man-



Counselling sessions create a safe space for students to seek emotional support.

MENTAL HEALTH

Finding a listening ear

agement, communication skills, mindfulness and mental health awareness.

"We also run a Peer Counselling Volunteers Programme to train students to be able to provide peer support to their fellow students. Through such services, we hope students who seek counselling will be able to achieve some of their goals, which often include, but are not limited to, academic success, improved social relationships, enhanced individual growth and increased overall life satisfaction," she said.



Lee Siok Ping



Marian E. Arumugam

For students who are experiencing psychological difficulties, Marian said a counsellor was the first person who will try to support the individual student.

For students with severe conditions who warrant specialist help, Taylor's University offers the services of a part-time consultant psychotherapist. The counselling centre also operates a peer support group twice weekly, group counselling and drop-in service.

"Students who appear to be having psychological difficulties have the option to defer a semester. It may be more beneficial for the student to take a gap year to gain some work experience, learn life skills or volunteer, in order to be better prepared and cognitively and emotionally competent to handle university."

Universiti Putra Malaysia's (UPM) counselling division does not have specific mental health counsellors who treat mental illness. However, it works closely with the University Health Centre and faculties that also directly consult a variety of related entities, including mental health centres, addiction treatment centres, community centres and psychotherapy practices.

"We offer individual and group counselling sessions to help support students as they work through the personal challenges that impair their ability to succeed at school and

Your counsellor is there to listen patiently, without any judgement, and can offer comfort to you if a session gets difficult. A lot of the time, it can be these distressing memories or conversations that might be causing you problems. Discussing them and how they made you feel can help you make sense of your emotions.

SITI FATIMAH ABDUL GHANI
UPM counselling division senior counsellor

in other areas of their lives," said counselling division senior counsellor Siti Fatimah Abdul Ghani.

"One of the biggest benefits of counselling is that it offers an open space opposite an impartial person to discuss what is going on in your life without fear of judgment. Just the knowledge that you have that place to go every week/fortnight can be enough to release the stress of holding in so many emotions.

"Because counselling is your time and space, for much of the time, your counsellor won't do lots of talking.

"They may, however, prompt or try to move conversations along if the flow of discussion has slowed or stopped. They don't offer much of their own personal opinions, but are there as a listening ear and to make your feelings feel validated. A lot of the time, just 'getting things off your chest' and getting your feelings out in the open can make you feel less weighted down by them," she said.

Siti Fatimah said it was important to remember that during the course of counselling, a patient may naturally discuss issues or situations in his or her life which they felt upset them or caused them distress to remember.

"Your counsellor is there to listen patiently, without any judgement, and can offer comfort to you if a session gets difficult. A lot of the time, it can be these distressing memories or conversations that might be causing you problems. Discussing them and how they made you feel can help you make sense of your emotions.

"While some of your sessions may be difficult, ultimately, you will learn to face your problems and begin to improve. A level of consistency is important in counselling, and your commitment is key to your counselling being successful. However, if the issues are related to medical treatment or further diagnostic action, the counsellor will refer the case to the University Health Centre," she said.



Siti Fatimah Abdul Ghani