

Varsities doing all they can to help

HIGHER education institutions are ready to help improve the mental health of students staying on campuses during the movement control order (MCO).

While some varsities are providing 24-hour *Telegram* service (an instant messaging app), others have their counsellors on rotation for 24 hours, seven days a week.

However, the assistance comes with its own set of challenges for the varsities.

Inconsistency among students attending their scheduled sessions is among Taylor's University's biggest challenges.

Its centre for counselling services head Ng Shan Na said counselling sessions have now moved to video calls via *Skype*.

"Now that it is conducted through e-counselling, students tend to miss their sessions and when we reschedule, they miss that, too," she said, adding that most students are stressed because of academic-related issues.

Online counselling is an uncommon practice in Sunway University, causing difficulty in the transition from face-to-face counselling.

"Our students prefer face-to-face counselling as it's more personal.

"Due to the MCO, we had to change our methods and this requires knowledge and skill," said Sunway Education Group student LIFE director Lee Siok Ping.

Though it has been challenging for them, Lee said it has given their counsellors an opportunity to learn a different approach in conducting their counselling sessions.

Similarly, Universiti Malaya (UM) students aren't keen on tele-counsel-

ling, deputy vice-chancellor (student affairs) Prof Dr Abdul Aziz Abdul Raman said.

"Because of this, we are afraid the counselling session will not be as effective as face-to-face counselling and we may not be able to help them solve the issues they are facing.

"We have a high number of students who suffer from anxiety due to various reasons," he added.

Their psychology officers, he said, are going the extra mile by providing consultation with these students' immediate family members.

While Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) carries out several initiatives to manage their students' mental health, its centre for student affairs director Dr Mohd Suhaimi Mohamad said its counsellors too were facing burnout.

"The varsity has only one hotline number available and nine counsellors, including trainees.

"It is not easy to handle so many cases at once as each case has to be looked into individually."

Universiti Putra Malaysia's (UPM) challenge is in ensuring their students remain indoors but get sufficient exercise.

Deputy vice-chancellor (student affairs and alumni) Prof Dr Mohd Roslan Sulaiman said the university has asked its fellows to come up with games and exercises that students can participate in indoors.

On Wednesday, *The Star* reported that while cases of depression and anxiety among students staying on campuses during the MCO are mostly under control, some varsities have recorded a spike.

Prior to the MCO, UKM's depression

and anxiety cases stood at less than 10%.

Now, of the 1,642 students screened on campus, 15.1% experienced high anxiety, 11.2% suffered from high depression, and 7% were in the high-stress level.

UPM has also seen a slight increase in mental health cases, although the rise is not significant.

As UPM's student representative council vice-president, Mohamad Ariff Fikri Ali keeps himself busy by helping others in need at the university's operational centre.

"I pray and call my parents often to keep my mind positive," he said.

Describing the MCO as a "good move" even though she could not return home to Nuwakot, Nepal, Sunway University psychology student Pratima Tamang, 22, said she is worried about her family.

"But we are staying in touch through social media.

"I try my best to give regular updates about the situation here.

"Although the MCO affected my visa and other plans, I think it's good that the Malaysian government implemented it to control the spread of Covid-19.

"I notice that the number of tested patients is increasing every day."

Noting that getting groceries was a problem due to an increase in demand, Pratima said Sunway University has made food arrangement for students.

"Counselling and career services have also gone online to support us students.

"And the international office keeps in touch with us," she said.



Help is available: Though challenging, varsities are doing their best to provide counselling services on and offline during the MCO. — Photo posed by model