

Green outdoor spaces can boost mental health



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IT has been nearly a year since the Covid-19 pandemic reared its ugly head and caused chaos all over the world.

Daily routines have been disrupted, and one of its serious impacts is on mental health, which has shown an alarming increase among the world's population including Malaysia.

In the past months, local news has reported that the number of people visiting health clinics to undergo mental health assessment has increased.

The government has admitted to the rising mental health cases

as 35,000 distress calls were made to the Health Ministry's Psychological Helpline between March and October this year.

Various efforts were made to address this issue. As the unpredictable situation of the pandemic continues, the social, mental, and emotional wellbeing of the citizens will suffer.

One way to help lessen the impact is through exposure to outdoor greenery.

Green outdoor spaces should now be seen as essential for the purpose of mental and physical health improvement of the public. Nature is beneficial to our mental wellbeing as advocated by numerous scientific studies.

There is strong evidence on significant positive association between the quantity of green space and perceived mental health, and evidence on an association with perceived general health.

Studies have shown that people tend to be healthier, happier and able to enjoy longer lives in areas where they have access to nature,

including green urban spaces.

Nature also has a positive impact on our brains as people living near green areas said that they had better mental health. People living close to trees and green spaces are less likely to be obese, inactive, or dependent on anti-depressants.

So, how do we create accessible green spaces? In this Covid-19 era, outdoor green spaces, especially those adjacent to indoor activities, are in demand.

Therefore in the future, plans to develop hospitals, offices, schools and institutions should take into consideration incorporating gardens and green spaces close to main indoor activities.

This approach will also provide an opportunity to view the greenery for those who do not have time away from their work desks.

The outdoor spaces should be able to offer a variety of activities and positive distractions for the different types of users. The design should take into consideration a few aspects in order for

the space to be a green stress reliever.

The first consideration is to create a sense of control. Users should be able to easily access the green space, where the main entrance is visible. The green space can also provide a sense of control among users in the form of selecting different types of routes, the hierarchy of spaces, and even the type of seating they prefer.

The green area should be able to provide spaces for social support. Even small green spaces can bring communities together.

Parks and green spaces can play major roles in enhancing the wellbeing of city residents, promoting physical activity, mental health and a sense of community. Outdoor green spaces can also act as outdoor rooms for therapy purposes, which has been widely practised in Scandinavian countries.

The next consideration is creating physical movement and opportunity for exercise. The green

spaces can be equipped with routes for walking and exercise opportunities while encouraging users' interaction with the natural surroundings.

Under the new normal, facilitating safe physical distancing for exercising in green spaces, providing different types of varying tracks (width, size, and levels) should be taken into consideration.

Providing positive natural attraction is the fourth consideration for healthy green spaces. Exposure to natural environments can be good way to restore mental health, particularly for people living in stressful and chaotic urban environments.

Investing in vacant or abandoned plots close to buildings can be one of the approaches to create better mental health, especially among urban population.

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