Press Release   20 December 2016

Mental Health Epidemic: The price of progress?

We are slated to be a high income country by 2020 and it appears that all indicators suggest we are close to the finishing line. Incidentally depression is also lurking to be the number one disability worldwide by 2020 – just four years away. According to the 2015 National Health and Mobidity Survey (NHMS), 1 in 3 individuals have mental health problems in Malaysia. The global average according to the World Health Organisation is 1 in 4 persons who are affected by a mental health disorder at some point in their lives.

We have overtaken global indicators. The statistics are frightening. What is more frightening is how unprepared we are to deal with such an epidemic. Mental illness is still regarded as a taboo and the illness is kept under shrouds until it gets uncontrollable. Many still suffer in silence.

Various contributing factors have been identified – financial difficulties, failure to meet expectations, pressure from surrounding environment, negative media influence, workplace pressures and even poor parenting. But what is the root cause of these factors? Is it not the ever increasing materialistic and performance oriented lifestyle?

• **Lost childhood**

Carefree childhood which is a fundamental right of children hardly exists. Children are being institutionalised earlier than ever. They are barely out of their diapers and they are enrolled in pre-school. As they enter mainstream school there are exams, tuition, music, tennis and a host of other extracurricular activities– not for fun and relaxation but to compete and excel. The notion of play-time for children seems to have been lost. Any free time is spent watching television and playing with gadgets. Living in apartments and flats has also deprived them of green space to run and play.

• **Endless wants**

It does not stop with a college degree in hand. It only gets worse. You need a car, a house, sleek gadgets, designer attire, plush household furnishings and annual vacations. As your income increases the need to upgrade arises – from a 2 bedroom link house to a four bedroom bungalow, a proton to a Mercedes, from local vacations to overseas vacations, from public schools to private schools. Debt sets in.

A recent study by Manulife Investor Sentiment index (MISI) stated that Malaysians have the highest debt in Asia. The report showed that 68% of Malaysians currently have debt – more than double the regional average of 33%. The debt is mostly due to living expenses (60%) with rental payments (44%) and children's' education (37%). This survey revealed worrying levels of debt which obviously would lead to all kinds of mental problems.

• **Performance oriented education system**

The education system is focused on high-performers and achieving a record number of As. Every year end as the major exam results is announced the media glorifies the high achievers. So how do the rest who have not achieved the desired level of grades feel. Entry to higher level of institutions is dependent on these grades. Those

left out of the system are deemed drop-outs leading to various social and mental problems. This is ironic as an education system should be geared towards the development of the individual holistically – in terms of character, values and honing their skills based on their capability.

- **Workplace stress**

The work place environment is also steeped in stress and performance. Every year the high performers are rewarded with all kinds of awards and incentives. Anyone not meeting the targets set is bound to feel all kinds of negative sentiments leading to mental health problems. If they continuously do not meet targets, they would most likely be asked to leave the company rendering them jobless and more mental health problems.

- **Declining spirituality**

With the mind preoccupied with the materialistic chase and the struggle to survive there is often no time left for any spiritual contemplation. So when the stress gets too much to bear and there is no built-in spiritual buffer to help withstand the pressure – mental health problems ensue. Spirituality is an essential ingredient for harmonious living in any community. Spirituality is not limited to religion.

The Royal College of Psychiatry states, "Spirituality is not necessarily tied to any particular religious belief or tradition. Although culture and beliefs can play a part in spirituality, every person has their own unique experience of spirituality. It's there for everyone. Spirituality also highlights how connected we are to other people and the world."

Live Simple

It takes an incredibly strong mind and will to turn your back on the norms of progress and set your own benchmarks. It requires equally strong support from family. It is only when society makes a 360 degree turn on their lifestyle and start focusing inwards towards personal enrichment and stop chasing the outward gratification that is promised by the commercial world that we will see some respite from the scourge of mental health.

A blueprint for survival is required to reverse some of the trends that are causing the ever-increasing explosion of mental health problems. Some recommendations for action are:

At a personal level

- Live simple. Know your needs versus your wants and reduce meaningless consumption. Take time to enjoy the simple things in life.
- Cut the addiction to gadgets and spend more time with family in conversations, outdoor activities, and wholesome activities like reading and helping the less fortunate.
- Be aware of the menace of advertising where you are just a target for consumption and sales.
- Set meaningful and realistic goals. Feeling good about the future is important for our happiness. We all need goals to motivate us and these need to be challenging enough to excite us but also achievable. Setting unrealistic goals for yourself and your family will lead to stress and mental health problems.

Policy level

- Reduce the workload and competition in the education system. Reward students for their effort and not just the end results.
- Put a limit to growth. Nature has its limitations and the human body is bound to breakdown if it is subjected to continuous pressure to perform.
- Coping skills should be inculcated as life skills in every stage – right from school, college, university, work place and even in community centres and religious institutions.
- There needs to be easy access to counselling services for those who need it – all over the country and not just in urban centres.

"Happiness is not something ready made. It comes from your own actions" - **Dalai Lama**

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