

## OPENNESS TOWARDS MENTAL ILLNESS IN MALAYSIA

Ulka Chandini Pendit & Koo Ah Choo

### ABSTRACT

Mental health is an important component for well-being beside physical health. Recent years, mental illness has become a challenge in society. However, public stigma towards mental illness is very bad. This stigma makes people with mental illness have difficulty to recover and to get help from society. This paper reports the evidences gathered through the recovered patients themselves of the importance of openness towards mental illness and the need for removal of stigma towards mental illness. There were six interviewees participated in a study conducted in a non-governmental organization (NGO) that supports mental wellness at Petaling Jaya City. The permission of interview was granted by the NGO's management and also the participants. The data gathered was open-ended answers addressing questions which are related to their feeling, public perceptions and also their expectation of the society and supports provided by external parties such as government. The results of the study show that the perception towards mental illness patients should be more open and receptive. Supports and reception given to them is crucial. Public and government should work together to build a mentally healthy and supportive environment for a better society.

**Keywords:** Mental health, Mental Illness, Stigma, Well-being

### INTRODUCTION

Mental health is one of the important dimensions for well-being apart from physical health. One of the challenges of mental health is mental illness. According to Healthdirect, there are nearly 300 types mental illness listed in DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), such as, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, personality disorders, and eating disorders (Healthdirect, 2018). In Malaysia, there are 4.2 millions of people who have mental health issues (Carvalho, Sivandham & Shagar, 2018). Mental illness will be the second biggest health problem after heart diseases by 2020 (The Sun Daily, 2018) with depression as the major mental illness among Malaysians due to stress at workplace and family pressure (The Star Online, 2018).

However, the stigma from public makes many mental illness patients have difficulty to seek help, get treatment and embark in a peaceful and supported recovery journey. The stigma creates barrier for mental illness patients for reaching out as the fear of getting labeled as "crazy" person, person who lacks of faith (Rashid, 2018), etc. The "crazy" label comes from the news of sensations that media creates towards mental illness. The urbanization trend in Malaysia with an unusually high urban growth rate of 3.8 percent due to migration to cities, has also faced the issue of mental well-being (Hurt, 2019), especially among the youth and children.

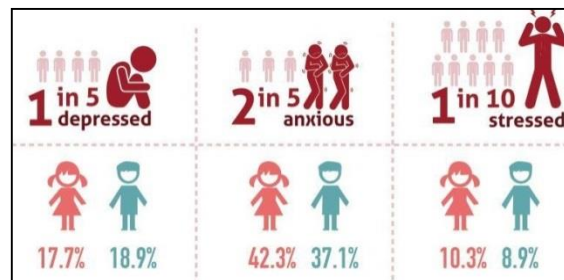
Young people addiction to technology and substance abuse has created more issues related to unmanaged behaviors and lifestyles that affecting their mental well-being (Hurt, 2019).

This paper explores the perceptions from the recovered mental illness patients of what they feel especially on public stigma, how they want to be treated, and their message for public, society and the government. Their retrospective of experiences can provide some lights for better apprehend the challenges faced by mental illness persons.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

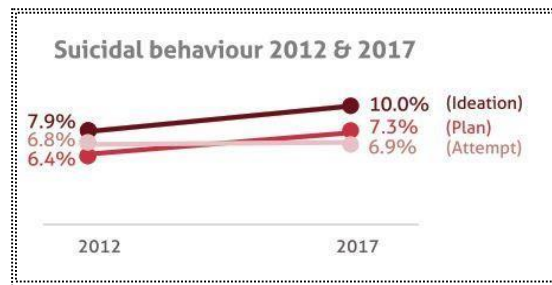
The Malaysian Mental Healthcare Performance, National Institute of Health (Malaysian Healthcare Performance Unit, 2017) mentioned about the prevalence of suicidal attempt is apparently increasing in Malaysia. This report suggested for immediate remedial actions in addressing these health challenges in Malaysia: “the high prevalence of mental disorders, substance abuse and suicidality; the prevalence of exercising as an indication of healthy life style was very low; the density of psychiatrist and counsellors are still low.” (p. iv). The morbidity survey conducted by The Institute of Public Health, Ministry of Health Malaysia (2015) (Institute of Public Health, 2015) has mentioned that the prevalence of mental health problem among adult and children were 29.2% and 12.1% respectively, which is considered high. Two years later in 2017, a survey was conducted by the Institute for Public Health (IPH) on Adolescent Health and Nutrition showed the percentage of Malaysian adolescents are general facing a significant percentage of anxiety and depressions (refer to the infographic, Figure 1(a)). The adolescents’ mental health is 2 in 5 of them are experiencing anxious feeling, and 1 in 5 are experiencing depressed feeling. As of the stress feeling, it is 1 in 10 of them has stressed (Institute for Public Health (IPH), 2018, p.28). The alarming situation is that there is an increase trend of suicidal ideation, plan, and attempt among adolescents, as shown in Figure 1(b) for the comparison of trends between 2012 with 2017.

Figure 1(a): The state of Adolescents’ Mental Health in Malaysia)



Source: Institute of Public Health (IPH) Malaysia (2018)

Figure 1(b): The adolescent suicidal behavior encompasses suicidal ideation, plan and/or attempt



Source: Institute of Public Health (IPH) Malaysia, (2018)

Promoting mental wellness should be an integral part for Malaysia healthcare system, and it is an agenda for UN Sustainable Development Goal #3, with concerted action to promote good health and well-being by 2030 (Institute of Public Health, 2015).

The present study is able to contribute some findings from the case of patients' perspectives and their perceptions of this illness, challenges faced by them, and their expectation of authority regarding mental illness.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There were six interviewees participated in a study conducted in a premise of the non-governmental organization (NGO) that supports mental health patients and their families at Petaling Jaya City. The permission of interview was granted by the NGO's management and also the recovered patients from mental illness. The data gathered was open-ended answers addressing questions which are related to their experiences, feeling, public perceptions and also their expectations from the public and government. Out of the 6 participants, half of them were females and another half was males. There were four Malays and another two were other races (Indian and Eurasian). The age range was 19 years old to 65 years old. These participants were chosen from the active members of the NGO. One of them had suffered from major depressive disorder (MDP) and anxiety disorder, two of them had suffered from depression and anxiety disorder, one of them had suffered from dysthymia and anxiety, one had suffered from anxiety disorder, and one had suffered from bipolar disorder.

The participants were asked for a number of questions as listed below in Table 1. These questions were devised to address the purpose of the study. In addition, it is also to reveal their suggestions for public and government for the benefit of people with mental illness.

Table 1: Interview Questions

No	Question
1	What does your diagnosis journey look like?
2	What is the reaction of your family/friends when they find out you suffered from mental illness?
3	What is your opinion about the public's stigma regarding people with mental illness?
4	Why do you think the public have that stigma?
5	How do you want to be treated in society as people with mental illness?
6	What is your message for those with mental illness?
7	What is your message for the public and government regarding people with mental illness?

The NGO provided a list of names who agreed to be interviewed. They were briefed about the study and the video recording session during their interview and their right to withdraw from the interview. They signed their consent forms. The participants were interviewed in English one by one in one day. They can answer in English or Malay.

Data were then extracted manually based on the key points of what they said. Digital videos were replayed in order to get more accurate data.

## RESULTS

The results answer the questions on mental illness patients' perceptions or feelings, especially on public stigma during the course of their illness period.

### i. *Public stigma towards mental illness still persists*

Public stigma towards mental illness is still evident. The participant revealed that stigma towards mental illness still persists (obvious) in this era. The deep stigma is evident through their explanation in their answers (some of the sentences are directly cited, kindly disregard their language flaws of the text in quotation marks due to the participants' verbatim). According to them, public are still lack of knowledge on mental illness which causes the stigma towards them

*“How could we still have stigma in this era? It is kinda disappointing. It is kinda frustrating for me because. It is already 2019, we should be like.. We should have knowledge in this.”*  
[Participant 1- Female]

The assumption of people with mental illness is like crazy people on the street who have lost their sanity. Whereas, there are many mental illness patients are still able to communicate and socialize. This lack of knowledge creates negative assumption or stigma towards mental illness patients.

*“Usually, people who mention mental illness in Malaysia, the people (public) will directly label them as the person who lost their sanity or and totally insane, like the crazy person on the street. In fact, there are many types of mental illness. [Participant 2 – Male]*

*“According to Healthdirect, there are 300 mental illness. Bipolar disorder, major depression, anxiety, etc. So, someone who has mental disorder is not necessarily they have lost their sanity. They can still communicate, socialize and do other things. There are only certain illnesses which make the patient lose the whole sanity. I hope people can be more open-minded to accept this kind of issue.” [Participant 2 – Male]*

Truth to be told, the patients who are perceived as dangerous and violent are most probably those who are not being helped, are not being supported and do not get the treatment they need. As what participant no 3 mentioned:

*“And also the other thing is, the other stigma that I really wanna talk about is you know a lot of times we think we perceive mental illness patients as dangerous and violent, and really.. These are people that have not received the treatment that they need, are not being helped, and not being supported. “[Participant 3 – Female]*

## ii. **False portrayal of media on mental illness; media has an important role to play**

One participant said that it is understandable for him to know that public has the stigma. Because in most of the news on media, mental illness people are portrayed as someone who does dangerous things, for instance, who hurt or kill people.

*“It is very understandable to me. I feel many people are frightened about mental illness. Because in most of the news that you hear about mental illness, it is like somebody like really goes all the top... start killing and all these.” [Participant 4 – Male]*

It is very clear that media does play an important role. The image of mental illness patients has been portrayed unhealthily through the sensation of news only when the mental illness attacks. On the contrary, the positive side of the illness recovery is not captured and portrayed much in media. One participant has made this point.

*“I think that because mental illness is something that it happens, you know the difficult time is not all the way throughout the journey. Sometimes we look normal like other people, we look healthy, and we do things like other people. We can contribute to the society, but there are times, when the illness attacks and we become... how to say... it becomes difficult for us to do what we are able to do before this, so, those times were captured in media and sensationalized. So it creates an unhealthy portrayal of mental illness. Whereby there are those periods where the recovery journey is very positive... but this is not portrayed in the media. So, I am echoing what my friends have been saying before this, that media plays a very important role in this.” [Participant 5 - Female]*

The particular action when mental illness attacks is when it comes to suicidal case. Most of the time, for readership purpose, many instances of suicidal news are sensationalized, such as to publish the real name of the victim (where if he/she is a celebrity), to add detailed stories, photographs and suicidal notes to the news, etc. Media should publish with positive message and professional views rather than the “drama” of the news. These instances do not follow the guidelines for media reporting on suicidal case (Disease Control Division Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2011).

*“Media plays a very very really important role. And I think I just wanna say not only ethical reporting but safe reporting is also very very important. You know, let's not sensationalize news especially when it comes to suicide. Because at the end of the day it is the lives of other people we talking about. You know people have rights. People have feelings.” [Participant 3 – Female]*

Besides news media, films also played a big role in framing people with mental illness. The movie such as, “Split”, make people think that those who have mental illness are dangerous, always kill people and harms citizens. This is also supported by expert who mentioned that “Split” movie is not the accurate portrayal of people living with mental illness (Fischer, 2017). Technically, it is a movie to misunderstand about mental illness.

*“Personally, I think, media such as movies has the problem in portraying mental illness ... which often shows mental illness is a dangerous thing, such as, “Split” movie. The person who has multiple personality disorder is portrayed as someone that is vicious, always kills people and others. There are other movies, which also show that mental illness is very dangerous where the person kills and harms citizen.” [Participant 6 – Male]*

**iii. How Mental Illness Patients want to be treated – with a lot of understanding or empathy, love, and support or at least like normal person**

Mental illness patients want people surround them or public to treat them with a lot of understanding and support. This is evident from almost all of the participants.

*“I think with a lot of understanding. Sometimes you wish there was more support. They could offer you more emotional and understanding of where you come from.” [Participant 4 – Male]*

Also they want to be treated as a normal person. As a person in public. And at the same time, as a patient too, where public can provide some supports.

*“I want the society to treat me as a normal person. As a person in the public. But, at the same time, I do want people to treat me the same as people who have chronic illness.” [Participant 1 – Female]*

Furthermore, mental illness patients also want public to treat them with a lot of love and empathy that will make them feel better and help them in recovery journey.

*“Treat us as we are human with love, sympathy and empathy. Because that makes us human. Without that feeling, we don't look like us but an evil.” [Participant 6 – Male]*

Having treated wrongly by public shows that still many people do not understand mental illness. Public should play a role and listen to their problems. When dealing with mental illness patient, they should be treating them like normal, if possible, provide them with some words of encouragement to lessen their burdens. One participant said this,

*“For society, because I know many people don't understand about this, so they treat this as*



*a normal thing. It is at the same situation when people are in the trouble. I really hope when public hear that someone has mental illness, please just listen to them so that can lessen our burdens.” [Participant 2 – Male]*

**iv. Recommendations for Public – to have empathy and to build knowledge on Mental Illness at least able to accept and treat the patients rightly**

Mental illness persons hope that public can be more cautious and be more supportive towards them. Sometimes, they only need empathy and listening ears. Also not to discriminate them with people who have chronic illness, such as cancer. It is not fair to see that people treat them very kindly and gently. Whereas, mental illness patients are treated as someone who is crazy or delusional. Their hope is to be treated like any other type of patients too such as cancer, who needs support; they repeatedly said they should not be treated like insane people.

*“Be more cautious, be more supportive, sometimes patients who have mental illness, only want pair of ears and a shoulder to cry on, a hand to get us back on track, nothing much to be honest. And then like, don’t give us a look and don’t discriminate us, as if we are not something different from you, we are also human being. It is not fair how you treat cancer patient, very kindly very gently, but you can’t treat us with mental illness kindness as well, because you think that we are, but I can’t say this, crazy or something who is crazy or delusional...” [Participant 1 – Female]*

Another participant said,

*“My hope for public is to make this thing as like cancer patients. If we say that cancer is losing the ability, a chronic illness. But for mental illness, people think it is a normal thing, it is a game. I am so sad. Many people don’t understand about this. Maybe people can just understand us about our problems to lessen our burdens.” [Participant 2 – Male]*

Mental illness patients have been gone through a lot of pain, it is not physical pain, it cannot be seen, and the patient suffers internally. It is also not their choice to suffer from the illness. They need a helping hand to pull them up, that will make some impacts for them. Public should be educated about this illness, too. Public should read and learn about mental illness in order to be aware and give the right treatment to help people living with mental illness.

*“The depressed person is going through a lot of pain. This pain is not physical pain. You can’t blame him for this. It is not his choice. He can’t slap himself out of it. He can only improve if you help him improve. If you come beside him, understand him and pull him up.” [Participant 4 – Male]*

*“I want you to at least try to read on, types of mental illness, you don’t know beside you might have facing, mental health, they just be silent. Be more understanding be more cautious and that is what I hope for.” [Participant 1 – Female]*

*“People should know that mental illness exists. It is not a myth. If someone sleeps a lot, it does not mean he or she is lazy. If someone cries, it does not mean he or she is weak. Open your heart to have empathy and help them.” [Participant 6 – Male]*

*“These people are ill people. They are not criminals. So open up your hearts, lend helping hand, less judgment and help.” [Participant 3 – Female]*

v. **Recommendations for the Government**

Government should allocate more facilities and support system related to mental health. For example, this authority can provide more public awareness (Public Service Announcement) and educative means on this mental illness. They can support the works done by mental health related NGOs, support research and developmental works which are related to this disease, and allocate more psychiatrists at hospitals or clinics so that more people can have access to psychiatrist or counselling service with cheaper rate. Further, the protection for jobs with people living with mental illness is also important. Many patients lose their job because of their illness. Supportive employment is highly necessary for helping people with mental illness. Besides, supportive accommodation and supportive medical treatment is also cannot be neglected. The following are the suggestions by participants related to these aspects:

*“Because we will have escalation of this case in the future and it will definitely affect the productivity of country. More money must be allocated, more budgets, because for work to happen, for change to happen, the government has to step in and do more.” [Participant 4 – Female]*

*“Even taking the step to implement, some sort of laws, and funds for this organizations that are actually helping people who have mental illness. I do hope government addresses this. It is actually a big problem. [Participant 1 – Female]*

*“I think we should have a lot more, how I could say this, like stuff to do, work to do, research, on mental health, on the patients. So not just throw us to hospital and clinic.” [Participant 1 – Female]*

He added,

*“Mental illness patients not only gone through discrimination but lost jobs, forced to leave in workplace, medically reported out, so we wanna talk about job creation. We wanna talk about supportive employment. We wanna talk about housing, supportive accommodation. We wanna talk about choices, about independent living, about treating mental illness patients as human being, not a number. Certainly not from medical view which is looking at the patients such as having a broken leg and giving a medication and that's fixed. It doesn't work that way. You know i read recently when a bird, hmm, what do you say, breaks a wing, you allow the time to heal, and that's an animal”*

Moreover, government needs to allocate more psychologists in government hospital because currently there is a lacking of psychologists to treat mental health patients. There is only one psychologist to treat every 100,000 patients and one psychiatrist to treat every 150,000 patients (Rashid, 2018). If required, a social interaction platform should be allocated for mental illness patients. This platform can be a place where group of mental health people can interact and socialize which this can help them to recover from depression.

One participant said, *“One more thing for the current government, I noticed that there is a lack of psychologist in government hospital. So I hope government can focus more on finding more psychologists.” [Participant 2 – Male]*

*“For government, provide social interaction for depression. Depression starts to become an epidemic. And where these groups can meet and support this and prevent the damage cause by mental illness.” [Participant 3 – Male]*



## **DISCUSSION**

The mental illness persons' voices are clear. From the way the participants expressed themselves during the interview, their illness journeys were challenging. They felt that they are stigmatized by society. The evidences are clearly indicated through their experiences.

They asked for a more openness by society towards this illness, and the need for reduction of stigma towards mental illness. They want to be treated with supportive and helping hand to help them recover, "pull them" from the illness, and not to be treated like an "insane" person through public stigma towards mental illness. They criticize media news report has sensationalized the suicidal news, and also making films or movies that portray the negative side of mental illness. They mentioned these movies choose not the "right part of the stories" to tell to the public. Many media publishers are perceived to be predominantly individual based or pro-medicine based. Media roles in health promotion has been promoted by (Malaysian Healthcare Performance Unit, 2016), that the authors proposed there is a need to rethink health promotion in a more holistic manner in planning ICT or digital based media communication (Mahmud, Olander, Eriksen & Haglund, 2013). "Innovative ways to design ICT systems in health care can contribute to individual wellbeing and quality of life, and achieve improved public health" (Mahmud, Olander, Eriksen & Haglund, 2013, p.4) and not the other way round. The roles of media is critically raised by the respondents of this study, it is timely for all relevant parties, especially media bodies to come together for finding solutions on the issue of reporting on mental health issues.

While recovering journey is always positive, the people with mental illness feel that they need love and kind words from the people in their surroundings (like their friends and family, or the larger context is the society). They feel much receptive and grateful with that kind of supports given to them especially like the services provided by the NGO. Hence, public should be educated with mental health literacy, recognizing it as one of the health situations that society need to deal with. Education on how to deal with it is crucial too.

With their input in this paper, these voices can be heard by larger audience. The future research will be looking into how mental illness of different age groups or category dealing with this illness.

## **CONCLUSION**

The results of this research consist of five main themes , which are (1) public stigma towards mental illness still persists, (2) false portrayal of media on mental illness; media has an important role to play, (3) how mental illness patients want to be treated – with a lot of understanding or empathy, love, and support or at least to be treated like normal person, (4) recommendations for public is to have empathy and to build awareness on mental illness at least able to accept and treat the patients rightly, and lastly, (5) recommendation for the government is to have more facilities and support system for mental health.

Based on the findings of this study, public, media and government should work together to build a mentally healthy and supportive environment for a better society. Malaysia still faces many challenges in mental health issue. All parties including research through interviews with NGOs should be supported, to make their voices heard collectively and to the larger audience. The NGO that supported this study is indeed practices openness, and willing to work with academia and health professionals for making the issue of mental illness more open and support the exposure of various

aspects of this issue, including the awareness and management of the issue. This paper is just a small effort to report on mental health issue and to curb stigmatization for this illness. There are more to be done in this area for creating a more wellness society for Malaysia.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

### **ULKA CHANDINI PENDIT**

C-ACT Human Centered Computing and Information System Lab  
Fakulti Teknologi Maklumat dan Komunikasi  
Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka  
ulkachandini@utem.edu.my

### **KOO AH CHOO**

Faculty of Creative Multimedia and Digital Cities Research Institute  
Multimedia University  
University, Cyberjaya, Selangor  
ackoo@mmu.edu.my

