

Impacts of Covid-19 on Community Mental Health: from a Philosophical Point of View

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Abstract

Covid-19 is an infectious disease that has affected the whole world. It has impacted almost the entire system and changed society's routine in the aspects of politics, economics, social, education, and many more. The changes that have occurred due to the transmission of this virus have a direct negative impact, especially on the community's mental health. This crisis has forced governments around the world to shut down their countries. Therefore, the community is forced to work from home and carry out online buying and selling activities. Schools are also unable to run face-to-face due to the spread of the Covid-19 virus. This study aims to examine the philosophy behind the spread of the Covid-19 virus. In addition, this study wants to analyse the impacts of Covid-19 on community mental health in Malaysia according to a philosophical point of view and to study the relationship between mental health and its solutions. This qualitative study uses the library research method and analyses data based on references obtained through articles, books, and other written materials to find more clear and detailed information. The implications of this study may increase public awareness of the impacts of Covid-19 on mental health. The findings of the study can be used as guidelines, especially for health institutions to organise strategies for assisting and solving mental health issues.

Keywords: philosophy, mental health, community, Covid-19.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Novel Coronavirus 2019, also known as Covid-19 is an infectious disease that has spread to almost every country in the world and has killed thousands of people at this point. According to the Department of Information Malaysia, 'Co' from the word 'Covid-19' stands for Corona, 'Vi' for Virus, and 'D' for Disease. Coronavirus is a group of viruses that spread disease to mammals, including humans and birds. It was discovered for the first time in 1960, when this Coronavirus got its name from its crown-like shape. Hence, it is called 'Corona' which means 'crown' (Al-Bakri 2020). This disease is a large family of viruses that can affect the respiratory system and cause symptoms like flu and acute respiratory infection (National Library of Malaysia 2020). The first case was detected in Wuhan, China on December 31st, 2019 at a seafood market (Abdullah 2020).

According to a report on the latest situation of Covid-19 around the world as of 30th November 2021 by the World Health Organisation, the number of positive cases has reached 200 million, with more than 3 million deaths. In Malaysia, the number of Covid-19 cases has reached 2.6 million, with the death toll at 25,679 (Covid-19 Statistics Report, Ministry of Health Malaysia 2021). The spread of Covid-19 had a significant impact, especially on the mental health of people around the world. Health is defined as a state of physical, emotional, and mental well-being, not only being free from disease (World Health Organisation 2021). The National Mental Health Policy (2012) defines mental health as the ability of individuals, groups, and surroundings to interact with each other to encourage subjective well-being and optimal functioning.

Mental health problems can directly affect an individual's daily life and future. The act of treating and preventing mental health problems from childhood and adolescence stages is important to improve people's development in the future. Rosli et al. (2020) stated that mental illness is expected to account for 15% of global illnesses. Covid-19 has certainly had many impacts on the community, such as emotional stress and mental disorders. This is because society has less awareness of how to handle emotions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the community's belief in the metaphysical power that has caused this to occur is still being explored and nurtured. Furthermore, the community is more inclined to act emotionally rather than think positively. So, it is not surprising that there is an increase in cases of mental health disorders during the Covid-19 pandemic. Even though Malaysia has moved to the endemic phase, community life cannot escape from the presence of the

Covid-19 virus. In addition, mental health issues still exist as a result of problems that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic phase. Therefore, all parties need to work together and play their respective roles to prevent more critical situations.

Research Problem

Covid-19 has hit our country since the beginning of 2020. The increase in positive cases has forced the Malaysian government to implement the Movement Control Order (MCO). The MCO 1.0 was implemented from March 18th until May 3rd, 2020, which caused the closure of economic activities to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Interstate travel and social gatherings are also not allowed. In early 2021, the government enforced MCO 2.0 after positive cases of Covid-19 increased significantly after the Sabah State Election (PRN) in September 2020. After MCO 1.0, many companies suffered losses, had to close their businesses, and had to lay off workers to save on operating costs. At the same time, those who are self-employed, such as night market traders, barbers, and caterers are affected because they cannot open their premises and there is less demand from customers.

The implementation of MCO 1.0 recorded a very significant reduction in the number of working people. In February 2020, a total of 15.34 million working people were recorded. This figure was reduced to 14.89 million in May 2020. The worst affected groups are freelancers, night market traders, farmers, and hawkers. Their number decreased from 2.69 million in February 2020 to 2.42 million in May 2020, which is a decrease of 0.27 million in 4 months. However, during MCO 2.0, this number showed an increase of 0.09 million, which is from 2.39 million in January 2021 to 2.48 million in March 2021.

In addition, the Malaysian education sector was affected during the MCO implementation. This sector consists of school pupils, university students, teachers, and lecturers. Since schools and educational institutions were not allowed to operate as usual, students had to adjust to the online learning process via Google Meet and Zoom platforms at their respective homes. However, some students are unable to follow this online learning method due to a lack of a good internet connection, especially in rural areas. Almost 36 percent or 1.8 million students do not have adequate online learning resources, such as appropriate devices and gadgets. Statistics show that 52 percent of students in Sabah do not have access to the internet, smartphones, computers, or other mobile devices to ensure smooth online learning sessions during the MCO period.

The spread of the Covid-19 virus also has a big impact on community health. The MCO implementation across the country indirectly limits the daily productivity and movement of the community, especially working people. Usually, they drive or use public transportation like commuters, MRT, and LRT to get to work. This activity increases physical movement and body productivity compared to working from home using laptops for 7 to 8 hours per day. A person who works from home is more likely to be obese if healthy eating habits are not maintained. This is also due to limited movement at home and a lack of physical activities such as exercise. According to the National Health and Morbidity Survey (2019), 50.1 percent of adults are obese or overweight. Out of the total percentage, 19.7 percent are obese, while 30.4 percent are overweight. This percentage has certainly increased when the pandemic occurs, considering that it requires people to stay at home for a long period, which is about 2 years.

Covid-19 has a massive impact on the mental health of every individual in the world, particularly Malaysians. According to the Director General of Health Malaysia, Tan Sri Dr. Noor Hisham Abdullah, a total of 366 suicide cases were reported to the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) in the first three months of 2021. Some individuals are at high risk of experiencing mental health problems such as depression, especially when they are under extreme and unmanageable stress and isolate themselves from the support of family and friends. This sad phenomenon usually happens because of life stress due to financial constraints, job losses, and over-indebtedness. Wang et al. (2020) mentioned that 53.8 percent of respondents faced moderate to severe psychological impact. Out of the total percentage, 16.5 percent were symptoms of depression, 28.8 percent were symptoms of anxiety, and 8.1 percent were symptoms of stress.

Although the MCO is no longer implemented following the country's transition to an endemic phase, the impact on mental health is still felt among the community affected by the spread of the Covid-19 virus and the MCO implementation. Hence, this study focuses on 3 objectives that will be discussed throughout the study:

1. Identify the general overview of the philosophy behind the spread of the Covid-19 virus.
2. Identify the impact of Covid-19 on community mental health in Malaysia from a philosophical point of view.
3. Determine the relationship between the philosophy behind the spread of the Covid-19 virus and mental health as well as the solutions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher used several methods to ensure that data and information could be collected accurately and the objectives of the study can be met. The methods are as follows:

1. Type of Research

a. Library Research

The researcher has conducted library research to obtain clear and accurate information regarding the study. It is one of the most important approaches for the researcher to analyse and collect the required data. In addition, this method is used by referring to books, theses, articles, and other written materials related to the research topic.

b. Content Analysis

The researcher used the content analysis method to obtain selected data and information related to the study, such as the impact of Covid-19 on community mental health in Malaysia from a philosophical point of view.

2. Research Design

This qualitative study is based on references to matters related to data analysis from articles, books, and other written materials. This study aims to analyse the philosophy behind Covid-19, where the researcher focuses more on the impact of the pandemic on the community's mental health.

3. Research Instruments

Research instruments are tools used to collect the required data to answer research questions. This study uses a reference method, where the researcher examines the views of leaders and philosophers in identifying the impact of Covid-19 on the community's mental health.

ANALYSIS, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION

Causes of Mental Health Problems

Mental health issues in the mass media have caught the attention of Malaysians due to the spread of the Covid-19 virus in this country. This is because mental health may affect a person's life positively or negatively. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as a state of well-being, in which the individual realises his or her abilities, can cope with normal life stress, can work productively, and is able to contribute to the community (WHO 2004). However, if an individual does not control and take care of his or her mental state, he or she can reflect badly on society. According to previous research, at least one out of ten young people, or 10 percent of the 5.5 million youth in this country has suicidal thoughts (National Mental Health 2017). The statistics indicate that Malaysians have experienced critical mental health issues. Thus, the authorities need to be more aware of the causes that lead to mental health issues in the community.

Emotional stress is one of the causes that contribute to mental health problems. According to the 4th Edition of Kamus Dewan (2005), stress means a state of being under stress or feeling stressed, which is the state of bearing heavy burdens that are difficult to endure by oneself. An individual who faces stress will indirectly affect his or her emotional management, potentially triggering more serious mental health conditions. Since the spread of the Covid-19 virus, most Malaysians have experienced chronic depression because they are unable to control their emotions well. Based on the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS 2019), almost half a million adults (2.3 percent) in this country are suffering from stress or depression. At the same time, the annual report of the Ministry of Health Malaysia (2018) recorded 465 cases of attempted suicide between January and June 2020. The outbreak of Covid-19 has instilled fear, worry, anxiety, and stress in every individual that this disaster seems to have no end. This has been proven by Holmes et al. (2020) and Gunnell et al. (2020) in their studies, where Covid-19 has affected mental and physical health as well as stress, trauma, depression, and anxiety of individuals (Mamun & Griffiths 2020). These studies have shown the mental tendency of people toward negativity after facing the Covid-19 outbreak.

In addition, unemployment may contribute to mental health problems in Malaysia. The Covid-19 crisis compelled Malaysia's government to issue the Movement Control Order (MCO) in order to halt the spread of Covid-19. The spread of this disease has a big impact on the economy, politics, and social sectors in this country. Based on the Labour Force Survey Report (2020), the employment sector is one of the most affected sectors by the increase in the unemployment rate in the first quarter of 2020, which is 3.9 percent compared to 3.3 percent in 2019. It is also found that the number of unemployed people has increased to 610 thousand people (17.1 percent) compared to the same month in 2019 (521 thousand people). Due to this

epidemic, many people have experienced stress and emotional instability due to their thoughts and worries about uncertain futures. This is consistent with the findings of a study conducted by a market research firm (IPSOS), which discovered that anxiety about unemployment increased the most (40 percent) during the pandemic compared to the previous year. The survey data recorded that 62 percent of Malaysians felt worried when the spread of the Covid-19 virus affects the national economy and restricts any form of outdoor activity including work (IPSOS Report 2020). From this survey, it can be concluded that the mental health of Malaysians is at a critical level.

Finally, the implementation of online teaching and learning (PdP) during the Covid-19 pandemic also contributed to community mental health problems. The MCO implementation has forced the community including students as well as public and private sector employees to adapt to online learning and working at home while waiting for the government's new measures. The 'New Normal' life requires the community to be more creative by utilising current technology despite many sudden changes. According to Wang (2020), the spread of the Covid-19 disease has caused stress, depression, and anxiety about the future in the community. Meanwhile, the Mental Health Study (2017) has previously reported that at least one in ten youth, or 10 percent of the 5.5 million youth in this country has suicidal thoughts. According to the same study, one in every five young people suffers from depression, and one in every ten young people experiences emotional stress. This clearly indicates that online learning has a huge impact on the mental and physical health of an individual. Therefore, this mental health issue must be taken into serious consideration to achieve one goal, which is to help youths emotionally and spiritually.

In conclusion, drastic changes due to MCO have affected the mental health of every individual in the world, including Malaysia. The Covid-19 outbreak has left a deep impact on society in various aspects, especially mental health. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, some people have experienced depression, emotional stress, and psychological disorders. However, they are still able to control their emotional stress by sticking to religion. With strong religious beliefs, the community can build a strong spiritual identity to reduce mental health problems. This aspect may also help an individual cope with the stress of starting a new normal life. Indirectly, it may reduce the number of cases involving serious mental health problems among Malaysians. Hence, each individual needs to be stronger in creating a new lifestyle to avoid unwanted happenings during the Covid-19 endemic phase.

Impacts of Covid-19 on Community Mental Health

In general, Covid-19 has affected the community in various ways, such as economic, political, social, and health. Therefore, the study focuses on the increase in mental health problems in the community throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. This aspect of mental health needs to be taken into account because it is the main factor in the increase in suicide cases in Malaysia. Data collected from the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) found that there was an increase in the number of suicide cases reported in 2020, which was 631 cases compared to 609 cases in 2019. As of March 2021, a total of 336 suicide cases have been reported to the police. Hence, this mental health issue needs to be dealt with immediately to prevent any worse crisis in the future.

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the community's mental health include extreme stress in adapting to new normal life, such as home curfew and compliance with the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). According to Abdul Rashid (2020), individuals who live alone or with their families need to change their daily lifestyle. Furthermore, the second and third waves of the Covid-19 pandemic had a great impact on the psychological aspects of an individual. However, mental health issues are often underestimated by society. The curfew implementation is indeed a big challenge and puts great pressure on many people. Hence, the recent lifting of Covid-19 movement restrictions can positively reduce their stress.

The next impact is the emotional and psychological disorders faced by the community. During the MCO implementation, many people experienced high levels of anxiety to the point of making panic purchases and collecting a large amount of healthcare products to prepare for the virus outbreak (Siti Sarawati 2020). The past pandemic has formed a negative mindset in the community, where they act recklessly without caring about their surroundings. Other than that, the controversial issues related to vaccines at that time and the increase in the death rate of Covid-19 patients have added fear and anxiety among the community. Hence, all parties need to take proactive steps to reduce the public's worries.

Depression is also a mental health issue that occurs as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak. Depression can interfere with psychological and personal well-being, which is an important element in determining the functionality of human beings and affecting the health system during the pandemic period (Abdul Aziz 2020). Symptoms of depression include feelings of sadness, anxiety, easily irritated, low self-esteem, misplaced guilt, helplessness, restlessness, as well as difficulties in concentrating, remembering, and making decisions. Patients may isolate themselves from society, family, or friends, and they may feel suicidal and make suicidal attempts. Meanwhile, some people experience depression and anxiety because they worry about their family members. They also wonder when they will be able to see their family members again. The lockdown or

quarantine order prevents those who live far from their families from returning to their hometowns. According to Mustaffa (2020), the whole world is experiencing limited social interaction. Large-scale group activities like parties, weddings, and team sports activities cannot be done. A prior study showed an increase in the depression rate among Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE) patients. Out of approximately 150 SLE patients who participated in the study, 46.6% of them experienced temporary anxiety, while another 33.3% experienced severe depression (Mohd Haazik et al. 2020).

In addition, the impact on mental health during the pandemic can be seen among Covid-19 patients. This is because patients and their families who have been infected with the disease are often viewed negatively by the community. Even though they have fully recovered, they still have to face discrimination from other people. This situation prevents people from getting screening processes and treatment. Dr. Andrew Mohanraj, President of the Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA) explained various risks that can be experienced by Covid-19 current and former patients. Some of the risks are stigma and social discrimination as well as the economic crisis that leads to their worrying mental health. The stigma not only affects patients, but also frontline workers and other employees from critical sectors. They may experience extreme stress and fatigue due to being on duty for a long period and bearing heavy workloads. However, during this endemic phase, Covid-19 patients are no longer viewed negatively because this disease has become the norm in society.

In short, community mental health is the significant effect of Covid-19 during this endemic era. Moreover, people need to adapt to new norms that test one's physical and mental readiness. According to Abd Rahman et al. (2021), stress and life problems experienced by the community today have a great impact on their psychological well-being. A high level of stress may lead to severe mental health issues. This happens when stress is not properly managed and proper emotional management is not known. Therefore, various measures have been implemented to overcome this mental health problem.

Measures to Overcome Mental Health Problems in the Community Due to the Impacts of Covid-19

Covid-19 has undoubtedly brought negative impacts on the community. Although recent technology makes people's lives easier, this pandemic can affect a person's mental health. Saravanan Murugan, the Minister of Human Resources issued a statement on September 23rd, 2021. According to him, a total number of 155,893 individuals in this country have been laid off during the Covid-19 pandemic. The reduction of employees due to Covid-19 since 2020 has made it difficult for many people to find a source of income, and some of them are willing to commit suicide. There are several steps to overcome mental health problems due to Covid-19.

First of all, communication is an effective way to deal with mental health problems. The community, especially Covid-19 patients is advised to communicate continuously with the closest people such as family and friends. This method can reduce the pressure faced during the quarantine period. Saodah, Narimah, and Mohd Yusof (2003) stated that communication is a basic tool like our needs for food, shelter, and clothes. Furthermore, many experts agree that communication is very vital in social life. According to Professor Wilbur Schramm, communication and community are two inseparable matters. Through communication, the community affected by the pandemic can be calmer and reduce their stress by sharing problems and finding solutions with one another.

In addition, community spirit is very crucial to maintaining an optimal level of mental health. Every individual needs to be aware of their surroundings and their problems. An individual is also encouraged to give moral support to other individuals who are affected by the pandemic, so that no one faces this pressure alone. Other than that, empathy must be cultivated to create a harmonious atmosphere in the community. Thus, self-care can reduce mental health problems along with strong social support from the community.

The next step is to live a healthy lifestyle, such as having a good sleeping pattern, practising a healthy and balanced diet, and doing exercise and physical training. A healthy sleeping pattern has a huge impact on psychological health, while physical activities contribute to improved self-confidence, enhanced quality of thinking, stabilised emotions, and good physical fitness. Therefore, the practise of a healthy lifestyle may greatly reduce the symptoms of stress as it has become a habit.

Finally is emotional management, where emotional changes or stress need to be addressed properly. This is because emotions are closely related to other mental health aspects, namely depression, anxiety, anger, and aggressive behaviour. These aspects can lead to an unsafe and inharmonious family life. If a family has good emotional management, their mental health will be in a better state.

Hence, each individual needs to work together to take care of their emotional and mental health from time to time. This can be done by practising several measures, such as changes in lifestyle, positive thinking patterns, and great mindsets. Thus, stable emotions can be formed and mental health problems can be controlled throughout the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study discusses the general overview of the philosophy behind the Covid-19 outbreak that affects mental health. Experiences that had negative impacts on various aspects of Malaysian community life during the Covid-19 pandemic can be referred to and used by related parties to prepare for any mental health problems during the endemic phase. Mental health can have a direct impact on an individual's daily life and future. The results of the study discovered that one of the mental health causes is emotional stress. Other than that, employment is one of the main factors of mental health issues in Malaysia. Online learning also contributes to mental health problems in the community. If one's mental health is affected, mistakes in life are often considered a failure. As a result, the individual will feel sad, disappointed, and hopeless. If this situation persists, it could create a culture of mental and physical disorder in the community. Thus, it is very essential for the community to be aware of mental health issues so that they do not become cancer or more serious due to the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

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