Chapter 55

The Counsellor’s Kit: Empowering Mental Health

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ABSTRACT
Young people face many events and challenges as they grow up. Many can adjust to life-changing experiences, while many others see some events as stressful and threatening to their psychological health. Individuals who succumb to the pressure of stress will be affected negatively either in their academic performance or personal well-being. Malaysia strives to embrace and achieve Goal 3 of United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for every citizen at all ages. In view of increasing reports of reduced mental health among Malaysian society especially young people, there is a need to promote awareness about psychological well-being and effective coping strategies. This kit is developed to provide engaging and fun tools for mental health professional helpers when they go out conducting programs or workshops. The main target audience includes but not limited to children and teenagers. There are four main themes of games available in the Counsellor’s Kit. The first is Wheel of Me to help increase self-awareness among participants. The second is Motivation games to nurture young people’s goals and interests in their future life. The third is ABCDE games to teach program participants about how to change from negative to positive thinking. Finally, is ABC stress instrument to assist participants with being aware and alert to signs of stress as well as learn how to cope with stressors. Each set of games is accompanied with a guidebook for helpers to refer to. The kit is designed to be handy and affordable for teachers, counsellors and even parents to purchase. The end objective of this product is to provide a tool for helpers that can serve as a basis for conducting programs to enhance stress resiliency among young people in Malaysia. The games have been designed to suit the diversity and uniqueness of a multicultural society. The tools can be utilised by mental health practitioners to design preventive and
developmental programs or modules that can enhance psychological well-being among Malaysian young people.

**Key Words:** Mental health, psychological well-being, young people, counselling games

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with their 169 targets, form the core of the 2030 Agenda to be achieved by all member states of the United Nations (Sustainable development goals, UN). All nations are called upon equally to play their part in finding shared solutions to the world's urgent challenges. Goal 3 of the SDG aims at ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages. Psychological well-being is not a choice but a necessity to live productively and happily in the society. The demand and changes of modern life brings along various kinds of challenges and stressors to mankind, notwithstanding young people of a nation. Although stress is a matter of perceiving an event as challenging or threatening, the inability of young adults to maturely experience the many facets of their lives will lead them to perceive and interpret events as stressful. Schools tasks, pressure to excel in studies, bodily changes, social relationships, personal traits, and family conflicts can at any time be a source of stress to the young individuals. The perception of a stress cannot be undermined since many studies have shown that stress can contribute to psychosomatic illness as well as negatively affect a person’s mental health and well-being.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysia has become a modern country in the 21st century, striving on economic development and increased quality of education, living standard and working force. Nevertheless, modernization brings a long extra pressure and demands to succeed and achieve, especially in terms of financial and education status. Recent days see several alarming incidents and statistics implying the increased stress suffered by the Malaysian society. In 2018 it was reported that about 2,000 Malaysians have committed suicide per year (mostly young people) and 5.6 million people aged 18 above have weight problem while 3.3 million are diagnosed as obese. In 2017 reports, 4.2 million of Malaysians aged 16 and above were found to have suffered depression, while 4.4 % or 2,123 from 48,258 teachers suffer from moderately high level of stress. In terms of marital situations, divorce cases for Muslim couples have increased in all states in Malaysia (2000-2009). There are 25,922 cases of known drug addicts as reported in year 2017 out of 32.4 million populations. World Health Organization in its annual review of Suicide Rate By Country by Population 2019 has located Malaysia at ranking number 123 out of 183 nations in the world. Total suicide rate is 5.5 cases per 100k population with female suicide rate (7.8) higher than female suicide rate (3.2). The total reported suicide in 2018 was 1,734 cases.
The director-general of Health Ministry Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said that there is a worrying increase in suicidal tendency among youths in Malaysia. Its noted that in the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2017, the trend among those aged between 13 and 17 had increased by 10% in 2017 compared to 7.9% in 2012. The same study showed that the depression rate (among those in the age group) is 18.3%, where one in five has depression; two in five, anxiety; and one in 10 suffer from stress. Many individuals who attempted to commit suicide or died of suicide were affected by several factors including a history of attempted suicides, suffering from depression and mental illnesses, substance and alcohol abuse, chronic disease and loneliness. Statistic of the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) shows that more than 500 individuals had committed suicide or attempted suicide every year in the last four years.

The theme of World Federation of Mental Health (WFMH)’s World Mental Health Day 2019 is “Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention”. Many organizations in cooperation with the Ministry of Health organized campaigns and activities related to mental health screening, awareness and prevention. Member of Mental Health Promotion Advisory Council, Ministry of Health, Malaysia, Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye stressed that such campaigns must be conducted including those about eliminating the stigma related to mental health illness and patients. The government should train more counsellor and psychologists to help those with depression and mental health issues.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that students’ mental health impacts their ability to perform life activities, especially one’s academic performance. For instance, a study conducted by Khurshid, Parveen, Yousuf, & Chaudhry (2015) found a negative effect of depression on student’s academic performance. The finding indicated that students with medium level of depression showed medium academic performance, and likewise, students with high level of depression reported to have low academic performance. Another study conducted by Summers (2016) found that students experiencing depression were reported to have lower GPA, tend to skip more class, and miss more tests and assignments. It was also not a surprise to learn that they also dropped more courses and missed more social events compared to those who are experiencing normal level of stress. A recent study conducted by Mohannad Eid, Hekmat & Samiha (2018) examined the effects of anxiety and depression among 170 students in private university in Jordan and found that anxious and depressed students tend to have lower academic achievement as demonstrated by their GPA. The study also discovered that these anxious and depressed students have higher absenteeism rate compared to non-depressed students.

These studies highlighted the significant relationship between mental health and academic problems (Brandão, Bolsoni-Silva & Loureiro, 2017). Therefore, in light of the abovementioned findings, it is critical to initiate and strengthen mental health services and counselling activities in schools and universities/colleges to curb this alarming problem in our society. Teachers, lecturers, counsellors and staff should be more vigilant and aware of the early symptoms of depression as these symptoms if not being treated at an early stage can negatively impact students’ overall physical and mental health.
Positive mental health is not dissimilar to well-being which is global judgments of life satisfaction and feelings ranging from depression to joy (Diener, Scollon & Lucas, 2009; Frey & Stutzer, 2002). In general, well-being includes the presence of positive emotions and moods (e.g., contentment, happiness), the absence of negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfilment and positive functioning (Diener, Scollon & Lucas, 2009; Diener, 2000; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). People with high levels of positive emotions, and those who are functioning well psychologically and socially are described by some as having complete mental health, or as “flourishing.” In can be concluded that positive mental health, well-being and flourishing refer to the presence of high levels of positive functioning encompassing physical, mental, and social domains (Keyes (2002).

There are many models for defining psychological well-being. The Tripartite model of subjective well-being (Diener, 1984) proposed three components of well-being which include cognitive evaluation, infrequent negative affect, and frequent positive affect. Ryff (1989) theorized on a six-factor model of psychological well-being. The factors are positive relationships, self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Another explanation came from Keyes (2002) who said that mental well-being comprises of a sense of purpose in life, life-satisfaction, and hedonic feelings. Seligman (2009) introduced the concept of “the good life” in his positive psychology, with three domains of life comprise of being meaningful, happy and engaged. It can be summarized that positive mental health comprise of positive cognition and emotion, positive relations with others, and positive sense of self.

In respond to the call for efforts to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being, this paper reported the researchers’ work on designed a set of games that provide professional helpers with tools to conduct developmental, preventive or remedial counselling programs. In educational setting, especially where majority of adolescents and young people spending their time, counsellors can easily use the games that focus on the many aspects of psychological well-being as delineated above. The roles of guidance and counselling programme is to nurture the human highest potential and development for the benefit of the individual and society (Nkechi, Ewoomaoghene, & Egenti, 2016). Guided by the framework that psychological well-being stand on a ground of having positive thinking, emotion and behaviour, the researchers came up with interactive games that target on creating awareness and teaching self-managing skills so that the young individuals can develop more resilient selves in face of life stressors and challenges.

3. THE TOOLS

There are four main set of games available in the Counsellor’s Kit. Each set of games is accompanied with a guidebook for helpers to refer to. The kit is designed to be handy and affordable for teachers, counsellors and even parents to purchase. Each game was designed based on relevant theoretical ideas which are then translated into tangible products. The first game is named Wheel of ME. It was designed to become a fun game
that applies the concept of the most popular game show which is wheel of fortune, but with a little bit of twist. Instead of just one game, counsellors are provided with three different set of games which are: Wheel of Improving Yourself, Wheel of Knowing Your Emotions and Wheel of Motivation. Counsellors can decide which game/theme that is suitable to be played in a particular session of group counselling.

The second is Motivation games to nurture young people’s goals and interests in their future life. Motivation has been found to improve academic achievement. One motivation theory called future time perspective recommends that pupils who are motivated foresee their future target either short term or long term. In term of short term goals, successful pupils are more aware of the need to excel in their examination and achieve good grades so that they can attain good higher education as well as good career in the future. There are three games included in the package: CD and card games on career options, and one board game on motivation to attend school and work for academic success.

The third set of games was designed to teach program participants about how to change from negative to positive thinking. This product used the concepts of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) developed by Albert Ellis in 1957. REBT assumes that people are both “inherently rational and irrational, sensible and crazy” unless a new way of thinking is learned. The theory believes that human emotions stem from our belief, evaluation, interpretation and reactions to life situation. Therefore, counselor needs to help clients learn skills to identify and dispute irrational beliefs that have been acquired and maintained by self-indoctrinations. There are three main techniques in REBT which are cognitive techniques, emotive techniques, and behavioral techniques. In this toolkit, the researchers focused on the cognitive techniques known as ‘ABCDE Technique”. A refers to activating event, B is the irrational belief, C is the consequences of thinking irrationally (on emotions and behaviour), D is how to debate or dispute the negative thoughts, and E is the effective expected new thought, emotion and behaviour. The ABCDE Let’s Be Positive has three games that counsellors can use in the counseling session or teacher in the classroom: ABCDE’s Boxes, ABCDE’s Flip Card, and ABCDE’s Board Game.

Finally, is ABC stress instrument target at assist young people with becoming aware of stress symptoms, beware of the source of stress, and coping with stress. A set of questionnaire were compiled and made accessible online for adolescents to rate their stress level. A simple handbook can be used by counsellors to encourage participants to talk about their source of stress and how to cope with stressors. Students can easily take the self-assessment and study about their stress from the explanation written in the handbook. The quick guidelines and advice are given to alert students to their stress experience and the need to seek professional help.

4. RESULTS

The games were initially tested in different programs when the researchers had the opportunity to test run the product. In brief, Wheel of ME was conducted in a program
organized for a group of at-risk adolescents living in a government shelter home. About forty boys aged from 13 to 17 years old who have no known parents or abandoned by the family participated in a one-day program where the researchers used the game to get students to talk about themselves, their friends and the current lives. The boys enjoyed spinning the wheel and choosing color-coded cards that have questions for them to answer in a circle of small groups.

The motivation CD game and career cards were pilot-tested with a group of five 15 year old school girls who volunteered to participate. The researchers took turn to facilitate the game first using the career cards where students were asked to select a card that match their future ambition and to talk about it. Next, another facilitator showed the girls how to play with the simple online quiz designed to ask question about their future targets. When interviewed in a focus group session later, all girls gave positive feedback about the games and said they had fun playing them, becoming more aware of the importance of having an ambition in life. The board game for motivation was designed using traditional snake-and-ladder concept. The game was played by another group of four girls at school. They played on their own, took pictures and later gave feedback to one of the researchers who monitored the pilot test. The girls said they enjoyed the game, it was easy to play, and they understood the message of each box which caused the player to step up towards success in school or step down and not achieve academically.

The ABCDE boxes, flip-cards and board game were all tested as instructional tool in three classes of Introduction to Guidance and Counselling course for undergraduate trainees teachers. After listening to lectures on the REBT theory and the ABCDE technique, the lecturers guided students to play with each of the game. They took pre and post-test survey on irrational belief and results show significant increase from irrational to rational thinking. An in-class assessment later evaluated by the researchers also showed that students could quickly grasp the technique after using the instructional games. For counselling purpose, pilot test on voluntary individual client and group activities in class found that these students felt more comfortable talking about their negative thoughts and understood how to change irrational beliefs when using the ABCDE tools.

Finally, the ABC stress instrument was distributed online and 389 undergraduate students completed it. Respondents could easily rate the symptoms of stress and get a score on their stress level. Using the instruments on source of stress and coping strategies, the respondents could self-review their own stress experience and if they feel a need to seek professional help, then hopefully the self-rated instrument will encourage them to do so.

5. DISCUSSION

Initially the games were designed separately according the specific themes and focused for specific target users. Seeing the initial positive response and benefits gained by the participants, the researchers decided to combine all sets of games in a package that will
be useful for counsellors and related professional helpers to use when conducting any preventive, developmental or remedial programs or workshops. In view of the increasing number of depression, suicidal attempts and stress-related issues in the society, the researcher foresee a need to market this package and make it easily accessible and available to helpers who can use the games to help young people manage their mental health better. The games are suitable for various age groups and different types of target groups due its attractive features and various options to choose from. It is highly hoped that such games will help professional helpers to guide and counsel young people so that they become more empowered with numerous knowledge and skills to handle their stress.

REFERENCES


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