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Cover Story: Pandemic's toll on mental health

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(Photo by Chu Juck Seng/The Edge)

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THE Covid-19 pandemic has taken a silent but marked toll on mental health.

The weight of adjusting to life in a pandemic has added significant pressures to the mental health of business owners, employees and members of households including children.

“Everyone has been affected differently by the Covid-19 pandemic, whether it is the general fear and anxiety of the pandemic itself and being at risk of exposure to the virus or adjusting to a new work-life situation, given that many have been forced to work from home.

“The weight of it all can significantly impact the mental health of employees. The additional pressures add up, as they are forced to maintain their level of productivity at work,” Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM) president Tan Sri Soh Thian Lai tells The Edge.

For frontliners, the falling number of Covid-19 cases does not remove the effects of fatigue and burnout. Many medical staff suffer from depression, panic disorder and generalised anxiety disorder, among other mental health issues, Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Dr Koh Kar Chai explains.

“Some who recover from a Covid-19 infection are also suffering post-Covid syndrome. Others who lost their family and friends during the peak of the pandemic but did not have room to grieve, owing to high workloads and endless shifts, are experiencing the effects of delayed grief response,” he says.

The National Institutes of Public Health, under the Ministry of Health (MoH), had said the number of Malaysians with anxiety, depression or other mental health conditions, which tripled between 1996 and 2016, is now about 10 million, or 29% of the population.

This tripling is significant, as mental healthcare services are estimated to cost the Malaysian economy more than RM14 billion a year, according to a study published in The Lancet in 2018.

The Covid-19 pandemic is certain to have worsened the mental health situation, although no official information has been released.

Koh says MoH, via State Health Departments, collaborates with the Mental Health Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Team from the Department of Psychiatry and Mental Health in hospitals across Malaysia to provide frontliners with psychological first aid.

“There is psychological first aid and therapy for frontliners who are suffering from stress-related disorders and mental health conditions,” Koh says.

For the public in general, some private insurance companies do include mental health benefits in its packages. These were not incorporated in direct response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

One international insurer, for example, included special benefits covering severe major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, severe obsessive-compulsive disorder, schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder in its medical card last year. Another insurer started covering similar mental conditions, including postpartum depression and Tourette Syndrome, in 2019.

“Currently, medical and health insurance (MHI) plans are [generally] not designed to cover mental health, as patients do not need to be hospitalised. However, there are some critical illness products in the market covering mental health specifically. These are a lump-sum payout when one is diagnosed with a mental health illness,” says Life Insurance Association of Malaysia (LIAM) president Loh Guat Lan, who is also group managing director and CEO of Hong Leong Assurance Bhd.

“Individuals with mental health illness — most commonly, depression and anxiety — usually seek outpatient treatment, usually in the form of counselling and medication. These costs are borne out-of-pocket or by employers.”

Open letters by medical professionals reflect urgent pleas for private health insurers to cover and reimburse mental healthcare services for members of society who would otherwise be unable to afford the necessary aid.

“Employers [must] show empathy towards their employees; provide them with the avenue to speak up confidentially about the issues they are facing, work-related or otherwise; and offer more flexible work schedules, enhanced benefits and compensations for working longer hours when working remotely, counselling support and periodic health-wellness checks,” FMM’s Soh urges.

He also urges the government to ensure equal access to health coverage and that insurance coverage covers all aspects of mental health issues, especially the extreme cases of people requiring prolonged treatment and medication to address severe psychological issues.

“This is especially so for vulnerable groups such as medical frontliners, the aged, women and children,” he adds.

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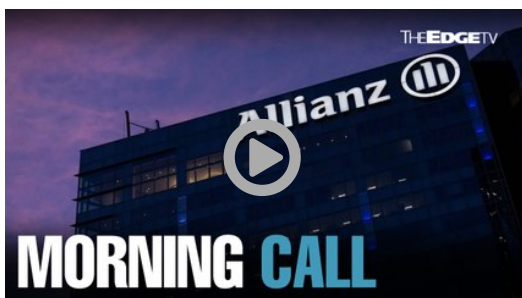
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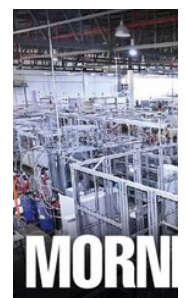
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