

'GOVT MUST DO MORE FOR MENTAL HEALTH'

Stigma of mental illnesses, decriminalising suicide are some aspects that need reform, says NGO

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THERE are many aspects of mental health in the country that need improvement and reform, says Awareness Against Suicide (Awas).

The non-governmental body said these aspects included stigma over mental illnesses, the need to decriminalise suicide attempts, costly mental healthcare and lack of funding,

"Firstly, the stigma. Due to a lack of understanding of mental health, it is often regarded as taboo to talk about it and to seek professional help. It impacts our progress in providing better mental health services, namely lack of mental health professionals, lack of treatment for mental disorders, (insufficient) insurance policy coverage for mental illnesses, fewer study and job opportunities for individuals with mental disorders, non-standardised government policies in inclusivity and mental disabilities.

"Secondly, decriminalising suicide attempts. Section 309 of the Penal Code needs to be abolished or revised. People who attempt suicide are mostly struggling



Consultant clinical psychologist Urmilah Dass (inset) says helplines should remain open so that individuals who require mental health support can get assistance. PIC BY MIKAIL ONG

with mental health issues.

"Unfortunately, in Malaysia, if an individual attempts suicide and gets caught in the act, instead of being given mental health support and care, he or she can be penalised by imprisonment or fine, or both.

"Thirdly, healthcare for mental health issues is costly, hence the misconception that mental health is only meant for the well-to-do or that it is a problem faced only by those who have enough but aren't grateful or 'not mentally strong', among other reasons.

"Due to this, those in the lower-income bracket would not per-

ceive this as a health matter, but a spiritual matter.

"It is important that all levels of income have equal access to mental health treatment.

"Lastly, lack of funding. Although it increased for this year, it is low given the fact that many are experiencing grief and loss on a massive scale due to the pandemic.

"The loss of loved ones and livelihoods have hit us hard and have resulted in more people struggling with their mental health, now more than ever," it said.

On Friday, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres

warned of a global mental health crisis.

Bernama, quoting Xinhua news agency, reported that Guterres, in his video message when launching the World Mental Health Report 2022: Transforming Mental Health For All, said nearly one billion people worldwide had a mental health condition, with most of them lacking access to treatment.

He added that the Covid-19 pandemic had increased mental health problems and led to a far greater understanding of the importance — and fragility — of good mental health. However, he said in most countries, mental

health remained the most neglected area of health policy.

Awas said Malaysia must apply a top-down approach so that when policies were in place, the public would accept that mental health was about health and that it should not be taken lightly.

Consultant clinical psychologist Urmilah Dass said there must be changes in how mental health was viewed in Malaysia.

"Mental health is not a minor thing. Unlike a broken leg, it is something that you cannot see.

"It is something that the people can mask and get on their lives every day, thinking that they still can work.

"But this is your mind, which goes on 24/7. It is torture if you go through it without any help."

She also agreed that mental health had taken a huge hit due to Covid-19.

"As a practitioner, I've seen more people struggling with mental health coming for help.

"They were 'trapped' in their homes and worried about illness⁺ and deaths. There is much grief and trauma and not enough support.

"We have more than 32 million people, but how many psychiatrists and psychologists are available in the country? With so few of us, there has been a long waiting list," she said.

Urmilah, however, added that Malaysia was doing a lot more than before.

"Many non-governmental organisations as well as the government, through the Health Ministry, have offered helplines for those seeking emotional support and counselling.

"These helplines should remain open, so that individuals who need support can get assistance."

