



A bird's-eye view of the rush hour traffic heading into the city from the Sungai Besi toll plaza in Kuala Lumpur recently. FILE PIC

CALL FOR FLEXIBLE WORKING HOURS

LONG COMMUTES' TOLL ON MENTAL HEALTH

Getting stuck in traffic jams daily raises risk of chronic mental disorder, warns expert

KUALA LUMPUR

LEAVING her house in Nilai, Negri Sembilan, as early as 6.15am for the 60km travel to office in the federal capital here has become a routine for civil servant Aida Ismail, 35.

Even a slight delay will see her arriving at her office later than 9am. In total, she spends about six hours on the road daily to commute between her house and office, arriving home only at 9pm. By then, her only child is already fast asleep.

That has been Aida's routine since April when the country began transitioning into the endemic phase.

In one month, she is on the road for about 120 hours, which is equivalent to five days, a situation that is experienced by thousands of other workers.

"There are times when I feel so stressful, I hear whispers, that I feel like crashing into the car in front," said the woman, who complained of her hands and lower back feeling numb and aching from long hours of driving.

A senior consultant psychiatrist at Universiti Malaya, Associate Professor Dr Muhammad

Muhsin Ahmad Zahari, said the situation of continually getting stuck in traffic jams could contribute to mental health disorders that lead to chronic stress, such as depression and anxiety.

"The stress will increase if the person is often late for work and is reprimanded or given a warning by the employer, which in turn affects his or her emotion and work productivity."

Dr Muhsin said if this matter was not addressed, it could also lead to the person having high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes, which would get worse without leading a healthy lifestyle.

Therefore, he said, time management was important to avoid the rush-hour congestion.

Professor Dr Rozmi Ismail, a specialist at the Psychology and Human Wellbeing Research Centre, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, expressed the importance of employers implementing flexible working hours as one of the measures to overcome the situation and create a more healthier work environment.

"This means having staggered working hours so that employees do not come to work and leave at the same time.

"For example, have a shift system that starts at 8am to 5pm and the second shift can start at 10am to 8pm. Alternatively, we can implement a system that requires employees to be present in rotation in the office," he said.

Based on media reports last month, Deputy Minister of Human Resources Datuk Awang Hashim said employees who

wanted to work on a flexible basis could apply for Flexible Working Arrangements (FWA) with their respective employers under the amendment to the Employment Act 1955, which will come into force on Sept 1.

The FWA application must be made in writing and can cover changes in working hours, working days and also the place of work.

Rozmi said implementing flexible working hours could help increase workers' productivity and help reduce the risk of stress, as well as maintain quality of life and mental wellbeing.

"After all, we went through it during implementation of the Movement Control Order, which required almost all organisations to adopt the work-from-home concept.

"This allows workers to give full attention to the tasks given because there is no need to commute to work and this can save time and work can be more productive," he added.

He said civil servants should also be considered for a flexible work arrangement according to the suitability of the department.

Rozmi said having flexible working hours enabled workers to better manage their time without neglecting their responsibilities at home.

"However, we must remember that not all types of work are suitable to be done outside of the office. If there are issues such as unsatisfactory work quality, employers can make regular monitoring by developing an effective system," he said. **Bernama**