

Everyone should see themselves as an empathetic leader in this worsening pandemic situation

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The number of depression and suicide cases has increased significantly and reported very frequently this year. The Royal Malaysia Police recorded 468 suicide cases from January to May this year, with depression, family and financial problems as the main factors. It is a hard time for many. The full Movement Control Order (MCO) 3.0 has been ongoing since 1st June 2021 and now extended until (1) the number of daily COVID-19 cases drop to below 4,000, (2) the rate of bed usage in intensive care units is at a moderate level and that (3) 10 per cent of the population has received two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. Understandably, the decision was made after our average daily new COVID-19 cases are still at above 5,000, and the number of reported daily death cases exceeding 100 has happened many times. There are a lot of things that need to be done to keep everyone safe, not only from the virus attack but also from the mental health effects.

On top of the government's continuous support and facilitation, the cabinet members, including our Prime Minister, YAB Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, has shown their solidarity and empathy by donating their three-month salary from June to August to the National Disaster Relief Fund for COVID-19, in response to the situation. In addition, 800,000 civil servants have followed the action by contributing about RM30mil from their allowance cut for three months to the same fund, as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Government, Tan Sri Mohd Zuki Ali. In addition, continuous contributions from the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) all around Malaysia as well are very overwhelming.

In this worsening situation, it is very important for everyone to stay strong and play a role as a leader with good empathetic quality. Being a leader does not mean that someone has to be in a certain position, a politician, or attain power and change the world. It can be as simple as the daily acts of standing up for ourselves and helping everyone around us.

According to Lolly Daskal, one of the well-known international leadership coaches and an author of the book "The Leadership Gap: What Gets Between You and Your Greatness", a leader is a person who claims for it. In one of her blogs, she proposed four ways for someone to claim their leadership and start to take action, which is by; (1) believing that you have something to offer, (2) dedicating yourself to making a difference, (3) being sensitive to issues impacting others, and (4) making a move. A leader that leads from within will make others better as a result of their presence.

Roman Krznaric defines empathy as "the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions". His books include The Good Ancestor and Empathy. Undeniably, empathy is one of the best indicators of the quality of good relationships. It is the key to a leader's connection with others and to the inner part of themselves.

What can be done, really, in our situation now?

Although it is easier to be said than done for some people, it is crucial for us to be often reminded that the leadership action needs to start from us to ourselves. If you are hit badly in this pandemic, please do your best to keep yourself positive and search for help. Take action to explore and get the assistance that you need.

The initiative of promoting for the people in need to raise a white flag (*#benderaputih*) in their house by a citizen known as Jamil bin Ismail in Facebook recently has been supported nationwide. This effort should be applauded and hopefully would make it easier for the people in need to be the leader to themselves and their families by asking for help and not doing something that could harm them or the family further.

Other than food supplies and essential aids, those who are experiencing emotional distress and need a listening ear, for example, can take action by reaching out to 24hour hotlines as follows for suitable support;

- Mental Health Psychosocial Support Service (MHPSS): 03-29359935 or 014-3223392
- Talian Kasih: 15999, or WhatsApp 019-2615999
- JAKIM's Family, Social and Community Care Centre: WhatsApp 0111-9598214
- Befrienders Kuala Lumpur: 03-76272929

For assistance in financial arrangements, offerings by the government such as the one via Agensi Kaunseling & Pengurusan Kredit (AKPK) on the repayment arrangement assistance and relevant entities such as the banks for the moratorium should be explored and leveraged on. The information can be found out further from the internet. Entities like Zakat and NGOs all across Malaysia should also be explored and utilised fully at this moment. Even people's representatives and individuals in your area should be reached out for help, too, if you need to. The most important thing is not to lose hope and try your best in surviving.

As community members, we should be much more alert with our surroundings nowadays and play our part. Of course, it is good if we can contribute monetarily. But if we can't, we can still contribute a lot by matching them up or helping them to apply for the assistance they need either in terms of daily essentials (food, baby milk formula, diapers, etc.), mental health support, or protection against violence. This is the most critical time for us to play a role as a resourceful and strategic leader with empathy, that is willing to act.

These times are hard, but they will pass. We might not be in the same boat in facing this challenge with others, but we are in the same ocean and are able to reach out for a helping hand or give ours to the one in need. So, let's keep the spirit of togetherness in this and make a difference. May many more souls can be saved in this tough time.