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MINISTRY OF HEALTH MALAYSIA

KEY FINDINGS

PERCEIVED BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS IN ACCESSING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AMONG MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Institute For Health Behavioural Research, National Institutes of Health, Ministry of Health Malaysia

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KEY FINDINGS

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Background of Study

Globally, many young adults grapple with both identified and unidentified mental health challenges. In Malaysia, an estimated 29.2% of the population is affected by mental disorders, with 11.0% of adolescents reporting symptoms of severe depression. Despite this high prevalence, help-seeking rates remain low, and many psychiatric conditions go untreated until they reach advanced stages. This trend is influenced by multiple factors, including lack of awareness, cultural beliefs, and pervasive stigma associated with mental illness. Although initiatives such as the Healthy Mind Program have been introduced in schools to support prevention, recovery, and crisis management, disparities in implementation and accessibility persist. These findings highlight the urgent need for enhanced, adolescent-focused mental health support systems, alongside increased collaboration across sectors to promote early intervention and improve access to care.

Objective

To investigate the barriers and facilitators influencing secondary school students' access to mental health services by examining the interplay between their awareness of available mental health services, knowledge on mental health and attitudes towards accessing these services.

Methodology

Study Design:
Online Cross-Sectional Study

Sampling:
Multi-Stage Stratified Cluster Sampling Design

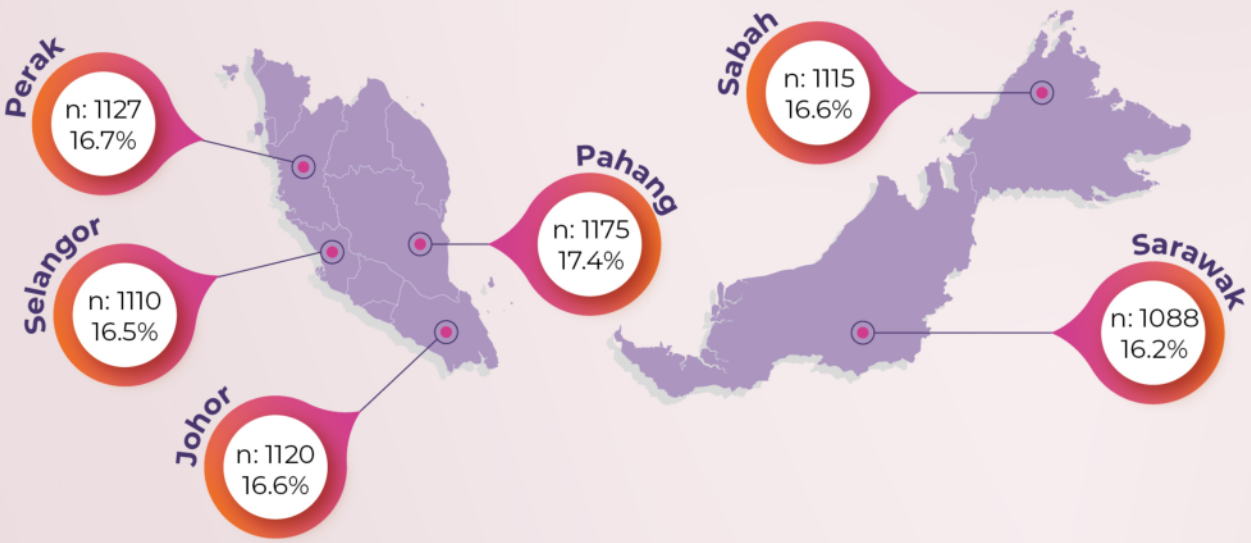
Study Populations:
Secondary school students in Malaysia aged between 13 to 18 years old

Sample Size:
6,264 respondents from both urban and rural areas

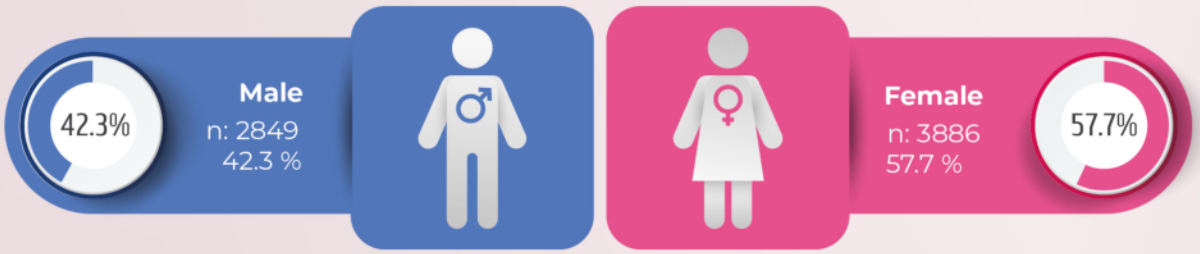
Demographic Profile

Total respondents: 6,735

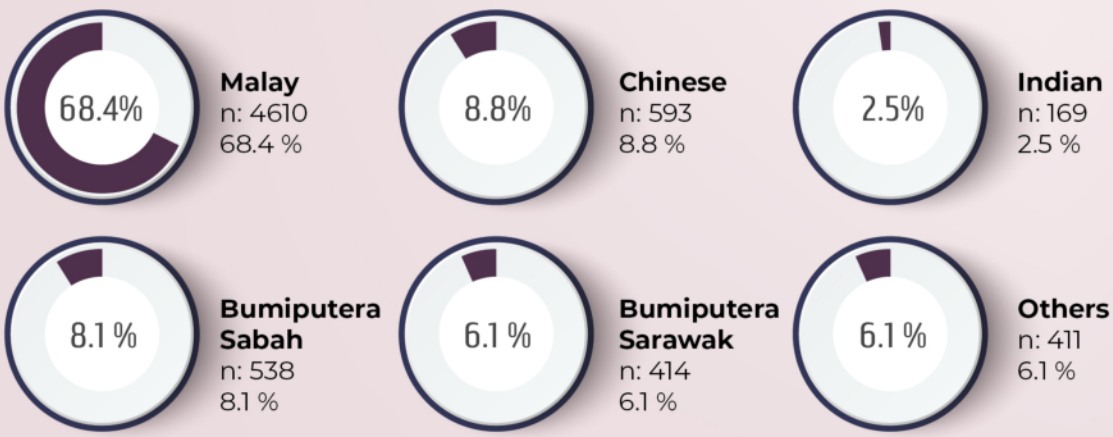
State



Gender



Ethnicity



Form

Form 1
n: 1393
20.7 %

Form 2
n: 1332
19.8 %

Form 3
n: 1509
22.4 %

Form 4
n: 1483
22.0 %

Form 5
n: 1009
15.0 %

Form 6
n: 9
0.1 %

Locality

Parents' Marital Status

82.2%
Married
n: 5534
82.2 %

5.2%
Married but not living together
n: 350
5.2 %

6.3%
Divorced
n: 431
6.3 %

1.3%
Separated
n: 85
1.3 %

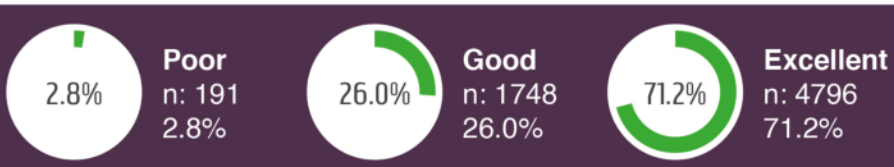
4.6%
Widowed
n: 310
4.6 %

0.4%
Orphan
n: 25
0.4 %

Knowledge on Mental Health Among Respondents

- 88.2% Mental health plays an important role in an individual's overall health
- 72.6% Individuals experiencing mental illness can be treated if detected early.
- 84.6% Mental illness could be caused by something that troubles the mind.
- 82.8% Individual can have mental health issues regardless of age.
- 70.1% Most people may have mental health problems, but they are not aware of them.
- 68.8% Mental illness can be prevented.
- 87.5% Mental illness could be caused by stress.
- 30.3% A person is more likely to develop mental illness if there is a family history of mental illness.
- 78.3% Mental health includes normal intelligence, stable mood, harmonious relationships, and good ability to adapt.
- 73.8% Individuals with unstable emotions are more prone to face mental health problems.

Knowledge



Attitude in Accessing Mental Health Services Among Respondents

- 52.8% If I experience mental health problems, I am hesitant to tell others about my condition.
- 32.6% Individuals with mental health problems are dangerous.
- 73.0% A person who has visited a counsellor does not necessary mean he/she is a person with mental disorder.
- 69.0% People with mental health problems should have the same rights as anyone else.
- 36.8% Talking to someone with mental health problems is the same as talking to anyone else.
- 75.7% People with mental health problems should not be blamed for their own condition.
- 84.9% People need to adopt a more caring and sympathetic attitude towards people with mental health problems.

Attitude

Poor
n: 219
3.3%

Good
n: 4593
68.2%

Excellent
n: 1923
28.5%

Perceived Barriers in Accessing Mental Health Services Among Respondents

It is difficult for me to share my problems with strangers, even if they are a counsellor/ psychologist/ psychiatrist/doctor.

I do not want to seek mental health services because it is not a common practice in my life.

I worry about being labelled as "problematic" if I seek help from a counsellor/psychologist/psychiatrist/doctor.

I worry that the counsellor/ psychologist/psychiatrist/doctor will not be sensitive to my problems.

I feel ashamed to tell my mental health problems to a counsellor/ psychologist/ psychiatrist/doctor.

My family discourages me from seeing a counsellor/psychologist/ psychiatrist/doctor for mental health assistance.

I am not concerned about others' opinions of me if I seek mental health services.

My friends will distance themselves from me if they know I am seeking help from a counsellor/psychologist/ psychiatrist/doctor.

I do not know how to contact a counsellor/psychologist/psychiatrist/ doctor who provides mental health services.

Teachers will look down on me if I see a counsellor/psychologist/ psychiatrist/doctor.

I refuse to share personal information about my problems when meeting with a counsellor/psychologist/ psychiatrist/doctor.

I will not be given any post in school if I have mental health problems. (example: prefect/ President etc)

I would feel inferior if I told my problems to a counsellor/psychologist/ psychiatrist /doctor.

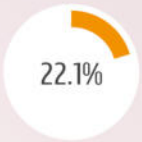
I worry that my personal problems will be known by friends and teachers if I seek help from a counsellor/ psychologist/ psychiatrist/doctor.

I worry that the counsellor/psychologist/ psychiatrist/ doctor will not understand me.

Barriers

Maximal
n: 1582
23.5%

Moderate
n: 3667
54.4%



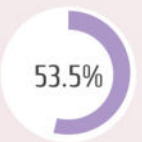
Minimal
n: 1486
22.1%

Facilitating Factors in Accessing Mental Health Services Among Respondents

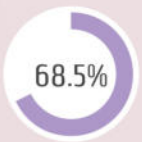
I am confident that support from a counsellor/psychologist/psychiatrist/doctor can help detect mental health issues.

The school encourages me to seek mental health services from a counsellor if needed.

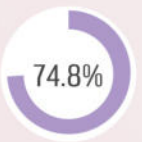
I have a positive attitude towards seeking mental health services if needed.



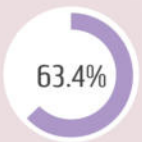
I feel comfortable sharing mental health issues with a counsellor /psychologist/psychiatrist/doctor if needed.



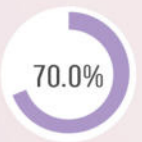
I know how to access counselling services related to mental health issues if needed.



I know the school counsellor to seek mental health services if needed.



The experience of family members or peers who have received mental health services increases my confidence in seeking help if needed.

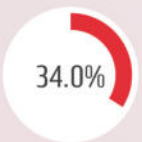


Information about mental health from social media helps me to seek mental health services if needed.

My family supports me in seeking mental health services if needed.

Facilitating Factors

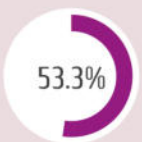
Poor
n: 274
4.1%



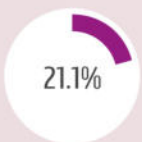
Good
n: 2292
34.0%

Excellent
n: 4169
61.9%

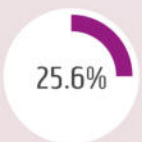
Respondents' Mental Health Practices



Share my feelings
n: 3592
53.3%



Ask for help
n: 1421
21.1%



Do nothing
n: 1722
25.6%

Identifying Trends in Respondents' Mental Health Behaviours

Feeling shy or embarrassed
n: 736
10.90%

Worried about what other people might think/say or do
n: 527
7.80%

Worried that I might be labelled as someone with mental health issue
n: 439
6.50%

Worried that people might know about my problem
n: 733
10.90%

Does not like to share about my feelings, emotions or thoughts
n: 121
1.80%

Wants to solve problems on my own
n: 889
13.20%

Does not consider myself facing problems
n: 620
9.20%

Consider it as a small problem which does not need to be shared to others
n: 947
14.10%%

Consider the problem will solve on it's own
n: 1330
19.70%

No time to share my feelings
n: 546
8.10%

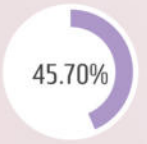
Respondents' Trusted Sources

Helpline
n: 876
13.00%

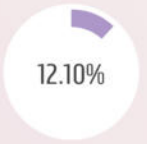
Families
n: 4950
73.50%

Friends
n: 4486
66.60%

Teachers
n: 3531
52.40%



Counsellor
n: 3081
45.70%



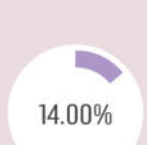
Religious Institution
n: 818
12.10%

Doctor
n: 1496
22.20%

Psychologist
n: 1492
22.20%

Non-Government Organizations (NGO)
n: 134
2.00%

Community Leader
n: 143
2.10%



Did not approach anyone for help
n: 944
14.00%

Actions Taken by Respondents When Others Share Emotional Distress

Listen to them
n: 5941
88.2%

Extend help based on one's own capacity
n: 4015
59.6%

Give them emotional support
n: 4446
66.0%

Inform the available sources they can use to seek for help if needed
n: 2822
41.9%

Does not judge them
n: 2560
38.0%

Respondents' Awareness of Mental Health Helplines and Support Services

1.10%

KKM Mercy Helpline
n: 75
1.10%

13.60%

HEAL
n: 918
13.60%

28.90%

Kasih Helpline
n: 1947
28.90%

7.40%

BefriendersKL Helpline
n: 499
7.40%

2.90%

Sneham Helpline
n: 198
2.90%

3.60%

MIASA Helpline
n: 244
3.60%

0.50%

KSK Care Centre @ JAKIM
n: 33
0.50%

31.30%

Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA)
n: 2109
31.30%

6.80%

Life Line Association Malaysia
n: 457
6.80%

7.00%

Women's Aid Organization (WAO)
n: 470
7.00%

8.80%

All Women's Action Society (AWAM)
n: 592
8.80%

36.20%

Guidance and Counselling Teachers (GBK)
n: 2437
36.20%

34.00%

Does not know any
n: 2292
34.00%

Conclusion

While Malaysian secondary school students demonstrate adequate knowledge of mental health, their attitudes toward it remain a concern. Internal barriers, particularly self-stigma, play a more significant role than external factors in preventing students from accessing mental health services. Despite their awareness, many students lack the confidence to seek help when needed. However, the study found that family members, friends, and teachers serve as vital support systems for students facing mental health challenges. Students tend to confide in these trusted individuals rather than turning to external resources, as these established relationships offer a safe, judgment-free space to express their concerns.

Recommendation

The mental health initiatives for Malaysian schools, jointly managed by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, should adopt a comprehensive and practical approach. Strategic initiatives include leveraging social media through edufluencers, integrating mental health modules into the school curriculum, strengthening peer support systems, and providing continuous professional development for teachers. The strategy also highlights on-the-ground implementation strategies such as expanding the Minda Sihat program, organizing mental health carnivals, developing student-friendly mobile applications, and establishing school adoption programs to foster supportive environments. Overall, the recommendations prioritize creating safe and inclusive spaces for open discussions, enhancing access to mental health support, and promoting collaboration among key stakeholders to ensure the well-being of students across Malaysia.

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