YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AMIDST THE PANDEMIC

by:

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Mental health has been defined as a state of well-being where in individuals are able to recognize their abilities, deal with life stressors, work productively, and contribute meaningfully to the community (WHO, 2018). Mental health is an integral part of one’s system as it greatly affects one’s cognition, emotion, and actions. The World Health Organization (2018) emphasized that there is no health without mental health, implying that mental health concerns and physical problems must be treated equally significant. Furthermore, the World Health Organization (2018) stressed that mental health is more than the absence of mental health disorders. Corresponding to this, nonappearance of mental health disorders does not directly equate to good mental health, but one must be flourishing and thriving in life to be considered a mentally healthy person.

Globally, numerous efforts have been made to promote and protect mental health of individuals and communities throughout the world. Countless petitions and advocacies have also been accomplished to lessen the stigma and discrimination associated with mental health. The Philippines has always been playing an active part in the move for mental health. However, despite such efforts and milestones, mental health remains poorly funded and people who experience mental health problems continues to persist. With more than 100 million population, there is an insufficient amount of psychiatric facilities and mental health professionals to cater the public’s mental health concerns. Philippines News Agency (2020) reported that the country has around 5 000 mental health professionals which is inadequate to cater more than 100 million Filipinos. In a 2017 World Health Organization report, mental illness is the third most common disability in the Philippines. Furthermore, WHO (2017) reported that around six million
Filipinos are estimated to experience depression and anxiety, making the Philippines the country with the third highest rate of mental health problems in the Western Pacific Region.

More specifically, mental health problems have devastatingly affected the Filipino youth. In a 2019 Philippine Daily Inquirer article, Dr. Cornelio Banaag Jr. explained that in his decades of practice, he has not seen depression or anxiety to the degree that the present have now. In a 2020 Manilla Bulletin article, it was stressed that the youth are most exposed to mental health problems due to pressure and changing times. Moreover, Manila Bulletin (2020) reported that there is an alarming rate of depression and suicide among the youth. Estrada, Usami, Satake, et al. (2020) demonstrated that too much academic pressure and excessive exposure to online gaming and social media are factors correlated to mental health issues among Filipino youth. This situation is further aggravated by the pandemic. Due to the almost year-long quarantine, the youth are more inclined to use social media as a way to cope to this challenging time. Some utilize social media as a means to connect to their friends while others resort to online gaming. However, the danger of the online world is inevitable as it can be the source of depression among youth, most especially if parental guidance is not observed. An even more disturbing scenario is that due to poverty, family has become the perpetrators of their children. Save the Children Philippines (2021) recently reported that there is a significant increased rate of online sexual abuse and exploitation amidst the COVID-19 as families resort to online child exploitation for money due to persisting poverty. This kind of circumstance has a detrimental effect to a youth’s mental health.

Furthermore, academic pressure has been much intensified by the pandemic. It is beyond doubt that the pandemic and the sudden transition of the education system has brought significant amount of stress to the students. Abrupt changes and adjustments may be factors that can lead to frustration and mental health problems particularly if parental concern and social support are not present. Students with pre-existing mental
health conditions, students with disability, those who are in the low socioeconomic status, may be considered at risk to mental health problems. In addition, social distancing and being lock down for too long may further aggravate the stress of students as it is harder to connect with others and get comfort from friends.

As mental health concerns and factors linked to it continues to persist among students, the Department of Education in partnership with the Psychological Association of the Philippines has taken steps to ensure the well-being of the students as well as the teachers. Elaborating the Department’s actions, a series of Psychosocial Support and Training for parents, teachers, school heads, and non-teaching personnel was implemented before School Year 2020-2021 started. Moreover, implementation of academic ease was pushed through aiming to help teachers and students cope better to the new learning modalities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, to further safeguard mental health in the academe, it will need comprehensive policy making in schools. More specifically, the present situation calls the need for a comprehensive guidance and counseling program that will address the students’ needs and concerns, emphasizing the significance of guidance counselors and advocate in schools. Counselors and advocates placed in schools are encouraged to establish a platform that students can easily go on to. This can be done through creating a Facebook Page where in students can message the Guidance Office whenever they need help. In this way, students are assured that offices in the school are open to address their concerns despite the limited physical interactions. Furthermore, collaboration between counselors/advocates and advisers should be strengthened for a more hands on monitoring of mental health of the students. Webinars that tackles mental health management are also recommended. Bautista & Manuel (2020) suggested that stress management webinars and strengthened linkages with the parents are effective ways to foster the mental health of the students. Lastly, a stronger sense of social connection and unity is needed more than ever as we battle and rise through this COVID-19 pandemic.
References:


Estrada, C.A., Usami, M., Satake, N. et al. (2020); Current situation and challenges for mental health focused on treatment and care in Japan and the Philippines - highlights of the training program by the National Center for Global Health and Medicine. BMC Proc 14, 11. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12919-020-00194-0


