



Psychological Impact on Parents of University Students During COVID-19 Movement Control Order (MCO)

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian Government has announced the Movement Control Order (MCO) starting 18th March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide. This study attempts to assess the level of psychological distress among parents of university students stranded on campus and out campus during MCO; and to identify the stressors causing psychological distress among parents. It is a cross sectional study using an online self-administered questionnaire done at a public university in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. Psychological distress was determined by using Kessler's Psychological Distress Scale (K10). The study has shown significant associations between parents' psychological distress with three stressors which consist of worrying about their child's food supply, child's future, and child's mental health.

Keywords: psychological distress, COVID-19 MCO, stressors, Kessler's Psychological Distress Scale (K10), parents

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1 INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, China and has since spread all over the world, bringing about the progressing 2019–2020 coronavirus pandemic. The mode of transmission of the infection is via individuals during close contact, frequently by means of little droplets produced during coughing, sneezing, or talking. Those infected could be either asymptomatic (Chen et al, 2020) or manifest common symptoms such as fever, shortness of breath and cough (CDC, 2020). Other symptoms include sore throat, fatigue, abdominal pain, muscle ache, diarrhoea, and loss of smell. The incubation period is around five to twenty-one days. Although most cases bring about mild symptoms, some progress to viral pneumonia and multi-organ failure (CDC, 2020).

The emergence of an outbreak has led to physical health concerns and psychological changes. Infectious diseases cause significant psychiatric morbidities which vary from depression, anxiety, panic attacks and posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, to psychosis and even suicidality (Müller, 2014). This is especially true for COVID-19 when there is much speculation surrounding the mode and rate of transmission, with the disease spreading at such an unparalleled magnitude, and there is still no definitive treatment (Cyrus, Cornelia, and Roger, 2020). It has been indicated that the increasing number of patients and suspected cases, as well as the increasing number of countries affected by the outbreak, have elicited public worry about being infected in this outbreak, which has increased anxiety (Bao et al., 2020). To combat this, psychological assistance services and hotlines are widely deployed by local and national mental health institutions in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Malaysia Government has actively carried out daily live broadcasts and social media releases on the progression of the outbreak to keep the public updated.

Malaysia Government has decided to implement Movement Control Order (MCO) under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Disease Act 1988 and the Police Act. 1967 (Ministry of Health [MOH], 2020). The MCO prohibits nationwide movements, mass assembly, including all religious, social, cultural and sports activities. All levels of education institutions are closed, nationwide, and lastly, the closure of all premises except for essential services (John, 2020) during the initial phase of MCO. This order is implemented throughout the whole country starting from March 18 to March 31. The MCO order was extended three times, each for another two-week period, until May 3. Malaysia then entered another phase known as Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) from May 4 to June 9 and Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) from June 10 until 31st December 2020. The aim of enforcing this MCO is to exemplify social distance to stop the spread of COVID-19 infection (John, 2020).

During MCO university students were asked to stay put at their respective universities. Despite being provided with free meals, separation from loved ones, the loss of freedom, uncertainty over disease status, and boredom can, on occasion, create dramatic effects (Brooks et al., 2020). A study by Koller et al. 2016 on quarantine during SARS outbreak revealed that parents expressed anger and discomfort at not being able to care for their children and felt forced to relinquish their parental role.