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A Short Communication on Indoor-Based Therapies to Reduce Stress During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Preserving mental health during the COVID-19 crisis should be a priority for individuals worldwide. In this regard, mental health professionals should advise the general public on the actions/activities that they can take to prevent mental health issues from becoming the next pandemic. However, the general public should also actively take measures to improve their mental wellbeing. Music therapy, aromatherapy or indoor nature therapy may or may not have the potential to preserve mental wellbeing, but individuals should experiment with them to ascertain the effects on themselves. Moreover, the guidelines provided by WHO should also be adhered to, as a healthy mind starts with a healthy body.

1. Introduction

As of August 2020, Malaysia has reported over 9000 positive cases of COVID-19. The spread of this pandemic in Malaysia had been contained due to a movement control order, that enforced a lockdown from March to June. Statically speaking, Malaysia has largely been successful in minimizing the spread and fatality of this pandemic, especially when compared to other countries. Even before the restricted movement order, the World Health Organization had praised Malaysia's preparedness in facing the pandemic [1].

Although the lockdown has been eased, people are still required to adhere to strict standards of procedure. Businesses are required to record customer information, usually using the government app "MySejahtera", people are required to wear face masks when in public, and large gatherings are still banned; Violators can be fined or even jailed.

Although the MCO has been largely successful in flattening the curve, there has been several other setbacks. Malaysia is on the verge of experiencing its worse economic recession in history [2], massive unemployment [3] and a growth in mental deterioration [4]. Mental health had been a major issue in Malaysia even before the COVID-19 outbreak, as mental illness had tripled in the past two decades [4]. This is largely due to a lack of awareness on the importance of managing stress and also the societal stigma pertaining to mental illnesses that prevents Malaysians from seeking assistance [5]. Besides that, as 26th March 2020, the Ministry of Women and Family Development reported 1893 domestic abuse cases during the MCO [6]. This has been attributed to increased stress levels caused by the lockdown and other implications such as loss of income [4]. Suicides has also increased around the globe due to fear of being infected and also due to mental health deterioration; Cause by increased stress levels from the lockdown, loss of income and fear of wellbeing [7, 8].

Hence, the general public needs to practice self-care methods of mental health preservation, to ensure that they do not succumb to mental illnesses. Throughout the past decades, there has been several methods of preventive medicine to maintain mental health. This paper aims to provide governmental agencies, mental health professionals and the general public ways they can safeguard the mental wellbeing of society as a whole, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.1 World Health Organization's Guidelines on Mental Health

The World Health Organization (WHO) has listed several actions or activities that can be taken to ensure mental health wellbeing during this pandemic, especially for those living under lockdown. These actions include maintaining a daily routine, exercising, maintaining a healthy diet, taking naps, breathing exercises and meditation. Moreover, WHO also advices people to keep in regular contact with their loved ones, via telephone, social media or other communication means.

2. Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy, sometimes referred to as essential oil therapy, is an alternative medicine that uses natural plant extracts to promote physical and mental health. It has been in existence for thousands of years, widely practiced by ancient Chinese, Indian and Persian civilizations. However, it is only recently that aromatherapy is gaining prominence in the researching world. Most research on aromatherapy has been carried out on lavender [9-12]. This might be due to the fact that the earliest published work on aromatherapy, written by French perfumer and chemist René-Maurice Gattefossé, focused on the healing potential of lavender [13]. Recent studies have reaffirmed Gattefossé's believes. Research has shown that lavender has the potential to improve sexual function of postmenopausal women [14].

Although the benefit of aromatherapy in terms of physical health is still debated, there is ample evidence to support its benefit towards mental health. Inhalation of certain smells have been found to improve sleep quality of pre-diabetic women [15]. Aromatherapy has also been reported to reduce stress, anxiety and depression levels [16]. For example, McCaffrey et al. [9] managed to reduce stress levels among graduate nursing students via aromatherapy. *Polianthes tuberosa*, a flowering plant native to Mexico, has the potential to reduce students' test anxiety [17]. People react differently to different essential oils, thus people wanting to use aromatherapy to reduce their stress levels will need to experiment with different scents to find which ones work for them [13].

3. Indoor Nature Therapy

The Stress Reduction Theory (SRT) developed by Ulrich et al. [18] states that living in building-dominant environments increases the stress levels of its residents, hence there is a need for urbanites to periodically

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experience natural elements. It is believed that by observing natural sceneries, such as forests and rivers, it creates positive emotions that enables a restorative effect. Studies have found that nature therapy does have the ability to improve physical and mental wellbeing [19-22] fueling a rapidly growing interest in this field. However, living under lockdown means staying at home, thus cutting off access to natural environments. Yet, there has been research that has attempted to conduct nature therapy indoors.

Jo et al. [23] stated that nature therapy can be practiced via images and videos, either by using monitors or virtual reality systems. Gao et al. [24] conducted an extensive study in this regard. Six different environments (using virtual reality) were assigned to 120 participants randomly, and it was found that natural sceneries had restorative effects on fatigue and negative mood. A study done by Wang et al. [25] discovered that water landscapes had a higher positive impact on the stress levels of subjects, compared to other natural environments. In contrast, Tsutsumi et al. [26] found that participants were more relaxed after watching forest videos compared to sea videos. Perhaps the exact effect of nature videos and images is entirely dependent on the individual themselves, thus people should experiment with different sceneries.

4. Music Therapy

Music therapy is the use of musical interventions to improve an individuals' quality of life. Some common music therapy includes developmental work for people with special needs (improving communication or motor skills), orientation work with the elderly, relaxation for highly stressed individuals and rhythmic rehabilitation for stroke victims. Hospitals, rehab centres, schools and even correctional facilities have used music therapy [27].

There has been both qualitative and quantitative research on music therapy. Shi et al. [28] carried out a meta-analysis study that found that music therapy improved mood, language, sensory perception and most importantly, the social skills of children with autism. Furthermore, music therapy can be a supporting form of care for cancer patients during the treatment process, as suitable types of music are played to improve the patient mood, reduce stress, pain, anxiety and promote relaxation [29]. Music therapy also improves the verbal and nonverbal communication skills and social interactions skills of patients with Rett syndrome [30]. In Turkey, Gokçek and Kayduy [31] stated that music therapy helps patients who underwent septorhinoplasty surgery under general anaesthesia, as it reduces the anxiety of patients. Besides that, music therapy also helps in reducing stress and anxiety of pregnant women [32].

Although it is said that one needs the services of certified music therapists to gain the benefit of music therapy [27], there isn't any harm for individuals, especially those under lockdown, to experiment with it. There are plenty of self-help resources online on how to perform music therapy; Even providing access to music for this purpose.

4. Conclusion

Preserving mental health during the COVID-19 crisis should be a priority for individuals worldwide. In this regard, mental health professionals should advise the general public on the actions/activities that they can take to prevent mental health issues from becoming the next pandemic. However, the general public should also actively take measures to improve their mental wellbeing. Music therapy, aromatherapy or indoor nature therapy may or may not have the potential to preserve mental wellbeing, but individuals should experiment with them to ascertain the effects on themselves. Moreover, the guidelines provided by WHO should also be adhered to, as a healthy mind starts with a healthy body.

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