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A survival tool every student needs

Live&Learn

Communication more than just a 'soft skill' for employability

A STUDENT sits quietly in a lecture hall, feeling overwhelmed. She understands the lesson, but not the anxiety that is tightening in her chest. She wants to ask for help but cannot quite find the words. She appears to be disengaged, but in reality, she is struggling silently.

Across Malaysia, similar scenes are unfolding in classrooms, homes and workplaces. As public concern over youth mental health has intensified in recent years, authorities and institutions have been strengthening counselling services and psychosocial support systems.

However, amid these reforms, mental well-being is not sustained by policy alone. It is shaped daily in conversations.

One critical question remains underexamined: are Malaysian youths equipped with the communication skills to express distress, ask for help and build supportive relationships before they reach a breaking point?

A silent crisis

Communication is often labelled a soft skill that is useful for interviews, presentations and collaborations. However, in moments of stress, transition and uncertainty,

communication becomes a survival skill. If youths cannot express what they are going through, even the best support systems may not reach them.

Effective communication shapes how a person navigates life's transitions, manages stress and builds relationships. It is also about self-expression, help-seeking and emotional regulation – the ability to say, “I don't understand”, “I need support” or “I am not coping well”. These are not soft skills; they are essential life skills for survival.

Transition periods often expose this gap most clearly. The move from school to college, or from campus to the workplace, demands new forms of communication.

Students and young adults are expected to ask questions proactively, manage group dynamics, write professional emails and articulate independent opinions. Many have mastered the content but not the confidence to express it.

In a culture where achievement is celebrated, vulnerability could feel risky.

Young people may worry about appearing weak, incompetent or dramatic.

Without deliberate cultivation of communication confidence, emotional struggles remain internalised.

Speak up:

Communication acts as a bridge between struggle and support.
– 123rf.com

Confidence with practice

The confidence to communicate grows through practice. It is developed when one is allowed to stumble over words, clarify thoughts and be heard without harsh judgement. Parents, educators and employers have a role to play in building this confidence.

At home, families could create safe spaces for open conversations without immediate correction or dismissal, while teaching children that expressing emotions is acceptable.

Parents could also verbalise their own help-seeking in front of their children: “I do not know the answer to this. I am going to ask someone who does.” Children who witness a parent asking for help learn that it is an action of self-awareness, not a weakness.

In classrooms, educators could build empathy and adaptability in communication. By assigning real-life scenarios with different roles, such as explaining a concept to a peer or resolving a conflict, students learn to regulate and express their emotions.

Furthermore, educators could encourage participation without fear of ridicule.

The standard “Any questions?” at the end of class is often met with silence. This is not necessarily because students understand, but because speaking up may feel like publicly admitting confusion in front of their peers.

Replace it with written communication tools, including anonymous digital platforms or paper: “Write one thing that is still unclear.” This creates the psychological safety that students need to develop honest communication habits.

Similarly, in workplaces, employers could normalise feedback and respectful disagreement. Employers could have check-ins that are not just perfor-

mance reviews, but also simple conversations: “How are you coping with your current workload? What support would help you feel more confident in your role? How can I support you better in this project?”

This offers young employees a safe and formal space while they learn to articulate their thoughts and speak up for themselves.

Powerful tool

It is important to emphasise that strengthening communication does not replace professional mental health support. Rather, it makes such support more accessible.

A student who can articulate distress is more likely to approach a counsellor early. An employee who can express burnout is more likely to seek solutions before reaching a breaking point.

Communication acts as a bridge between struggle and support. In a rapidly changing and often overwhelming world, young people need the tools to navigate uncertainty and transitions. Communication is one of the most powerful tools they can have.

The student in the lecture hall does not lack intelligence or motivation. She may simply lack the confidence to voice what she feels. Perhaps the most urgent lesson to teach and model for the younger generations is how to express their inner lives clearly and confidently.

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