

Calm minds build a strong nation

COMMENT by Akmal Ariff Zainul Ariff

I STILL remember one Hari Raya at my hometown when a casual football debate nearly turned into a shouting match.

The air in the room shifted, my chest tightened, my words sharpened and suddenly my cousin wasn't family anymore - just someone I had to "win" against. We laughed about it later but in that moment, it felt real. That is the thing about emotions: they sneak up on us and before we know it, the mood has changed.

This happens everywhere - at the dinner table, in office meetings and even in the comments section of a news article. A single sentence can make your blood pressure rise before you have even finished reading.

In Malaysia, where different languages, faiths and histories sit side by side at every *kopitiam*, how we manage our emotions carries extra weight. Diversity is our strength but it can also create friction.

The real question is not whether conflict will arise - it inevitably will - but how we choose to respond.

When feelings take the wheel

Our emotions are not the enemy. My late grandfather used to say, "*Kalau orang bercakap, jangan sibuk fikir nak jawab, dengar dulu*".

At the time, I thought it was just *kampung* wisdom but he was right. Feelings are tools: they warn us of danger, fuel our love and push us to act when something matters. Without them, life would feel strangely flat.

The trouble starts when we leap

straight from feeling to action without giving our thinking time to catch up.

Anger, for example, is a natural response to unfairness. But when left unchecked, it can be lashed out at whoever is closest, rather than at the true cause. Similarly, fear, if left alone, can shrink our world until everyone outside our circle seems dangerous, while grief, if ignored, can harden into bitterness.

We have seen this play out in neighbours feuding over small misunderstandings, workplaces poisoned by unspoken tension and online arguments that spiral for days. When emotions take over, perspective slips away and nobody wins.

The pressure we carry

It would be naive to discuss emotional regulation without acknowledging the weight that Malaysians carry today.

Prices keep climbing, and for many young people, owning a home feels like chasing a mirage. Jobs are competitive, unpredictable and the line between work and rest has blurred in this digital age. Parents lie awake wondering if they are giving enough to their children. Young professionals question whether their hard work will ever bring the security their parents had.

The elderly sometimes feel left behind by the very society they helped build. These stresses accumulate, and when they spill over, they often show up in places where they don't belong - in family dinners, office meetings or online debates.

Understanding this context is not an

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excuse for bad behaviour; it is a reminder to extend compassion. When someone snaps, there is usually a bigger story behind it.

Emotional intelligence isn't just about managing our feelings; it is also about giving grace to others who are struggling with theirs.

Listening is an act of courage

Listening - real listening - is one of the hardest emotional skills. It means sitting with discomfort, resisting the urge to prepare a rebuttal and accepting that someone else's perspective may be worth hearing.

In a polarised environment, listening feels risky. It can be mistaken for agreement but in truth, disagreements are always better navigated when both sides feel heard.

Our culture has long understood this. The tradition of *musyawarah* - deliberation and consensus - is not just a relic of village life. It reflects the wisdom that sustainable solutions come from voices being heard. Bringing that spirit into our homes, offices and online spaces costs nothing but gains us everything.

Everyone has a role

Emotional health isn't private; it ripples outward. A leader who responds to criticism with contempt spreads that contempt through an organisation. A parent who withdraws in conflict teaches children that silence is the answer. A teacher who shuts down questions with impatience turns classrooms into unsafe spaces.

The reverse is just as powerful. A manager who admits mistakes creates a culture of honesty. A parent who apologises teaches humility. A public

figure who chooses measured words in a heated moment gives the rest of us permission to do the same. These micromoments of maturity build trust brick by brick.

Schools carry a special responsibility. Emotional literacy, which is the ability to name and navigate feelings, is a skill that must be taught. A child who learns to say, "I feel frustrated because..." instead of lashing out grows into an adult capable of constructive engagement. This is not soft education; it is preparation for life in a complex society.

Moving forward together

Malaysia has weathered economic crises, political transitions and social pressures that have fractured other nations.

We have held together because at critical moments, enough people chose dialogue over dismissal, trust over suspicion and patience over reaction. That instinct must be protected and cultivated.

Every generation must rediscover it, every institution must be reminded of it and every individual - in ordinary moments - must decide whether to respond from their best side or their most reactive one.

The choice to listen and to speak with clarity instead of frustration may not seem as grand acts but they are what keep a nation whole.

Calm minds build strong nations, and in 2026 and beyond, that should be Malaysia's aspiration.

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