Arisha:
Hi there! Welcome to Episode 3 of MMI Podcast: Mental Health during Crises and Pandemics. Hope that you’ll enjoy this episode, and do watch this space as we provide you with more episodes to come. Also, do follow us on Facebook at Malaysian Medics International or our website, malaysianmedics.org to know more about our interesting podcasts.

Luanne:
Welcome to the third episode of our MMI Podcast Series, Mental Health during Crises and Pandemics. My name is Luanne
Jerry:
And my name is Jerry.

Luanne:
And today’s episode is “Eat Well, Cope Well”.

Jerry:
Today, we have invited Ms Ceymone Ng, a dietician and graduate from the International Medical University. She will be sharing her expertise regarding nutrition during the Movement Control Order, better known as the MCO, and how to mitigate any negative aspects of our diet during this challenging time.

Luanne:
Welcome, Ceymone! Would you mind sharing with us a little bit more of yourself and what you do?

Ceymone:
Hi! Sure, thank you. I am a weight-management dietician, representing Nutrafit, where we offer trusted, result-driven, individualised consultation and corporate wellness programmes to achieve overall health objectives. You can check us out on Instagram, we are called @nutrafitmy for the latest updates on nutrition and diet tips.

Luanne:
Right, that sounds really interesting! I’m sure that some of our listeners would be interested to check them out! So, back to our podcast today; well, as you know, during the MCO, a lot of us are going to feel trapped at times, making our daily lives a lot more stressful than we are normally used to. So for example, I personally use snacks to cope with the stress!

Jerry:
Hahahaha, you’re not the only one Luanne! I snack quite a lot as well! I think in the past 3 phases of MCO, I finished 3 big tins of Jacob’s biscuits, so, oh well, there goes my diet plans. But I also heard that diet can affect our mental health, and I do recall reading a few papers that discussed this relationship. Ceymone, could you tell us a little bit about the relationship between mental health and our diet? Have there been any studies conducted into this interesting concept?

Ceymone:
Well, yeah! When we talk about diet and nutrition, many people constantly change the way they eat for many reasons. It could be for weight loss, heart health, digestive health, or even to live longer; and mental health is actually a topic that is rarely talked about in our Malaysian culture as it may be considered as something taboo in the society we live in where people have strong social stigma associated with mental health, where people have superstitious beliefs, misconceptions or very little acceptance, or people might think they are just crazy. According to the latest National Health and Morbidity Survey, every 3/10 adults, aged 16 yrs and above in...
Malaysia suffer a form of mental health issues. And I believe every one here, or most of us, actually experience a form of stress, anxiety, grief or depression in their lives.

Jerry:
Hmm

Ceymone:
And when you face these kinds of mental health issues, do you notice that there’s a change in appetite or the choice of food that you make? So, when people are stressed, like sometimes they will just overeat, like they will stress it. Or those who are going through a breakup - they will actually just chuck down a tub of ice cream just to feel better about the pain; or some just don’t eat at all. Or worse, some even develop an eating disorder.

So there is that lack of attention needed for our brains, and its still a growing idea and a new field of study. So our brain uses up 2% of our total body weight, but it consumes 20% of our energy. Meaning, our brains operate at a very high metabolic rate, which needs a constant supply of energy as it relies on a lot of nutrition, such as amino acids, fats, vitamins and minerals; and many of our neurotransmitters, such as serotonin and dopamine, are actually made from these amino acid in our diet. So lets take serotonin for example. The neurotransmitter that regulates our mood and sleep - 95% are made up from our gut; and therefore, what you eat actually can affect your brain functions, how your immune system works, and how your body responds to stress. And its about understanding how diet can really impact your mental health too; it goes both ways.

On the bad side, it can lead to a bad diet when you’re in a bad mood; so it will further worsen your bad mood when you actually gain weight and so on - it creates this endless vicious cycle which destroys your self-esteem and mental wellness as a whole. But, by also looking on the good side, good diet can actually help with poor mental health; so physiologically, chemicals in the food like sugar, cacao from chocolates or certain amino acids such as tryptophan found in foods like banana and milk, can trigger these feel-good hormones such as dopamine. So the key is however, to not rely on this comfort food on relieving these emotional burdens by over-indulging them, because way too many people rely on these desserts and delicious foods just to cure those feelings. But we have to understand, this could actually create an unhealthy relationship with food over the long term as you are abusing these tastes for a temporary relief of your pain. So, that being said, balance is key, so we can enjoy all these comfort foods, but as long as self-control is in place.

Jerry:
Alright so -

Luanne:
So it really seems like the phrase “you are what you eat” actually applies even in a mental health aspect.
Ceymone:
Yes

Luanne:
Jerry, you were saying?

Jerry:
Yeap, so it seems that these trigger foods, these foods can trigger a lot of feel good feelings in ourselves, and we need to control that and cut down on our snacking; but to decide that, are there any other recommendations that you can give us to maintain a healthy diet and take care of our mental health and physical health?

Ceymone:
So, one aspect is to actually improve your diet quality. So ensure your diet is filled with fruits, vegetables, full-grains, legumes, fish, nuts, low-fat dairy and low in processed foods. Because these are all nutrient-dense foods and they can provide all the nutrients that you need for your brain; and especially foods that contain probiotics and fibre - those actually promote a diverse population of good bacteria in our gut that plays an important role in helping these neurotransmitters such as serotonin, to regulate our mood.

Luanne:
Yeah, I see. Okay, so even when you put this in the context of the MCO right, how would you recommend people eat? Because I find that sometimes accessibility to a lot of these foods are quite limited, especially nowadays, so what is your recommended replacement for that?

Ceymone:
So before, I actually can answer that question, we actually have to understand what influences a person’s diet and their lifestyle. I believe everyone lives a different lifestyle, and people have different choices of food or different preferences as well. So we need to understand what determines the factors that can affect our choices of food.

So the key driver of us eating is of course, our hunger, but what we choose to eat does not solely come from the physiological or nutritional needs. There are many factors in play that actually shape a diet; so, there are biological determinants, such as hunger, satiety, palatability, taste; economical ones: whether we can afford it, how our income is and availability of the food and our surroundings; physical: whether or not we have the knowledge, or the skills such as cooking, time to actually prepare the food; social determinants: whether or not we are eating at home, or with the social support of eating alone or with family, the social setting, the meal patterns. Psychological determinants plays a role as well; how our mood is, our stress etc. Lastly is our attitude, knowledge, and beliefs about food.
So in a nutshell, it's a complex interplay between the individual and the environment. So understanding all these factors is very important. For example, if you're educated on nutrition and information, but struggle to eat a healthy lifestyle because of a busy work schedule - all this will ensue a restriction in your choices of food. So understanding this time constraint or this movement/limitation to prepare your food is a limiting factor. So a method for yourself to try and overcome, is one, better time management or planning your meals, and finding healthy options that works around your living pace. So ultimately, you are the essential outcome of your genetics and environment; your knowledge, behaviour and attitude are the 3 components that are ever-changing depending on your exposure, self-learning and in-born awareness.

Luanne:
Okay, so going back to my initial question, taking all of this into consideration and understanding how and what a good diet is, how should we adapt to this?

Ceymone:
Well one thing that I mention is a lot of self-learning and awareness. Be aware of our surroundings and ourselves, especially going through all these stressful times. I guess when someone goes, for example, you guys, go through a stressful time, you talked about stress eating, so like snacking as well - it reflects an inappropriate emotional handling, where someone just munch on sweets/chocolate and you know, they just feel better. So this is where it all starts in itself, our body would be accustomed to telling you to seek for sweet treats whenever you're stressed; and this is an unhealthy relationship with food where it becomes a mental solution where “okay, very stressed right now - first thing I should do = chocolates”. And sometimes, these activities can add on to either the mental health part, or to the “small” waistline.

So to overcome that, we can opt for a healthy snack, or opting for other stress-relieving activities like meditating, going for exercise, or even if you're living in the confinements of your room, just take a walk. Just walk around, don’t stay at your computer for so long, maybe enjoy a cup of tea, look out of the window, look at how far things are - just get your mind lost for a while to overcome the stress.

And another tip to curb the tendency of excessive eating or cravings: you can actually try chewing mint gum or drinking peppermint tea. Or if you actually have essential oils, such as peppermint oil, you can actually take a whiff of that - this will stimulate your brain to release appetite-suppressing hormones and it also can help with promoting the feeling of fullness at the same time.

Luanne:
Hmm, it kinda makes sense! Because I'm not sure about everyone else, but I know during this period of time, my mum likes to feed me peppermint tea, and I realised that every single time after I drink something minty, like something similar to what you've mentioned, I realised that yeah, my appetite is actually curbed, and I tend to eat a lot less than I normally would. Yeah, makes sense!
Jerry:
Yeah, that’s actually a very interesting tip. So I think a lot of it boils down to how much you know about what you eat and the things you eat as well. But this reminds me of something else - I realised that now, a lot of people in the public aren’t able to buy a lot of fresh foods or healthy foods, and that’s maybe because their supply of fresh or healthy food to their supermarkets have grown lesser because of MCO, and I realise that now a lot of people are buying a lot of canned food, preserved food, junk food because those can last longer on their shelves, and that means they don’t need to go out as often during the MCO. So what is your opinion on that Ceymone? What about preserved foods and canned foods?

Ceymone:
It’s…. Kind of like the apocalypse mentality so because of the restriction of movement order, everyone is feeling very scared; very worried; and they will just opt for food with longer shelf lives. And yeah, canned food is actually one of the foods that can last longer, so its in a way, an alternative to store food, but those foods that are canned are usually high in sodium and fats, like luncheon meats and sausages. You can still have them, but a better alternative would be tuna, mackerel, sardines or beans or peas; especially those that are canned with water. A tip to make it healthier is to drain the salt, and put a bit of water just to wash the excess salt.

And for junk food, there is naturally little in nutrition values, and they are high calories. Maybe a better alternative would be to get fresh foods. Usually vegetables and fresh foods are cheaper alternatives, and they are high in nutritional values; also opting for longer shelf-lives fruits and vegetables such as apples, carrots, cabbage, potatoes are a good option rather than just getting pre-packed potato chips or ice-cream. Or you can even buy some yoghurt to just increase the probiotics in the body.

Luanne:
So It’s kind of debunking the myth that healthy food is expensive to maintain.

So I know a lot of people in my surroundings at least, they always mention that the reason why they turn to more processed food or even junk food for that matter is because things like fruits can be quite pricey to buy. So in order to snack, they want a healthier alternative to snack, or something to fill up their bellies, they turn to junk food or canned food. From what you say it balances out and having healthier food is a cheaper alternative.

Ceymone
It may seem that healthier food is always more expensive, especially the organically labelled ones, but if you actually plan out right, it can cost less. I’ll give you 5 simple tips for whenever you go shopping and you want to opt for a healthier option.
1. Write a shopping list. Draw a weekly plan and get the ingredients required for that week.

2. Waste nothing. When you plan you have to be strict about what you want to buy and when you buy it, it’s what you’re going to eat and use up all the ingredients you have bought.

3. Look out for cheap recipes. Cheap recipes doesn’t mean that its less tasty, it could be lesser ingredients and it’s just easier to cook as well.

4. I would highly encourage to cook your food from scratch, as you save money by cutting back on takeaways. And you’re preparing and cooking your meal, which is cheaper than buying the whole meal. On top of that, it’s also easier to control what goes on your dish.

5. Last but not least, cut down on the luxuries. If your regular shopping cart has fizzy drinks, snack bars, biscuits, chocolates and chips, try trimming them down on these non-essential items and replacing them with fruits, yoghurt, milk, vegetables or dips as a healthier option.

Jerry:
That seems like a very healthy and helpful 5 tips. But I think for me the hardest part would be cutting down on luxuries. Because I really love my ice cream, fizzy drinks and cookies! Moving on, since these tips are based on shoppers, what about for people who have just started to cook or bake? I’ve realised, looking through Instagram and TikTok, that many people have taken the MCO time to start cooking or baking. For someone like me - whose expertise in cooking is probably just maggi mee and fried eggs - do you have any tips for new chefs, Ceymone?

Ceymone:
Yes I do! I have another 5 tips for this.

1. You’ve got to make time for it. You got to make time for cooking. That means spending time picking out the food you want to make, preparing them and actually cooking them. It’s cultivating a new habit, where you have a time to buy groceries, prepare the groceries and to cook them.

2. Make a list of “must-have” kitchen items. When you go grocery shopping or plan your meals you’ve got to make sure that there are certain foods that you've got to have on your kitchen shelves. Sometimes you don’t stick to your regular schedule, sometimes life gets in the way or you’re just too busy at work and you just don’t want to go out, you shouldn’t resort to take out or just starve since you didn’t have time to do groceries. So why not when you go do groceries, you have a list of “must-have” foods. You can have it in bulk or keep it in the pantry for a while - so that when you’re super busy, you have that bundle of foods there, your favourite foods, that you can
have immediately. For example, eggs! You can start out with eggs (if you’re the person that likes eggs) and when you’re busy working at home and suddenly go “I ran out of time!” If you have some bread and eggs, you can whip out an easy egg sandwich.

3. Same as when you go grocery shopping, write it down! Do meal planning, where you sit down and plan out what you want to eat for every meal for the week ahead. Yes, every meal! Let’s be realistic - you don’t want to eat steam chicken and broccoli every lunch and dinner for a week. Think about things that you already have in your fridge or freezer and how you can incorporate the meals into various dishes. For example, you have chicken breast. What are different ways you can cook your chicken breast? You can marinate them, you can bake them, you can do a braised chicken. You can play around with these recipes.

4. Moving on, you need to find a few good dishes or recipes that require only one pot. Especially for beginners, sometimes a recipe can get too complex and we’re just so confused and not necessarily have all the equipment we have or needed in the kitchen. Having some recipes that require only one pot is a good way to start off. The beauty of all these single pot recipes is that everything is in that meal. You have your protein, you have your fat, you have your carbohydrates in one single pot. For example, like lasagne, stew, porridge, pasta, fried rice or roasted chic with potatoes are some of the examples of the recipes you can have.

5. Last but not least, don’t be afraid of cooking a lot of food, especially when you’re new. Because you’re not very used to the estimation of how much food that we need or our portion size. So if you plan you’re meals right you can actually use several ingredients in several dishes. For example you have leftover rice - you can make fried rice or you can keep it for the next day for additional dishes as well.

Luanne:
So it’s really about increasing accessibility to the foods you naturally you like, reducing the friction to take the time to cook your meals and changing it up to make things more interesting. That’s pretty good tips there.

So of course during the MCO, I noticed, not sure about you guys, that there’s a huge rise in people trying out trendy food or even trying out baking or cooking. I’m all for people trying new things, but is there anything in particular that you have to be weary about when we do this? I see a lot of people baking cakes, cookies…. I tried baking bread myself but I failed terribly. Just a fun question – what do you make of this? What’s your opinion on this?

Since we have so much much time at home, and to cultivate a new habit, especially for those who don’t have time to cook or never tried cooking before, it’s a good time for you to actually trial these different things. I very impressed with how simple recipes can go super viral and are
super easy to do. I myself tried the Dalgona coffee, it was fun hopping onto the bandwagon. It’s alright to indulge yummy food trends once or twice a week, but not for long, because they do contain high in sugar or high in fat which definitely adds on to the calories. My opinion is when you’re still interested in cooking or baking, just try and choose healthier food options, healthy trends like making smoothies. Good job for you Luanne for making your own bread, or making a nice simple meal.

Luanne:
I think it’ll be a good first time for a lot of people into learning how to cook as it’s a life skill.

Jerry:
Ceymone, I think you mentioned something that really rung a chord with me. You mentioned that now with the MCO, people have too much time on their hands. Just reflecting on myself as student, as my classes have been cancelled, I have too much time - so that my sleep schedule has also been altered. Nowadays there are some days where I wake up at 10 or 11, skip breakfast and then have lunch at 2 and dinner at 9 - which completely throws my normal eating schedule out of whack. For people like me, does that affect our health in any way when we don’t eat regular meals or we have an irregular eating schedule?

Ceymone:
Skipping meals is not a good habit to practice on. Especially for people who want to lose weight or prevent any weight gain. The main point of it is that we have to reduce the overall amount of calories we consume and we have to increase the calories we burn. It’s like a weighing scale where input is less than output.

So, skipping meals altogether can actually cause tiredness and you may miss out on the essential nutrients that are required for your body. And definitely can affect your next meal where you might feel more hungry. Once you feel more hungry, you tend to eat more in that next meal. That means it’ll contribute to your additional overall calories. And some more, when you get extra hungry, you will most likely snack on high fat foods or high sugar food which definitely does result in some weight gain. So how to overcome that? It’s to have more meals but in small and moderate portions - that can be helpful for certain individuals who have hunger or appetite issues. And very important, in between those main meals, is to have healthier snacks inside such as yoghurt, nuts or chickpeas.

Just a thing to add on – when it comes to staying up late there are certain studies that have shown that people who sleep late can actually gain more weight than those who actually sleep earlier. That’s where diet actually plays a major role in causing this. Given a normal portion of food, dinner time you have it at 7 PM and digestion usually completes within 3-4 hours. So around 11PM, your hunger will theoretically peak at that time. So if you’re still awake beyond the 11 o’clock mark, you will definitely have that hunger sensation. Hence, you’re more driven to find food and snacks during that time because you’re not asleep yet. To make matters worse, the choices available past new are usually instant noodles, ice cream, chips or biscuits that can
make you feel full and that will add on to the extra calories on top of our normal diet. That will also lead to weight gain.

Luanne:
So, literally eating at odd hours = “you make bad choices, you get fat.”

Jerry:
Looks like I’m going to have to stop my midnight Hot Cup binges from now own. Looks like my mums nagging was right!

Luanne:
Or even finishing 3 tins of Jacobs biscuits! I mean, who does that, Jerry?

Jerry:
Looks like this podcast is finally making me change my ways!

Luanne:
Alright! I think we’ve covered quite a lot of ground today in the podcast. We’ve talked about stress and its relation to food and vice versa. We also talked about some advice for buying groceries, nutritional requirements during this period of time, how to cook if you’re a beginner and where to begin, some trends like skipping meals and how to mitigate them. Is there any other key advices or key takeaways that you want to give to our public?
Ceymone:
I would narrow it down to three main points, based on the overall topic that we've covered.
1. Improve your diet quality. Like I said before, add on healthier alternatives to your meal, adding more fruits and vegetables, and probiotics as well.
2. During these unprecedented times, it also comes with new opportunities as well, where we can actually cultivate a new habit to carry forward. As I believe once we cultivate this new habit, once MCO is lifted, we can actually still maintain these new, healthy, dietary habits as we go.
3. Last but not least, since we’re taking more effort to cook at home and trying out new recipes, let’s get our taste buds accustomed to milder tastes. With Malaysian food out there, especially with outside food, we really crave strong flavours. With strong flavours come high fat, high sugar, high salt. Taste sensitivity can change over time and taste perception does differ among individuals. When you’re used to milder tastes you can actually be surprised at how different and how salty and how sweet food outside actually is. It’s a great way to manage our diet even better.

Luanne:
I see. I think that’s a very good tip. I think that resonates a lot with me as well. So, I think that’s the end of our podcast. Thank you so much Ceymone for coming on and sharing all your amazing experiences and advice for the rest of us. So, you can check Ceymone’s Nutrafit on her Instagram page as well if you’re interested. Don’t forget to follow and rate our podcast on Spotify and iTunes. If you have any questions, comments or feedback regarding our podcast, feel free to give us a shoutout on our Facebook page, Malaysian Medics International. Till then, eat well and cope well!