

# A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Parental Mental Health Challenges in Malaysia

Siti Mariam Ali<sup>1</sup>, Mohd Sufian Ab Kadir<sup>2\*</sup>, Dr. Anidah Aziz<sup>3</sup>, Maz Izuan Mazalan<sup>4</sup>, Dr. Rizuwan Abu Karim<sup>5</sup>, Dr. Muhammad Syukri Abdulah<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup>Faculty of Business Management, University of Technology MARA, Melaka Branch, KM26 Jalan Lendu, 78000 Alor Gajah. Melaka.

<sup>6</sup>Faculty of Economics and Management, Centre for Value Creation and Human Well-Being Studies (INSAN), The National University of Malaysia, Bangi Selangor. Malaysia.

\*Corresponding author

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## ABSTRACT

Mental health among parents is a critical issue that influences family dynamics, child development, and overall societal well-being. This study aims to develop a conceptual framework that identifies and examines the key factors affecting mental health among parents in Malaysia. The framework considers psychological, social, economic, and cultural influences that contribute to parental mental well-being. Key factors explored include financial stress, work-life balance, parenting responsibilities, social support, healthcare accessibility, and cultural expectations. By integrating theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, this study provides a structured approach to understanding the challenges Malaysian parents face in maintaining mental health. The proposed framework serves as a foundation for future research, policy formulation, and the development of targeted interventions to support parents' mental well-being in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Mental health, parents, social support, socioeconomic status and cultural expectation

## INTRODUCTION

The period from 2020 to 2024 has seen a notable increase in mental health challenges in Malaysia, largely exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lock downs, financial hardships, and isolation significantly impacted mental well-being, leading to a rise in depression and anxiety, especially among younger populations. For instance, the prevalence of depression nearly doubled from 2019 to 2023, with mental health issues affecting around 4.6% of Malaysian adults and increasing sharply among adolescents and children. The National Health Morbidity Survey of 2022 highlighted that one in four adolescents experienced depression, and one in ten had attempted suicide. (WHO, 2024). To address these rising issues, Malaysia implemented the National Strategic Plan for Mental Health (2020-2025), aiming to enhance access to mental health services, especially in underserved areas. This strategy includes mental health promotion, early detection, and intervention. Additionally, the National Centre of Excellence on Mental Health (NCEMH) spearheaded efforts to improve adolescent mental health with the support of the World Health Organization and UNICEF.

Despite these initiatives, Malaysia continues to face challenges, including a shortage of mental health professionals and uneven access to services. This shortage is particularly acute in rural areas, limiting treatment options for many. The Malaysian Youth Mental Health Index, launched in collaboration with UNICEF, has also identified areas for improvement in the social support and coping mechanisms available to young Malaysians. Overall, Malaysia's proactive steps reflect an understanding of the critical need for mental health support across the country, although significant barriers remain. In examining the factors affecting mental health among parents in Malaysia, several key domains emerge based on socioeconomic, cultural, and family dynamics. These factors can be categorized broadly into four domains: socioeconomic status, parenting stress,

social support, and cultural expectations. The interplay between these factors shapes the mental health outcomes of parents in Malaysia.

### **Mental Health Challenges in Malaysia**

Malaysia currently faces significant mental health. According to The Star 2024, some of one million individuals suffering of depression for those range of 16 to 29 years old which contribute 4.6 percent the total population in Malaysia. Stigma remains a major barrier, with cultural perceptions often discouraging people from seeking help, associating mental health needs with “weakness” or “incapacity”. This can lead individuals to avoid mental health services, fearing repercussions in their personal and professional lives, as stigma can affect employment and insurance opportunities. Many Malaysians thus seek alternative treatments or avoid disclosing their struggles altogether, limiting access to professional care and raising less of awareness about managing mental health. Moreover, Malaysia has a critical shortage of mental health professionals. The need for mental health interventions is growing. Malaysia’s mental health helplines have reported increased calls for help, and the government has highlighted a sharp rise in suicide rates. As a response, new initiatives, like the Human Resource Development Corporation’s mental health training programs for workplaces, aim to raise awareness and improve support networks within communities.

Despite these steps, experts emphasize that reducing stigma and expanding mental health services, especially in underserved areas, are crucial for addressing Malaysia's mental health care in Malaysia currently faces significant mental health challenges. Stigma remains a major barrier, with cultural perceptions often discouraging people from seeking help, associating mental health needs with “weakness” or “incapacity.” This can lead individuals to avoid mental health services, fearing repercussions in their personal and professional lives, as stigma can affect employment and insurance opportunities. Many Malaysians thus seek alternative treatments or avoid disclosing their struggles altogether, limiting access to professional care.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Socioeconomic Status (SES)**

Recent research about mental health highlights the complex relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and health, education, and cognitive development outcomes. Studies indicate that SES affects health through various mechanisms, such as social mobility, critical life periods, and cumulative advantages or disadvantages over a lifetime. Several items related to the SES such as education level, work-life balance and financial strain. Lower SES is associated with increased health risks and limited educational attainment, impacting lifelong opportunities and well-being. Higher levels of education often equip parents with better coping mechanisms and access to mental health resources. Conversely, lower education levels may limit access to mental health support (Rahman et al., 2020). The life-course approach helps researchers explore how SES transitions (e.g., upward or downward mobility) affect health and cognitive outcomes across different stages of life, underscoring SES as a persistent determinant of disparities.

Balancing work demands with family responsibilities can be a major source of stress. Parents in dual-income households often face challenges in managing both professional and personal life, leading to increased mental strain (Chin et al., 2021). The number and age of children, as well as the intensity of care giving demands, are significant contributors to parental stress. Younger children or children with health needs may increase parental stress levels (Ismail & Omar, 2019). Financial strain such as low income, job insecurity, or debt burden can cause stress and anxiety among parents, contributing to poor mental health (Abdullah et al., 2018). Economic insecurity has been linked to higher risks of depression and anxiety in parents as they struggle to provide for their families. These findings underscore SES as a multidimensional factor involving income or financial strain, education, occupation, and social mobility, and further suggest that interventions addressing early SES disparities can significantly improve long-term outcomes in health and education, especially among marginalized groups. Such insights are essential for shaping equitable public health and educational policies (MDPI, Springer, De Gruyter, 2023).

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## Social Support (SS)

Social support has consistently been shown to play a crucial role in protecting and improving mental health. Studies published in recent years have increasingly focused on understanding the specific mechanisms through which social support mitigates mental health challenges, the types of social support that are most effective, and how support can be enhanced for vulnerable populations. Research categorizes social support into three main types: emotional, instrumental, and informational support. Emotional support, such as empathy, care, and encouragement, has been highlighted as essential for mental health. Instrumental support, which involves tangible help (e.g., financial aid or assistance with tasks), and informational support (e.g., guidance and advice), also contribute to better mental health outcomes, although the type of support needed may vary depending on individual circumstances (Ozbay et al., 2021; Zhao & Li, 2023).

For instance, Zhao and Li (2023) conducted a study on college students and found that emotional support had a more significant effect on reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression compared to instrumental support, suggesting the importance of personalized support interventions. Similarly, people who received both emotional and instrumental support during the COVID-19 pandemic reported lower levels of stress and anxiety (Chen et al., 2022). Social support has been shown to improve mental health through various mechanisms, such as reducing stress, enhancing self-efficacy, and promoting a sense of belonging. According to Smith and Hsu (2020), social support can serve as a buffer against stress by providing individuals with resources to cope with life's challenges. In addition, social support has been linked to higher levels of self-efficacy, which enables individuals to believe in their capacity to handle stressful situations, thus lowering their risk of mental health issues (Kumari et al., 2021). The sense of belonging fostered through social connections also plays a critical role. A study by Lewis and West (2022) found that a strong sense of belonging in community groups was correlated with lower rates of depression and anxiety, emphasizing the value of social bonds in promoting mental well-being.

Recent research has paid particular attention to the role of social support in specific populations, such as older adults, adolescents, and those experiencing social isolation. Older adults, who may be at higher risk of social isolation, benefit greatly from both family and community support, which has been linked to improved mood and cognitive function (Garcia & Liu, 2023). Interventions designed to enhance community ties among the elderly, such as group activities and volunteer programs, have been shown to reduce feelings of loneliness and depression (Nguyen et al., 2024). Strong support networks, including extended family, friends, and community resources, have been shown to mitigate stress and improve mental health outcomes for parents (Zulkifli et al., 2022). In Malaysian culture, family and community play essential roles in providing both emotional and practical support.

Adolescents and young adults, especially those using social media extensively, face unique challenges when it comes to social support. For example, Zhang and Park (2023) found that while social media can provide a platform for emotional support, excessive online engagement sometimes exacerbates feelings of loneliness. Thus, promoting in-person connections and balanced social media use has been recommended to improve young people's mental health outcomes (Zhang & Park, 2023). The rise of digital technology has also transformed how social support is provided. Virtual support groups and online counselling have become increasingly popular, especially during the pandemic. A study by Thompson et al. (2021) showed that online support groups were effective in reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety, particularly among socially isolated individuals. These findings suggest that virtual platforms can supplement traditional support mechanisms, providing accessible options for those unable to access in-person support. High levels of spousal support are associated with lower stress levels among parents, particularly mothers. Effective communication and shared parenting responsibilities contribute positively to mental well-being (Lee & Cheong, 2020).

## Cultural Expectation (CE)

Cultural expectations play a pivotal role in shaping mental health perceptions, stigma, and treatment-seeking behaviors. Across different societies, mental health is interpreted through cultural beliefs and norms, which often determine how symptoms are expressed and addressed. For example, in some cultural contexts, mental health issues are heavily stigmatized, leading to avoidance of formal care and support. This is particularly

notable among minority groups in the UK, where cultural expectations may inhibit mental health service use due to fears of judgment or lack of culturally competent services. Studies emphasize that language, religious beliefs, and social values all impact individuals' willingness to seek help, often resulting in untreated conditions within these communities. Cultural norms often place different expectations on mothers and fathers, which can lead to gendered stress. Mothers in Malaysia may feel societal pressure to take on primary care giving roles, which can be mentally taxing, especially if they are also balancing work responsibilities (Ahmad et al., 2019).

Efforts to mitigate mental health stigma have found that culturally adapted interventions are more effective in resonating with diverse groups. Interventions that consider cultural nuances, such as communication styles, community roles, and belief systems, can enhance engagement and reduce stigma. For instance, the adaptation of mental health initiatives in North India using the Ecological Validity Model highlights the need for culturally sensitive approaches that integrate local language, metaphors, and interpersonal dynamics. Such adaptations improve mental health outcomes by fostering environments that respect cultural identities and reduce discrimination. Cultural stigma associated with mental health issues can deter parents from seeking help, leading to worsened mental health conditions. The stigma may discourage parents from acknowledging mental health struggles or reaching out for support (Yusoff et al., 2018).

Additionally, during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, cultural resilience played a significant role in mental well-being. In many communities, cultural practices and collective coping mechanisms helped individuals mitigate pandemic-related stress. This underscores the value of a cultural lens in mental health strategies, not only to bridge gaps in care but also to support resilience and recovery in times of societal stress. Addressing mental health stigma and enhancing accessibility to services requires culturally tailored strategies that involve active community participation. This can ensure that mental health policies and services are more relevant, impact and sustainable in diverse settings.

### Conceptual Framework

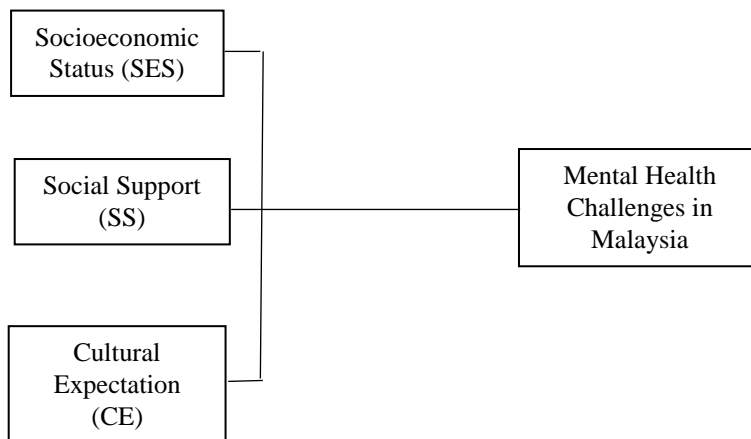


Diagram 1.1 Conceptual Framework of Mental Health Challenges in Malaysia

## METHODOLOGY

Conducting mental health research in Malaysia involves a combination of factors related to the cultural, social, and health system context. Malaysia is a diverse country, with various ethnic groups (Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous groups), languages, and religions. This diversity plays a significant role in shaping the research methodology. This study employs a quantitative (e.g., surveys, epidemiological studies) that focus on parents' groups in sample of population. A sample randomly based on 500 sample will provide a more comprehensive understanding about mental health in Malaysia. Determine which populations or groups to study, such as children, adolescents, adults, the elderly, ethnic groups, or those with specific mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, or schizophrenia. The quantitative analysis will be suggested to analyze data to provide a more holistic view of the research problem, particularly complex issues such as mental health.



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## CONCLUSION

This framework provides a foundation for further empirical study and highlights the need for targeted mental health resources, cultural expectation (CE), socioeconomic status (SES), and social support (SS) for parents especially parents or adults among Malaysian. The expected result will be used for planning and strategies by government to reduce the mental health cases according to the factors that will be contribute to the number of mental illness patient in Malaysia.

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