

THE IMPACT OF ECONOMIC CRISIS ON DEPRESSION IN SRI LANKA; SPECIAL REFERENCE TO WESTERN PROVINCE

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is experiencing the highest inflation and financial crisis since its independence in 1948. As a low- and middle-income country, most citizens are unaware of mental health and its importance to a healthy life. As a result of the highest inflation in Sri Lanka, severe mental health issues are occurring in every category of society. Among them, depression could be identified as a massive threat to human security. This research is intended to identify the impact of the financial crisis on depression, trends and patterns of depression and emphasize the importance of mental health as the top health condition in Sri Lanka. Primary and secondary data were collected to address the study's central research question. Primary data were collected from a sample size of 100, based on the western province government, private, pensionable and business employers through a structured questionnaire. Secondary data was collected from archival methods, and published research, newspapers, books and websites were adopted where necessary. Excel analyzed collected data, and charts, graphs and descriptions were utilized to address the study's research questions. The study has revealed that the financial and economic crisis in Sri Lanka has severely affected the community's mental health. However, many do not have a proper idea of the curing methods for mental health issues. The study also identified that the economic crisis has directly impacted people to suffer from depression, and this has become a significant threat to human security.

Key Words: *Economic Crisis, Sri Lanka, Depression, Mental Health, inflation*

Introduction

The Sri Lankan economy depends on foreign trade. Meanwhile, agriculture, tourism, apparel, and textile are leading export trade in Sri Lanka. China, the US, the UK and some European countries significantly impacted the Sri Lankan economy. As a result of COVID -19 pandemic has initiated global travel restrictions. This situation decreased the demand for the tourism industry of Sri Lanka. Moreover, it has further drop down the export income. This was also a reason for the collapse of the financial strength of Sri Lanka. The political crisis of Rajapaksa's family and the misuse of foreign investment were another significant reasons for the collapse of Sri Lanka's financial strength. USD rate increased suddenly from 202.38 LKR (22nd March 2022) to 365.04 LKR (09th December 2020) (Google finance 2022) due to artificial control by the central bank. Currently, Sri Lanka is suffering from a weak and poor economic condition for the reasons mentioned above.

Middle-class and low-income people cannot bear the current inflation in Sri Lanka. Ultimately, they need more financial situation for their daily needs. They are almost fed up with this situation, and most are helpless. Even though they do not have an option for security in this situation. Then most of them got stressed and finally got depressed. Sri Lanka needs to pay proper attention to mental health as a low-economy country.

Nevertheless, reporting about the mental disease and treatments many centuries ago. Ayurveda, Siddha and Unani systems were treated for the mental disease in the historical period in Sri Lanka (Samudra T Kathriarachchi, V Lakmi Seneviratne, Luckshika Amarakoon 2019). Organic and supernatural ways are used to heal mental diseases in ancient Sri Lanka, similar to other Asian countries. Moreover, under British rule, they proposed western treatment for mental diseases. Governor Mackenzie proposed an ordinance in 1839 (Gambheera, 2013) to create asylums for the insane. During this time, the mentally ill patients were kept in a leprosy asylum in Hendala. The current level of psychiatric care provided by the Sri Lankan Ministry of Health exemplifies the impact of the British allopathic medical system on psychiatric care. It also reflects a quick upward shift in service development, training of staff in psychiatry and related fields and training of gatekeepers, public awareness campaigns, and delivery of community mental health services. This happened even though there

were few trained professionals in the mental health field, and there were few resources and low resource allocations for psychiatry.

Due to the lack of mental health services and knowledge in Sri Lanka, most people decided to suicide. Three thousand two hundred seventy-nine people died of suicide because of mental unbalance after facing various problems in 2021 (Department of Census and Statistics 2021). If they have good advice and attention, they may be able to save their life. It is a considerable amount of annual death rate in Sri Lanka. One hundred seventy-two people (Department of Census and Statistics 2021) had suicide, the reason for poverty and indebtedness. If the Sri Lankan government had a significant financial situation, these 172 people could save, and their families also live happily.

Sri Lanka experienced a sharp rise in suicide mortality due the inflation as a result of the economic crisis. The low and middle economic classes could not face this inflation, and day by day, they got stressed and finally depressed. Without weather discrimination, they belong to the urban or rural working environment; inflation has hit all levels of low and middle-income people. Most of them usually purchase daily goods basis or weekly. Most of the time, they do not have a chance to save money. They do not have the proper ability to purchase goods daily, raising the price of goods. So many parents cannot fill their kids' education needs. Most of them get stressed due to the unavailability of feeding their family as responsible people. Continuous failure has motivated many people to end their life as an answer to their issues of suicide. Therefore, the economic crisis has created a high risk of mental health in society.

The main focus of this paper is to examine the impact of the economic and financial crisis on depression in the community. In particular, this paper explores the trends and patterns of depression and further intends to emphasize the importance of mental health as a primary health condition in Sri Lanka.

Literature review

Nirosha Hewa Wellalage has discussed that during the global financial crisis, ethnic minority directors and agency disputes were present in listed Sri Lankan companies (Wellalage, 2012). Ethnic minorities now account for a higher percentage of directors

on corporate boards in Sri Lanka due to social and economic pressures in recent decades. Additionally, the need for boards to increase racial diversity in the workforce has grown due to the global financial crisis. In addition, the author presented that information about the Sri Lankan context's association between agency costs and board ethnic diversification. A little over 40% (Wellalage, 2012) of the board members of Sri Lanka's listed companies are from ethnic minorities. However, the author has yet to discuss low- and middle-income people's mental health in front of the current high inflation.

Daya Somasundaram and Sambasivamoorthy Sivayokan have discussed Developing knowledge and suggestions for restoring post-war community resilience - through an ethnographic investigation in Northern Sri Lanka (Daya Somasundaram & Sambasivamoorthy Sivayokan, 2013). Their study included unresolved grief, individual and group trauma, insecurity, self-harm, suicides, poverty, unemployment, teenage pregnancies, alcoholism, child abuse, and neglect. They also included gender-based violence and vulnerability, such as domestic violence, widows, and female-headed households, family conflict and separation, physical injuries, and handicaps. They also included issues specific to children and the elderly, as well as problems with abuse and neglect of the elderly and disabled, behaviour that is antisocial and socially irresponsible, mistrust, and a sense of helplessness. Though they discussed suicides and mentally unbalanced mental health, they would not discuss depression situation because of the financial crisis. They pay their attention mainly to the effects of war.

Chesmal Siriwardhana, Athula Sumathipala, Sisira Siribaddana, Sudath Smaraweera, Nihal Abesinghe, Martin Prince and Matthew Hotopf have argued about reducing the scarcity in mental health research from low- and middle-income countries: A success story from Sri Lanka. They find the poor situation of the mental health field in Sri Lanka. Over 20 million people and only about 25 specialist psychiatrists in Sri Lanka lacked a formal psychology service in 2004 (CHESMAL SIRIWARDHANA, ATHULA SUMATHIPALA, SISIRA SIRIBADDANA, SUDATH SAMARAWEERA, NIHAL ABEYSINGHE, MARTIN PRINCE, MATTHEW HOTOPF 2011). Though those teams identified the lack of mental health services in Sri Lanka, they could not be concerned about depression due to the financial crisis in

Sri Lanka. They focused their attention on the low- and middle-income countries rather than on the low- and middle-income level people in Sri Lanka.

Daya Somasundaram has focused his attention on how exposure to violent conflict, war, and disaster situations impacts essential family and community dynamics, causing changes at a collective level. For relief, rehabilitation, and development programs to be successful, the issue of collective trauma must be addressed, especially using integrated multi-level approaches (Somasundaram, 2007). The author could not focus on the financial crisis and how it affects mental health.

Thyagi Ponnampereuma and Nancy A. Nicolson have focused on Traumatic Experiences and Daily Stressors on Mental Health Outcomes in Sri Lankan Adolescents (Thyagi Ponnampereuma, Nancy A. Nicolson 2018). The author had limitations on the effects of traumatic experiences and everyday stressors on Sri Lankan adolescent mental health and daily functioning. There were focused only on adolescents and traumatic experiences.

Kien Hoe Ng, Mark Agius, and Rashid Zaman have discussed the effects of the world economic crisis on mental health (Kien Hoe Ng, Mark Agius, Rashid Zaman 2013). They discussed the global economic crisis. There could no narrowing down on the Sri Lankan financial crisis and how it affects mental health. They highlighted that although an economic downturn can be measured, dealing with mental health issues is more complex, and unemployment is undoubtedly a significant issue during economic downturns.

Kristina Wahlbeck and David Mcdaid have argued about actions to alleviate the mental health impact of the economic crisis. They explain that the global economic crisis is anticipated to have adverse mental health effects that could increase the number of people who die from suicide and alcohol-related causes in affected nations (Kristina Wahlbeck & David Mcdaid, 2012). This observation concerns mental health, economic crisis, suicide prevention and social policy. Nevertheless, they could not concern about Sri Lankan financial crisis and depression. The study suggests the economic crisis's effects mostly hurt low-income families, with reduced budget reductions in health and education low-income families the most.

Barbara Lopes Cardozo, Carol Crawford, Pilar Petit, Frida Ghitis, Teresa I. Sivilli, Willem F. Scholte, Alastair Ager, and Cynthia Eriksson have argued about factors influencing the mental health of local employers in Sri Lanka's Vanni region. Humanitarian aid workers and those with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder were described in this study. Teaching stress management, providing knowledge about mental health, identifying unresolved grief, offering specific management, and providing psychological skill training were illustrated by this study (Barbara Lopes Cardozo, Carol Crawford, Pilar Petit, Frida Ghitis, Teresa I. Sivilli, Willem F. Scholte, Alastair Ager, and Cynthia Eriksson 2013). They have mainly focused only on the Vanni region and their employment stress.

Methodology

It has been identified that a significant amount of people are suffering due to the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. To identify how the financial crisis impacted mental health, particularly depression, patterns and trends of depression, the study utilized quantitative analysis. The study was based in the western province of Sri Lanka, and the sample size was 100. To maintain the consistency of the data and the sample, primary data were collected from the government sector, private sector, pensionable and business employers. The sample was selected by random sampling method. A structural questionnaire was shared with the sample, and 25 responses from each category were recorded via google forms. The collected data was analyzed using excel software to address the study's central question. Graphs and charts illustrated the findings of the analysis to emphasize the study's objectives, and descriptive analysis was conducted where necessary to support the main argument of the study. Secondary data were collected from archival methods such as published research, newspapers, journal articles, books, and websites and media sources.

Discussion and findings

The importance of mental health has been highlighted and becomes a debatable topic in the present context more than in the earlier. This has been identified mainly by the European content. Even though the European content has chiefly identified the necessity, Sri Lanka, as a developing country, has yet to give significant value to mental health. Different factors have further accelerated this. The existing literature

has suggested that mental health is vulnerable to different social movements and political situations. This study has focused on identifying whether the financial crisis has impacted depression among people.

To identify the main research objectives of the study, cooperative data has been analyzed using excel software. It has highlighted a few significant research findings and provided a ground argument supporting the central question. According to the analysis, depression is not a new concept in society. Also, mental health is a concept that has been introduced previously in society. The majority of the active community (the sample of research) has been heard and aware that mental health is essential, and just as a concept, people have been aware of it. However, where they are lacking is the necessity of mental health for healthy life and the importance of knowledge about mental disabilities.

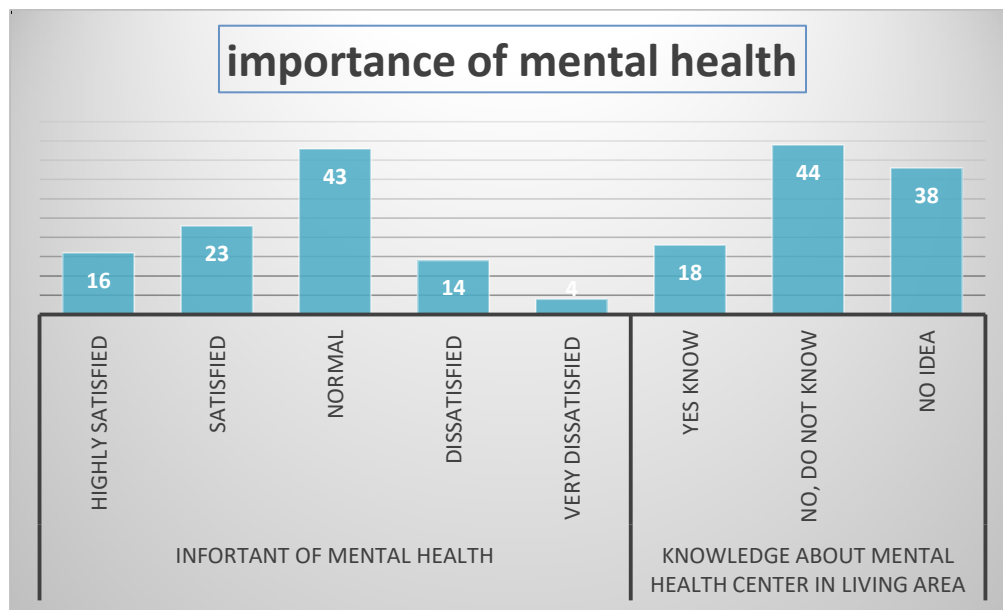


Figure 1: the importance of mental health

Figure 1 provides an understanding of the picture. Most people from the sample are aware of mental health and have an average idea of it. Nevertheless, their satisfaction with the importance of mental health is standard. This has because most people have heard the concept of mental health recently from social media but have yet to get an opportunity to study or refer to it further. As a result, their satisfaction with the knowledge they have had is average level. The questionnaire has revealed that even though the sample is aware of mental health, they have yet to be aware of the different

situations of mental health and health scales or levels. This would enhance the vulnerability of the people struggling with their day-to-day activities, including financial, social or political perspectives.

To maintain the consistency of the sample, the government, private, pensionable and business sector was equally analyzed. It has been clearly illustrated from the analysis that even though the sample consists of 5 main income groups majority are earning wages below 150,000 per month. Among them, the highest population belongs to below 50,000. As Sri Lanka has been experiencing the highest recorded inflation recently, essential services have skyrocketed, and most people cannot reach them. The study's results have demarcated how inflation impacts people and their purchasing behaviour and lifestyle.

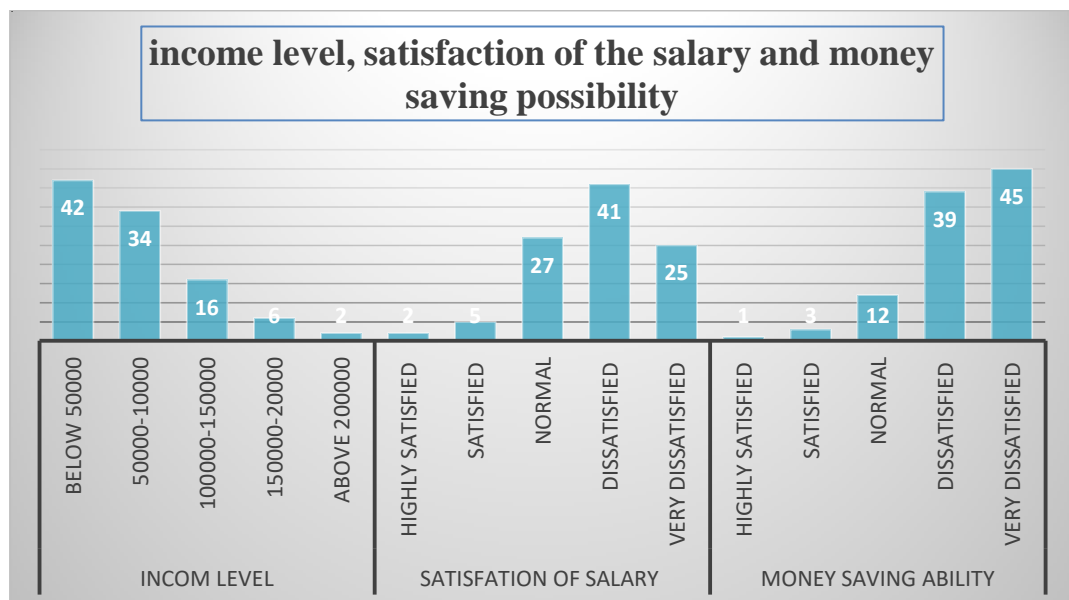


Figure 2: income level, the satisfaction of the salary and money-saving possibility

According to the analysis, it has revealed that a significant amount of people would like to be satisfied with their income level. Figure 2 has demonstrated that when income level has been comparatively less satisfaction of the salary and money saving possibility has been significantly reduced. People are becoming more stressed and need help to pay for the ends and meet their daily expenses. Savings have been a dropout, and the economic crisis has hit the bottom of every social category. Due to these reasons, most of them suffer from uncertainty about their future and family responsibilities have increased daily.

The collected data from the western province has further illustrated that with less income and high dissatisfaction majority of the working people's participation in recreational activities has been limited. When they cannot release their stress through recreational or leisure activities, all the complex feelings are stored in their minds and would lead to social unrest. This has happened during the past few months in Sri Lanka. Most people had shown their unavailability to pay for their food and essential services and started to protest for their rights, mainly located around the western province. When people are dissatisfied with their income or saving possibilities, they do not have pleasure in their life. The data has highlighted that the patterns of low-income level lead to high dissatisfaction with income, high dissatisfaction with money-saving and a high possibility for stressful thoughts.

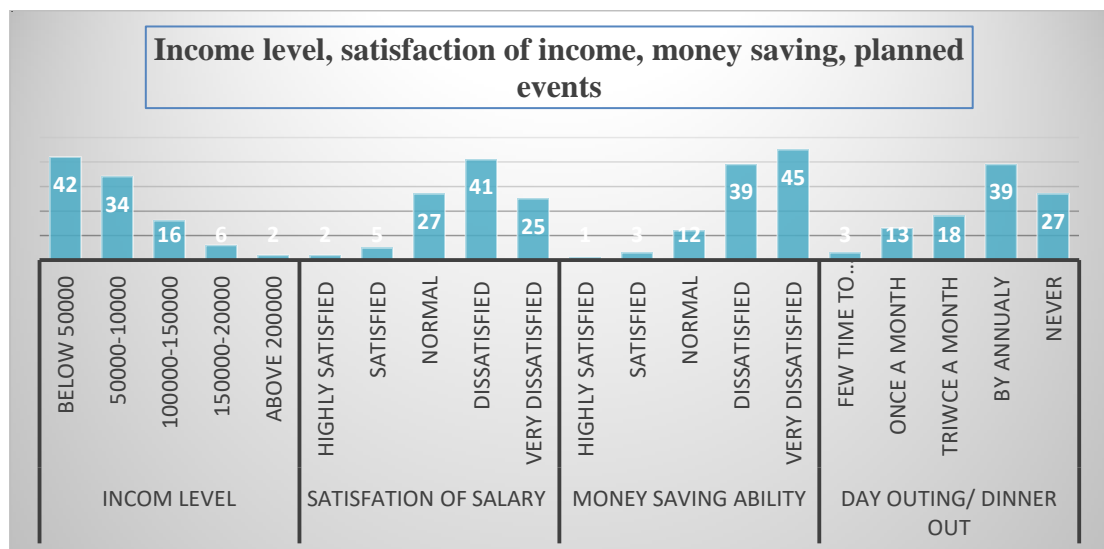


Figure 3: income level, the satisfaction of income, money saving, planned events

Many people from the sample have postponed or given up their pre-planned functions or tour due to the inflation and economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Figure 3 shows how stressful for them to give up or postpone the pre-planned sessions due to the financial crisis they are currently suffering. Regarding the recreational activities of the sample, most of them do not attend recreational activities such as family outings, dinner outs or special gatherings (Figure 4). Either they have been limited in their attendance for recreational activities. They have yet to attend or conduct such events by managing the situation. It has further revealed that, even though people are supposed to release their stress from those activities, this situation has driven them more towards the bad feeling for them.

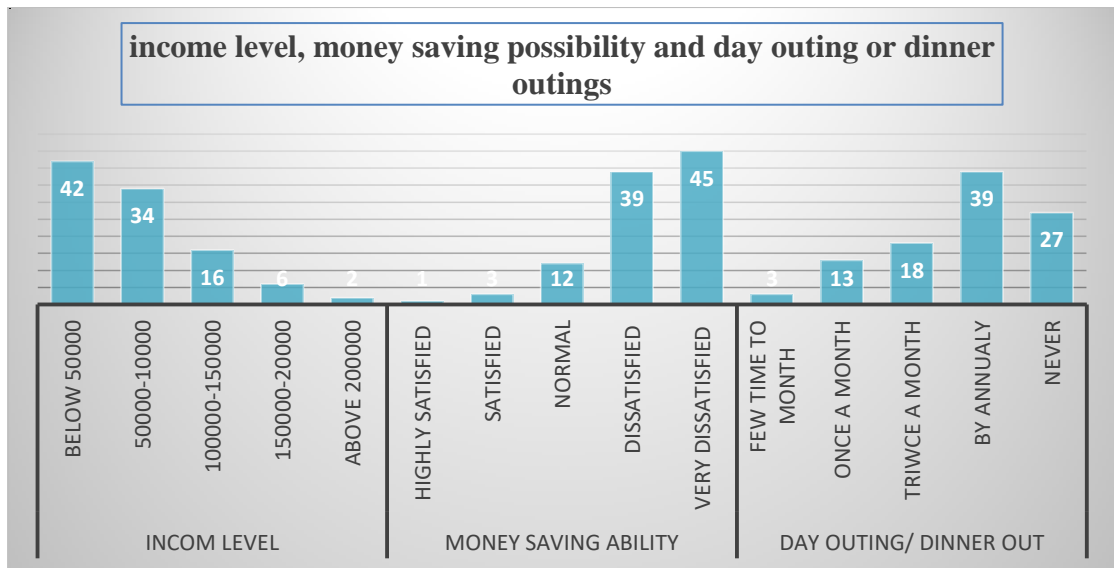


Figure 4: income level, money-saving possibility and day outing or dinner outings

Moreover, the collected data has highlighted that the economic crisis has severely impacted the community's mental health. The significant point revealed by analysis is that the response towards stress or problems varies. Figure 5 below illustrates a high tendency for them to discuss their stressful issues or problems with someone. Furthermore, there is a significant tendency to be isolated when they suffer stress or problems. Concerning their behaviours of stress control, they have unidentified methods. They do not like to reveal them, but it has been further identified that the current economic crisis has hindered their mental health in Sri Lanka. Even though most of the sample tended to discuss their stressful situation or problems with someone, it has not been revealed that they are referring to a recognized consultor or someone with knowledge of mental health management.

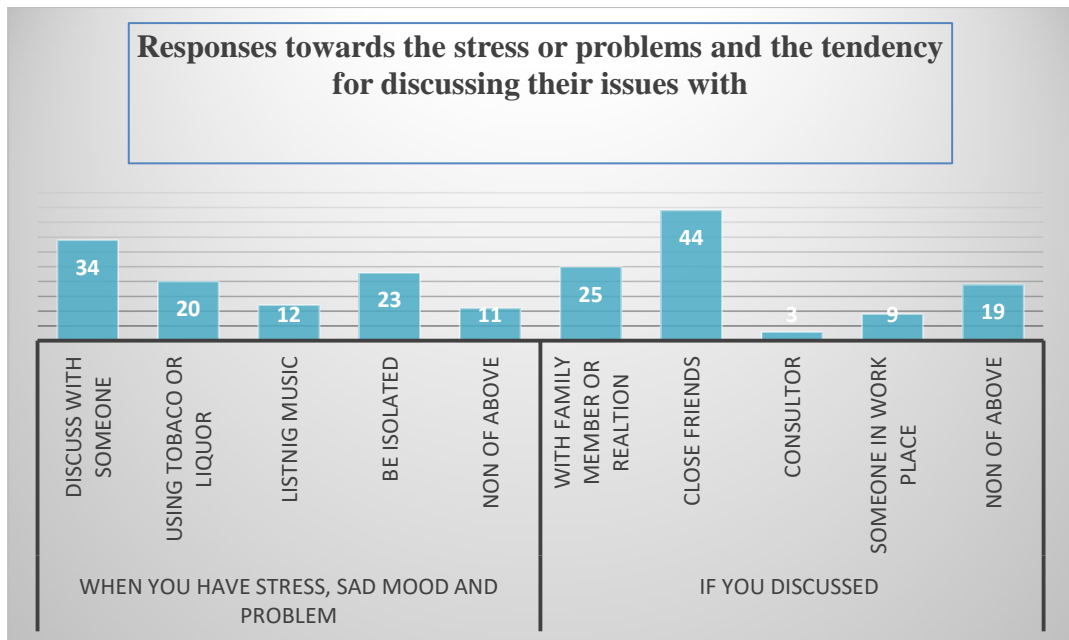


Figure 5: Responses towards the stress or problems and the tendency to discuss their issues with

It has been identified that out of the sample size of 100 participants in the study, only 03 refer to the consultant or a person who has particular knowledge of mental health. It is a meagre percentage compared to the population of the study. Even though the responses to the question on whether they are aware of the importance of mental health received a moderate amount of positive answers, the majority needed a specific idea about counselling and respective mental health improvement institutes in their respective areas. Figure 6 illustrates the need for knowledge about the mental health institutes in their area, the importance of mental health and the responses towards stress and problems. Further, the study has shown the trends and patterns of lack of awareness of mental health and service providers, affecting the community's vulnerability.

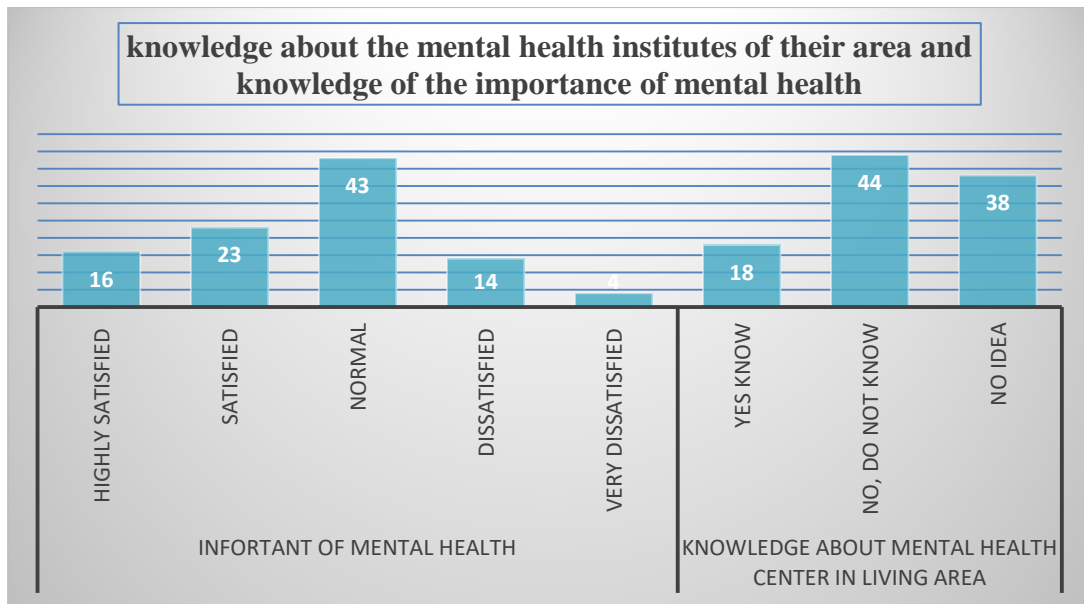


Figure 6: knowledge about the mental health institutes in their area and knowledge of the importance of mental health

Moreover, it further illustrated that due to the current economic crisis in Sri Lanka, many people are planning to migrate either with family, themselves, or someone from a family who has already migrated. The loss of family members also directs a person into a stressful environment, further leading to depression. Depression is challenging to identify from the general community unless the victim is being requested medical assistance. It has been identified that most of the sample suffers from stressful situations due to the financial crisis. They do not even know that they suffer from a mental health disorder resulting in significant issues.

Meanwhile, the study has revealed the trends and patterns of the depression and economic crisis in Sri Lanka. With the worsening of the economic condition in Sri Lanka, a significant amount of people were unable to fulfil the ends and means they used earlier. Most of the expenses were limited by themselves, and the inflation has not fulfilled recreation or relaxation. The main four categories of the study were severely affected by this vulnerable situation, and they were gradually pushed towards depression and many other mental health issues. The hindrance of this situation is that until some medical person, therapist, or counsellor can define that someone is suffering from depression or mental diseases, no one would be able to identify the risk.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka has yet to give significant value to mental health as a developing country. This study has focused on identifying whether the financial crisis has impacted depression among people. Mental health is essential, and people know it as a concept. However, they needed to know how to approach mental health services, and they identified that they needed assistance when they were mentally ill. Their satisfaction with the importance of mental health is standard. To maintain the consistency of the sample, the government, private, pensionable and business sector was equally analyzed. Sri Lanka has been experiencing the highest recorded inflation recently, the essential services have skyrocketed, and most people cannot reach them.

The study has revealed that the financial and economic crisis in Sri Lanka has severely affected the community's mental health. However, many do not have a proper idea of the curing methods for mental health issues. The economic crisis in Sri Lanka has directly impacted people to suffer from depression and has become a significant threat to human security. Most of them cannot save under inflation. Most of them have less income and are not satisfied with their salary. They had to limit their expenditures due to the financial crisis, and they did not have an opportunity for recreational or leisure activities. Pre-planned functions and gatherings have been reduced due to the lack of financial freedom.

Most of them need a better idea about the consultation service, and sample size of 100 participants in the study, only 03 refer to the consultant or a person with particular knowledge of mental health. Additionally, they need to learn about the mental health service Centre. A significant number of people are planning to migrate either with family, himself herself, or someone from the family who has already migrated. With the worsening of the economic condition in Sri Lanka, a significant amount of people were unable to fulfil the ends and means they used earlier. Most expenses were limited by themselves, and inflation still needed to fulfil recreation or relaxation. Hence, it has highlighted the significance of mental health and the counterbalance of an economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Because the study has highlighted that these two

conditions have interconnection at the ground level, it would cause severe impacts on the community.

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