

By ARMAN RASHID

BORN in Alor Star, Kedah, on July 10, 1925, he has led a monumental life as a physician, politician and statesman with extraordinary dedication to public service and leadership all through.

Reaching a centennial birthday is a milestone – and for Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (fondly called 'Dr M'), it stands out even more as he remains exceptionally vibrant in body, mind and intellect, with age having only a minimal impact on him so far.

Serving as prime minister for 24 years from 1981 to 2003 and 2018 to 2020, Dr M's legacy is inseparable from Malaysia's history and development. Having spearheaded economic transformation and modernisation in his first tenure, he returned to office as a nonagenarian to lead the country's historic change of government to Pakatan Harapan.

Dr M remains active in public life to this day, lending his unwavering voice to national and international issues while inspiring younger generations to lead more impactful lives.

Health and wellbeing

Dr M is not only one of the most consequential leaders of our time, but also a model of enduring wellness and vitality as he becomes a centenarian. His physical and mental agility – not to mention sharp acumen, wit and humour – are qualities most of us can only aspire to at an advanced age. So what are Dr M's "secrets" to health and wellbeing?

As a mental health professional, I recently had the honour of interviewing Dr M in his Putrajaya office to learn what keeps him in exceptional physical and mental fitness at this age. He shares his wisdom on a range of health and wellbeing topics – from stress management and interpersonal relationships to sustaining youth mental health.

> Coping with stress – find root causes

Stress is inevitable in life – especially for leaders shouldering a wide array of responsibilities. It may often be related to frustrations and disappointments, such as when things don't go as planned. How does Dr M navigate these challenges?

Dr M adopts an optimistic and analytical approach to coping with challenges. According to him, "all problems can be resolved if given the time and attention is paid to the causes of the problem."

To understand and address life's challenges, Dr M draws upon his early medical training.

"A doctor has to diagnose the person's disease and to do that we have to go into the history, we have to do physical examinations, we have to do special examinations and such. I do the same thing with problems."

"When I am faced with a problem, I try to understand the reasons for a problem and see whether we can reduce or diminish or do away with reasons that cause the problem," he says.

Dr M has shown us the value of adopting a constructive approach in examining the root causes of our challenges rather than merely focusing on symptoms. Although uncovering the underlying drivers of stress may be time consuming and uncomfortable, it helps build coping skills, disrupt

Turning 100 with Dr M

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Former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad shares his 'secrets' to good health and longevity as he marked his 100th birthday recently.



Inspiring: Dr M's physical and mental agility are qualities most of us can only aspire to at an advanced age. — Stephanie Arman.

unhealthy cycles and foster long-term wellbeing.

> Reconciling differences – practise tolerance and acceptance

We often encounter differences in interpersonal relationships, as each person brings their unique personality, experiences and values. Leaders are no different; if anything, they face conflicts even more frequently due to the greater diversity of people and opinions they engage with. How does Dr M handle disagreements?

"I am tolerant. I don't expect people to be like me or understand only my own reasons for doing things and I don't expect other people to do the same as what I would do," he says.

Dr M acknowledges that different thought processes shape people's differences.

"I accept they have their own views, I have my own views and I have to accept that they have reasons for their own views."

He also mentions explaining different perspectives to one another can help bridge interpersonal gaps.

Moreover, Dr M highlights the importance of listening to different views in being open to change.

"You see, I may have one idea but if the people reject the idea, you must understand why and try to meet their needs."

He notes that policies may sometimes evolve depending on the needs and opinions of the people served by him.

In recounting his nearly 69-year marriage to Tun Dr Siti Hasmah – a union widely admired as relationship-goal material – Dr M also emphasises the importance

of tolerance.

"We are tolerant of each other. We don't expect to be exactly the same as each other, we understand the differences and we accept the differences."

Dr M has provided valuable insights into how tolerance and acceptance can help nurture harmonious relationships, including citing his own marriage as an example.

Recognising diverse personalities and perspectives can go a long way in helping build trust, respect, and empathy, while laying the foundation for strong personal and professional relationships.

> Living well – eat in moderation

Nutrition shapes both physical and mental health. Although food fuels our brain and body, it can also contribute to obesity, depression and chronic disease. What are Dr M's dietary habits keeping him in good health?

Dr M attributes his good health to moderation in every aspect of life, particularly his diet.

"In eating, I don't eat too much and grow fat."

He shares his dietary preferences: "Actually, I eat everything except that I eat in small quantities."

Dr M regularly eats rice, but cuts back on portion sizes to prevent weight gain.

Despite his political career, Dr M remains the quintessential doctor advising on dietary requirements changing with age.

"When you are growing (up), you need a lot of food but when you have stopped growing and you are old, it's better not to eat too much," he points out.



Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali regularly exercise together in a park in Putrajaya. — Chang W. Lee/The New York Times



Dr Mahathir, in blue, riding on a tandem bike in Putrajaya. — Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Dr M has demonstrated the effectiveness of eating healthily in moderation, without resorting to extreme diets or restrictions. In fact, moderate eating can help cultivate a healthy and sustainable relationship with food that delivers balanced nutrition, lowers disease risk and enhances cognitive function.

Ageing well

Growing older impacts on physical and mental health alike.

Despite the bodily and cognitive shifts brought about by ageing, many older adults remain healthy and productive through awareness, self-care and timely interventions. What does Dr M do to stay physically and mentally agile?

"Actually, working and being active is very important when you are ageing," he says.

He points out the importance of keeping both mind and body engaged to function well in later life.

Dr M offers a glimpse into his physical and mental fitness routine: "I do some light exercise. I continue to be involved in writing, reading, talking (and) discussing to keep myself mentally active. I go cycling (and) I used to ride horses before."

However, he was recently advised against horseback riding due to his age, but he was quick to say he is still capable of it.

Dr M has shown us the importance of engaging both body and mind for ageing well – his good health is a blessing that is the result of a deliberate choice to stay physically active and mentally stimulated. A balanced physical and mental fitness routine can help boost energy, improve mood and enhance wellbeing later in life.

Sustaining mental health

In recent years, mental health conditions have become increasingly prevalent among Malaysian youth, affecting their morale, productivity and wellbeing. Reports also indicate growing workplace stress experienced

by young professionals. As a veteran leader, what is Dr M's advice for Malaysian youth?

Dr M says Malaysian youth can help protect their mental health by pursuing work and activities they are truly passionate about.

He shares his own example of what keeps him from feeling unhappiness: "I enjoy the work I do, so I find that that it is not a strain, not a pressure on me. Young people must also identify what they like to do and do it."

He encourages young people to find satisfaction in pursuits that contribute to the wider society.

"What they (youth) like to do must be something positive that benefits not only themselves but also society. If they like doing it, they won't feel the pressure of work."

He acknowledges the youths' need to look at their own wellbeing, but in the process also contribute towards Malaysia's development.

Dr M notes that his own satisfaction gained from serving the nation, including improved performance and growth during his first tenure as prime minister.

Dr M highlights the importance of enjoyable and satisfying work, especially when it is tied to serving society, in boosting mental health. Engaging in meaningful, purposeful work can boost motivation, self-esteem and wellbeing, while easing stress.

So, Happy Birthday, Tun!

A heartfelt gratitude to you for generously sharing your priceless wisdom on health and wellbeing – this is another example of your service to society.

My warmest birthday wishes too, Dr M. As you celebrate the centennial milestone of your life, we honour you and your achievements today and pray for your continued longevity, happiness, success, and good physical and mental health.

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