

The Relationship between Self-Esteem and Depression among Chronically Ill Teachers in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the relationship between self-esteem and depression levels among teachers with chronic illnesses. Utilizing a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, a sample of 510 teachers (43.3% male, 56.7% female) was selected via cluster sampling across Malaysia. Data were collected using the validated Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), both of which demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.69$ and $\alpha = 0.84$, respectively). Inferential data analysis involved independent samples t-tests and Pearson correlation analysis. The t-test results revealed no significant difference in self-esteem based on gender ($t(508) = 1.422$, $p > .05$), although the mean score for male teachers ($M = 33.484$, $SD = 4.392$) was slightly higher than that of female teachers ($M = 32.896$, $SD = 4.918$). However, a statistically significant difference was observed in depression levels by gender ($t(508) = 2.075$, $p < .05$), where chronically ill male teachers exhibited a significantly higher mean depression score ($M = 33.484$, $SD = 20.076$) compared to female teachers ($M = 29.848$, $SD = 19.242$). Pearson correlation analysis indicated a significant but weak negative relationship between self-esteem and depression ($r = -.099$, $p < .05$). The implications of this study underscore the urgent need for the Ministry of Education (MOE), District Education Offices (DEO), and school administrators to design psychological interventions, emotional support systems, and conducive physical infrastructure to safeguard the welfare of educators experiencing chronic health conditions, thereby enhancing the overall well-being of the national education ecosystem.

Keywords: Self-Esteem, Depression, Chronically Ill Teachers, Emotional Well-Being, Social Support

Introduction

The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Depression Among Chronically Ill Teachers

Teachers play a critical role in sustaining educational quality, yet the increasing complexity of teaching demands has raised growing concerns about their psychological well-being. Recent evidence indicates that teachers are particularly vulnerable to stress, burnout, anxiety and

depression because of sustained occupational demands and the emotional requirements of their profession (Ma et al., 2022; Wei et al., 2022). In Malaysia, a recent systematic review identified workload, work environment, personality traits and physical health among the key factors associated with poor mental health among educators (Munusamy et al., 2024). These findings suggest that teachers' mental health should be understood not only in relation to occupational demands but also through individual psychological and health-related circumstances.

The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that approximately 322 million people were living with depression globally in 2023, while depressive disorders continue to constitute a substantial proportion of the global burden of disability. Importantly, depression is not determined solely by psychological characteristics; rather, it emerges through the interaction of biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors. Individuals experiencing adverse circumstances, including disability and physical health problems, may face increased vulnerability to mental health difficulties (World Health Organization [WHO], 2026). This biopsychosocial perspective is particularly relevant when examining populations who experience the simultaneous demands of occupational responsibilities and prolonged physical illness.

The issue may be particularly significant for teachers experiencing prolonged or chronic illness. Unlike generally healthy teachers, those living with long-term health conditions may face persistent physical limitations, reduced work capacity, extended medical leave and disruptions to their professional and social roles. Such circumstances may affect how individuals perceive their personal worth, competence and ability to fulfil occupational responsibilities, potentially increasing vulnerability to depressive symptoms. Recent research has further demonstrated that physical health is an important factor associated with educators' mental health in Malaysia, while personality characteristics may also shape individual vulnerability to psychological difficulties (Munusamy et al., 2024).

Self-esteem is particularly relevant within this context because it represents an individual's evaluation of personal worth and competence. Contemporary evidence suggests that self-esteem is closely connected to psychological well-being and can be influenced through psychological interventions, including cognitive-behavioural approaches (Niveau et al., 2021). Evidence also indicates a consistent association between lower self-esteem and depression across vulnerable adult populations (Lee et al., 2023). Thus, for teachers coping with prolonged illness, diminished self-esteem may represent an important psychological pathway through which health-related and occupational challenges are associated with depressive symptoms.

Despite increasing research on teacher mental health, an important gap remains. Existing Malaysian literature has predominantly examined educators as a general occupational group and has focused on broad factors such as workload, work-family conflict, workplace conditions, personality and general physical health. The 2024 systematic review of Malaysian educators, for example, identified physical health and personality as important themes but also highlighted the need for further research examining how relevant factors interact and

influence mental health outcomes. Consequently, limited empirical attention has been given specifically to teachers experiencing prolonged or chronic illness, particularly regarding the relationship between self-esteem and depression within this distinct occupational and health context.

Accordingly, the present study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between self-esteem and depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illness in Malaysia. By focusing on this under-researched population, the study extends existing literature on teacher mental health and provides evidence that may inform more targeted psychological support, occupational health strategies and institutional interventions for teachers whose health conditions affect their continued participation in the teaching profession.

Literature Review

The Concept of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is defined as an individual's global and subjective evaluation of their own worth, value, and competence. A pioneer of self-psychology theory, Rosenberg (1965), stated that individuals with high self-esteem exhibit self-respect, appreciate their strengths, and can maturely accept their weaknesses without harboring excessive negative emotions. Conversely, low self-esteem is associated with self-rejection, feelings of helplessness, and a tendency to view oneself as a failed entity.

An integrative model by Mruk (2006) divides self-esteem into two critical components:

- i. Self-Worth: The affective dimension concerning the extent to which an individual feels worthy of being loved, valued, and respected within their social space.
- ii. Self-Competence: The behavioral dimension involving confidence in one's cognitive and physical capacities to complete tasks or overcome life challenges.

In the context of teaching, when a teacher is afflicted by a prolonged chronic illness (such as cancer or kidney failure), both components are drastically affected. Teachers feel a loss of professional competence due to physical limitations and clinical isolation, which subsequently diminishes their sense of self-worth within the school community. Contemporary literature confirms that stable self-esteem acts as a psychological buffer that protects teachers from the impact of extreme work stress.

Depression among Educators

Depression is an emotional and mental disorder characterized by deep feelings of sadness, prolonged fatigue, loss of interest (anhedonia) in daily activities, and cognitive and social dysfunction (APA, 2013). The World Health Organization (WHO) positions depression among the largest global disease burdens across socioeconomic statuses. In Malaysia, data from the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) show consistently rising statistics of mental health disorders, where the teacher population is among the public servant groups recording a high prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms.

According to Beck's (1967) cognitive theory, depression is driven by the "Negative Cognitive Triad," which consists of negative views of oneself, the surrounding world, and the future. For teachers suffering from chronic illness who must take leave exceeding 180 days, this triad is activated when they begin to view themselves as burdens to the school, perceive the work

environment as unsupportive, and assume that their future career is ruined. A study by Klai and Bahrin (2020) found that low mental health awareness among teachers causes early signs of depression such as difficulty focusing, frequent crying, baseless worry, and feelings of failure to be misunderstood as a lack of motivation, thereby delaying appropriate clinical interventions.

The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Depression

There is a robust empirical consensus in psychological research that self-esteem has a strong negative correlation with depression. A study by Mohd Khir et al. (2020) on local university undergraduates proved that an increase in self-esteem scores significantly predicts a decrease in depression scores ($r = -0.39$ to -0.51). Similarly, Giong and Abdullah (2018) in their study on the adult population in Kuala Lumpur found a high negative correlation ($r = -0.602$, $p < 0.01$), showing that maladaptive emotional regulation mechanisms among young adults are frequently influenced by a fragile self-esteem status.

In recent literature reviews, comprehensive studies on teacher mental health reveal a significant linear relationship between the strength of self-esteem structures and overall psychological well-being, where chronic burnout acts as a major destructive factor that erodes self-esteem and triggers depressive symptoms. Therefore, exploring these variables in the specific segment of teachers suffering from chronic illnesses (cancer, kidney, heart disease) with the constraint of 180 days of leave is highly critical to fill the existing research gap.

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to enable the researcher to gather large-scale data systematically, objectively, and effectively.

Respondents and Sampling Procedure

The target research population involved teachers under the MOE who were clinically confirmed to have chronic illnesses for more than six months and met the criteria of the MOE Service Circular No. 2 of 2009. Based on a cluster sampling framework, a final sample of 510 teachers was selected as respondents, consisting of 221 male teachers (43.3%) and 289 female teachers (56.7%).

Operational Definition of Chronic Illness

In this doctoral-level study, chronic illness is operationally defined based on rigid public service criteria. It refers to a condition where an Education Service Officer (Pegawai Perkhidmatan Pendidikan, PPP) meets the following two parameters:

- i. Pathological Disease Type: Clinically confirmed to suffer from a major chronic illness, including cancer malignancy, chronic kidney failure (requiring scheduled hemodialysis), or chronic cardiovascular dysfunction/heart disease.
- ii. Operational Absenteeism Criteria: Having accumulated medical leave (sijil cuti sakit) exceeding 180 days in a single calendar year, and certified by a Government Medical Officer as unlikely to recover in the near future.

Research Instruments and Data Analysis

Primary data collection was conducted using a written questionnaire set containing three main instrument components: (1) Demographic Profile; (2) Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; $\alpha = 0.69$) to assess self-esteem; and (3) Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; $\alpha = 0.84$) to assess depressive manifestations. Raw data were processed using computer software for inferential statistics via Independent Samples t-test (for gender differences) and Pearson Correlation Analysis (for relationship between variables) at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$.

Results*Analysis of Self-Esteem by Gender*

An independent samples t-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in self-esteem scores between male and female teachers experiencing chronic illness. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Independent Samples t-Test Results for Self-Esteem by Gender

Gender	N	Mean (M)	SD	t-value	df	Sig. (p)
Male	221	33.484	4.392	1.422	508	.156
Female	289	32.896	4.918			

Based on Table 1, the results show that there is no significant difference in the level of self-esteem between male and female teachers experiencing chronic illness, $t(508) = 1.422$, $p > .05$ ($p = .156$). The null hypothesis fails to be rejected. However, descriptive profile analysis indicates that the mean self-esteem score for male teachers ($M = 33.484$, $SD = 4.392$) is slightly higher than the mean for female teachers ($M = 32.896$, $SD = 4.918$).

Analysis of Depression Levels by Gender

Next, the difference in depression levels among chronically ill teachers was assessed based on gender using a t-test analysis.

Table 2

Independent Samples t-Test Results for Depression Levels by Gender

Gender	N	Mean (M)	SD	t-value	df	Sig. (p)
Male	221	33.484	20.076	2.075	508	.038
Female	289	29.848	19.242			

The results in Table 2 demonstrate that there is a statistically significant difference in depression levels between male and female teachers experiencing chronic illness, $t(508) = 2.075$, $p < .05$. The probability value of $p = .038$ is smaller than the alpha level of 0.05, thereby rejecting the null hypothesis. Empirically, the mean depression score for male teachers is significantly higher ($M = 33.484$, $SD = 20.076$) compared to the mean score for female teachers ($M = 29.848$, $SD = 19.242$).

The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Depression

To address the primary objective of this study, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the direction and strength of the relationship between the self-esteem and depression variables.

Table 3

Pearson Correlation Analysis between Self-Esteem and Depression

Variable Pair	Sample Size (N)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Sig. (p)
Self-Esteem Depression	x 510	-0.099	.025

The findings in Table 3 prove that there is a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and depression levels among teachers experiencing chronic illness ($r = -0.099$, $p < 0.05$). The p-value of .025 is smaller than 0.05, hence the null hypothesis is rejected. The negative correlation value ($r = -0.099$) indicates the existence of an inverse relationship: as self-esteem scores increase, teachers' depression levels decrease, and vice versa. However, the strength of this relationship is classified as weak.

Discussion

The findings of this study unravel several critical insights that contribute to the occupational health psychology literature within the public education sector. The first finding shows no significant difference in self-esteem between genders, which is consistent with the global literature argument that a teacher's professional self-esteem structure is shaped by the stability of the work environment and competency achievement, rather than gender alone.

The second and most critical finding is that male teachers recorded a significantly higher mean depression score ($M = 33.484$) compared to female teachers ($M = 29.848$) when dealing with chronic illnesses. This finding contradicts the macro trends of the WHO (2017), which state that females are generally at a higher risk of experiencing depression. This deviation is due to sociocultural factors and local gender responsibilities. Male teachers, as heads of households (the sole or primary breadwinner), experience double the psychological pressure when afflicted with a major chronic illness such as cancer, kidney failure, or cardiac dysfunction.

They are not only distressed by their inability to perform teaching duties at school, but are also haunted by the anxiety of failing to provide for their families and the trauma of job loss due to taking sick leave exceeding 180 days a year. In contrast, female teachers tend to have a wider social support network and are more open to expressing emotions or seeking help, which acts as a cathartic agent to reduce internal depressive burdens.

Furthermore, the existence of a negative correlation between self-esteem and depression ($r = -0.099$) supports cognitive theory. This inverse relationship confirms the cognitive theory premise that healthy self-esteem serves as an internal shield that prevents negative cognitive distortions from overwhelming the minds of ill teachers. The weakness of this r-value provides an important clue: for the population of teachers suffering from chronic illnesses and taking long sick leave, there are other external variables—such as the quality of medical treatment (dialysis, chemotherapy), the financial burden of medication costs, and the tolerance of

school administrations—that have a far more dominant influence in determining the fluctuation of their depression levels compared to self-esteem itself.

Implications and Recommendations

The empirical findings of this study have profound implications for civil servant welfare policies and school management in Malaysia:

- i. Micro Policy Implications (MOE & DEO): The MOE is advised to not merely view the Pool Position (POOL) instrument as a passive final solution. The MOE needs to introduce a Recovery-Oriented Self-Management Framework specifically for teachers suffering from chronic illnesses. This framework should focus on physical rehabilitation, cognitive adjustment, and a gradual return to instructional duties.
- ii. Operational Implications (School Administrators): Principals and Headmasters need to create an inclusive and sustainable school ecosystem. Administrators must avoid stigma or duty-based discrimination against chronically ill teachers. Providing moral support platforms, arranging flexible timetables, and equipping schools with health-friendly physical infrastructure (such as ground-floor teachers' breakrooms) greatly helps in maintaining teachers' self-esteem.
- iii. Recommendations for Future Research: For future research, it is recommended that researchers use a mixed-methods design, incorporating in-depth qualitative interviews to explore contextual factors causing higher depression among ill male teachers, such as financial liabilities or specific workplace stressors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has empirically proven a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and depression levels among teachers experiencing chronic illnesses (cancer, kidney failure, and heart disease) in Malaysia. Additionally, this study highlights a critical finding where male teachers are detected to be more vulnerable to severe depressive symptoms compared to female teachers when their physical health is compromised to the point of being forced to take medical leave exceeding 180 days a year. The manifestation of this study demands a concerted commitment from all stakeholders in the education ecosystem to mobilize resources in building a strong psychosocial, moral, and infrastructural support system to ensure the sustainability and quality of the national education system.

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