

# Experts Lounge



## Coronavirus disease: How to deal with anxiety, fear and disruption of routine life

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**T**he spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) across the globe has literally locked the earth. A third of the World is in a lockdown. In Kenya, all educational institutions were closed by 20th March, 2020 and a dawn to dusk curfew was instituted effective 27th March, 2020.

Besides, the COVID-19 pandemic, Kenya has a cocktail of other issues to deal with. They include unemployment,

perennial drought, the current locust invasion and diseases such as cancer and malaria. Why then are we, or should we, be preoccupied and afraid of this new coronavirus disease?

Health Business talked to Dr. Geoffrey Wango, an expert on behaviour and Senior Lecturer in Counselling Psychology at the University of Nairobi on the issue. He elucidates on methods to counter the raw concerns that the disease may ravage the country as it has done in Italy, Spain, Iran and the USA.

**Q:** We are afraid of coronavirus disease. How do we deal with the anxiety and fear from this pandemic?

**Dr Wango:** Thank you for this opportunity. As a Counselling Psychologist, I will approach this issue from a disaster point of view. The first and foremost thing I can tell people is self-care. This involves protecting self and others from the virus through simple hygiene such as maintaining social distance, washing of hands and other safety and health precautions. The second is to obtain accurate information about the situation.

Avoid panic by obtaining truthful information from credible sources such as the Ministry of Health, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization, and trusted media houses.

The fact that we have a few deaths in Kenya is not an excuse to throw caution to the wind. In fact, the best way of coping with a pandemic is coping and not waiting to cope with a major outbreak. That projection largely depends on two things: that public health officials and media provide accurate information to prevent a major outbreak; and, everyone takes precautions. One is a strategy, the other is about tactfulness.

**Q:** People are worried and anxious about this pandemic. How can one manage the fear and stress?

**Dr Wango:** Stress is often a normal part of life. It arises out of our attempts to deal with life and challenging situations. It is a natural response to an external pressure that disrupts the equilibrium. Symptoms include the following:

- Sadness, confusion, irritability, anger, uneasiness, and suicidal thoughts
- Reduced concentration, inefficiency, and low productivity
- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Interpersonal problems (such as lies, defensiveness, communication concerns)
- Tension (notable in constant headaches, jaw clenching, teeth grinding)
- Body pain (for example, headaches, muscle spasms)
- Reduced energy (such as tiredness, weakness, fatigue)
- Sleeping problems (for example, lack of sleep (insomnia), sleeping too much, bad dreams and nightmares)
- Preoccupation with the disaster (such as COVID 19) and thoughts of death

The first step in stemming fear is finding if you are experiencing these emotions. Misinformation fuels fear and anxiety. I urge people to get news from credible sources. One can also seek support from organisations that provide psychological support and practical support for people who need it.

**Q:** What can the ordinary people do at home or at this time? Is there anything we can do to avoid the psychological aspects you outlined above?

**Dr Wango:** The utmost measure taking the necessary health precautions given by government. Second, obtain accurate information by reading more about self-care. Thirdly,



protect yourself and your loved ones from rumourmongers and people who use such times to gain popularity.

You can also try out the following:

- Art and Craft, gardening, exercise, listening to music, dancing
- Meditation
- Cleanliness and hygiene
- Play with a pet
- Read a book
- Call a loved one
- Watch your favourite movie
- Practice gratitude and hospitality
- Take an online class
- Host a virtual gathering

For those at home or confined elsewhere, keep in touch online and by calling loved ones. Inform them of your condition and assure them of your health.

**Q:** The movement of people has been restricted by the dusk to dawn curfew imposed by the government. How do people deal with withdrawal from the social activities such as family meetings and other social gatherings.

**Dr Wango:** We are dealing with a disease here. There are risks involved leading to circumstances such as the quarantines. It is an opportunity cost. It is true that it feels like one is being

denied their rights. Under the present crisis and the present situation, people need to understand what is going on. We need to comprehend the situation. Typically, you can rally around one another, family, those around you, and you give each other support. Please do not forget the social distancing and healthy precautions. Let us support one another, and at the same time act bravely. People's lives have been, and will be disrupted but it is an opportunity to act in a coordinated way and make things better.

Phone calls and electronic meetings can solve the social aspects hampered by the social distancing and restrictions in movement.

**Q:** In conclusion, kindly summarize what we need to avoid fear and panic, and thus manage the anxiety?

**Dr Wango:** First, take care of self and family especially the aged and the sick. Second, take safety precautions. Third, obtain accurate information and follow it. Fourth, avoid risk. Fifth, ask yourself what you can do to keep yourself busy but at the same time avoiding risk. Six, be supportive of family, friends and people who are under greater stress. The fears, worries and anxiety may be triggered by the Corona virus or other issues. Assure them of their safety and security. Finally, you should pray with your family. **HB**

Dr. Wango has authored several publications on Counselling, Education and Gender including: *Counselling in the School: A Handbook for Teachers* (Wango & Mungai, 2007); *School Administration and Management: Quality Assurance and Standards in Schools* (Wango, 2009); *School Finance Management: Fiscal Management to Enhance Governance and Accountability* (Wango & Gatere, 2012); *Early Childhood Development Education Guidance and Counselling* (Wango, Kimani, Osaka, Githinji & Amayo, 2015); *Counselling Psychology in Kenya: A Contemporary Review of the Developing World* (Wango, 2015); *Study Skills for Secondary School Learners* (Wango & Gatere, 2016); and, *Parenting: Counselling in the Home* (Wango & Gatere, 2019).