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Coronavirus disease: Worries, Fears, Stress and Anxiety in Kenya and Low-and Middle- Income Countries, and How to deal with the Pandemic

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The spread of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) across the globe has locked all countries, including Kenya. While most of the cases had initially been recorded in China, it was soon surpassed by Italy, Spain, France and now the United States of America. This has not stopped people in Kenya and other countries from worrying. In Kenya, all educational institutions were closed by 20th March 2020, and a 7.00 p.m. to 5.00 am curfew instituted effective 27th March 2020. Indeed, this new illness is frightening and needs many considerations. However, it is essential to note that Kenya as a developing country has far more urgent needs such as the estimated over 70% of people in informal employment who earn their wages daily, poverty, threats of communicable disease, cancer and HIV/

AIDS. Besides, there are other conditions such as lack of daily subsistence, perennial drought, vaccinations, the present locust invasion and other seasonal flues, including malaria. Why then are we, or, should we be so preoccupied and afraid of this new coronavirus disease?

Health Business Chief Editor, Stephen Macharia, talked to Dr Geoffrey Wango, an expert on behaviour and a Senior Lecturer in Counselling Psychology at the University of Nairobi. Dr Wango elucidates the high tension, the increased fears, and worries as well as about the new risk more than familiar ones. He elucidates on methods to counter the COVID-19.

This is the transcript of the interview, also reproduced in several media including *Health Business Magazine*, *Radio Citizen* and *The People Daily*.

Stephen: Hello, and welcome to this interview on the worries and fears, stress and anxiety not just about everyday life but how the COVID-19, known as coronavirus has gripped the World and Kenya. Let us set the pace from the onset by posing the utmost; why are we so afraid of coronavirus when we seemingly have so much more disturbing issues? Our guest for this episode will explain why we are so worried about new risks like COVID-19 more than familiar ones, how to calm our fears and anxiety, and more so the psychological effects of being quarantined in the home, hospital and elsewhere, which is what is happening to almost all of us.

Dr Wango: Thank you for this opportunity to discuss what is going on among many people. There are indeed several challenges in life, but, even so, is the fear of this new virus. Honestly, people are very fearful of what they do not know, and this is the case of the COVID-19 coronavirus. There is increased systematic research and documentation on COVID-19 with clear Ministry of Health guidelines and updates.

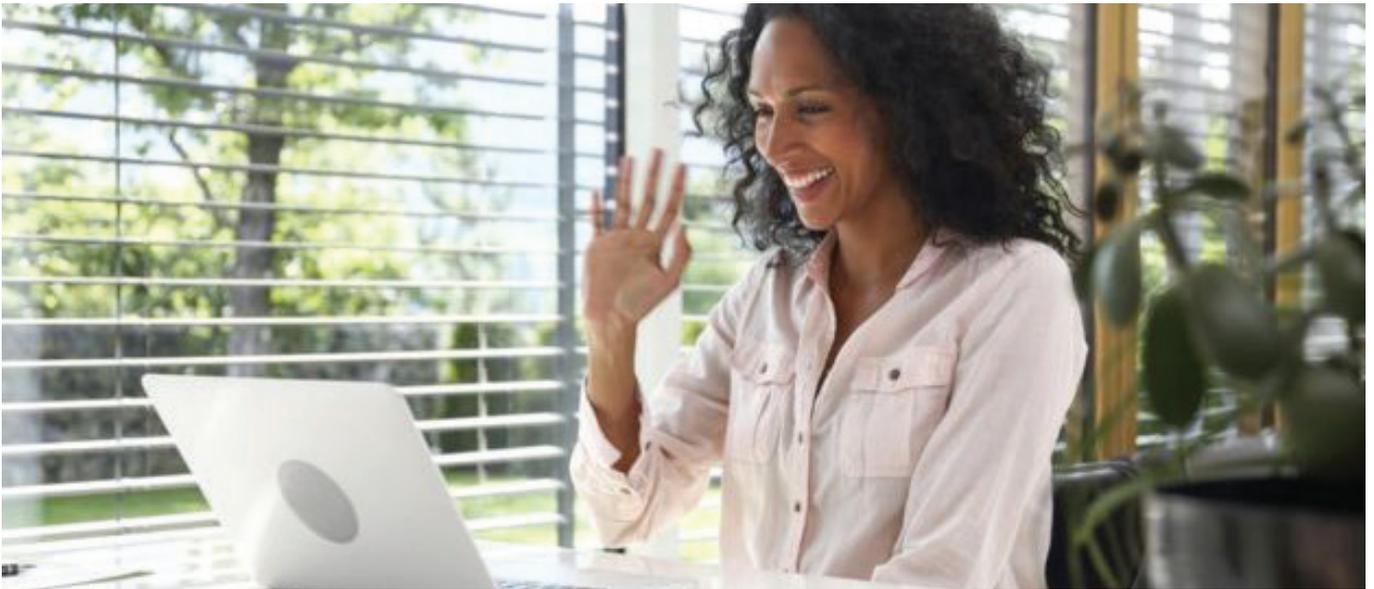
As a Counselling Psychologist, I will approach this discussion from the point of dealing with a crisis, a disaster now, COVID-19, and hence the need to cope with our fears and anxiety. The first and foremost thing I can tell people is self-care. This involves protecting self and others from the virus through simple hygiene such as maintaining social distance, washing hands and other safety and health precautions. The second is to obtain accurate information about COVID-19 and the present situation. Avoid panic at this point by obtaining

truthful information. These include the Ministry of Health, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization, and some of our and trusted media houses. Just stick to them for information and avoid rumours, hearsays and the traditional gossip.

The fact that we have had a few deaths in Kenya is not an excuse to throw caution to the wind. The best way of coping with a pandemic such as COVID-19 is coping and not waiting to seek treatment in the event of 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, and the other is about tactfulness.

Stephen: It is possible that people are worried and anxious about COVID-19. The virus has spread worldwide as on 14th April 2020 with high fatalities in China (3,341), Italy (20,465), France (14,967), Spain (18,056), United Kingdom (11,329) and the United States of America (23, 644). How can people manage their fears anxiety about this? There are all the myths, stories if you like, pictures, information on the media, including social media, there is the quarantine and the curfew. Additionally, most of the high-income countries have better health systems, and most certainly, we are highly disadvantaged in this instance.

Dr Wango: People are indeed fearful and anxious. The world will experience a pandemic with critical social economic and political ramifications. There will be an economic



depression in 2020 worse than experience in 1929. People are anxious and stressed. Let us admit it, these are hard times, and the pandemic leaves many people wrapped up in fear and anxiety. We may have much information on cancer, malaria, common cold and HIV/AIDS. I accept many Kenyans are struggling with daily wages and a hard economy, relationship and family issues and all that, but the COVID-19 is a deadly illness with no apparent cure and a high fatality. Italy, for instance at the peak was grappling with almost 1,000 deaths a day while the United States of America reached a 2,000 peak in one day. These countries have records of over 10,000 people in the morgue. This is a reason for concern and hence the worry. Let us admit it in our hearts and mind that all the safety precautions, including the frequent washing of hands, use of sanitizers, curfew, quarantine, remaining at home and others, are justified. The use of personal protective equipment (PPE) is recommended, such as gloves, respirator-type masks, and gowns in various settings, including healthcare, home care settings and during the handling of cargo. In the end, let's work out how to improve on our lives, our family, those close to us and our country and the world.

Stephen: If you are here in Kenya, what can you do? How can one manage the fear and stress around COVID-19?

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

- Mixed up feelings including confusion, anger, irritability, and uneasiness as well as the sensation of sadness
- Reduced concentration, leading to inefficiency, and low productivity
- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Interpersonal problems (arising out of an inability to effectively cope such as too much time on the phone, television or Internet, lies, being defensive, communication concerns)

- Tension and strain (notable in constant headaches, jaw clenching, teeth grinding)
- Body pain (for example, frequent and unexplained headaches, muscle spasms)
- Reduced energy (such as tiredness, weakness, fatigue)
- Sleeping problems (for example, lack of sleep (insomnia), sleeping too much, bad dreams or nightmares)
- Sense of hopelessness, depression and sometimes suicidal thoughts
- Preoccupation with the disaster (such as COVID-19) and thoughts of death

The first step in stemming fear is finding out if you are experiencing these types of emotions. A lot of the fears arise out of inadequate information and the worst misinformation in this case about coronavirus. Some several people and organizations provide psychological support and practical support for people who need it.

Stephen: What can 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 thing one can do is to avoid panic. You may be concerned about the illness, but avoid anxiety and other repercussions. There is a lot one can do about our lives amidst difficult and challenging circumstances such as COVID-19. In the first instance, avoid the risk of infection by taking the necessary health precautions. Secondly, obtain accurate information by learning more about COVID-19 and adopting self-care. Thirdly, protect yourself and your loved ones from the irresponsible persons, the rumour mongers, people who use such incidents to gain popularity or as an opportunity to sell things or to inflame racial hatred or ethnic/racial/religious, gender hatred.

You can also try out the following:

- Prayer and Meditation. This includes reading the Bible, Quran or scriptures
- General cleanliness and appropriate hygiene

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- Leisure activities such as playing with a pet, gardening, tending to flowers
- Reading a book, newspaper or magazine. This can be from your home library or online
- Calling family, friends and loved one
- Watching your favourite programme or movie, or listening to music
- Practising gratitude and hospitality especially to the underprivileged in society
- Taking an online class or learning a new skill or thing
- Taking a walk, especially in the sunshine
- Writing an article, book, poem or paper
- Involvement in works of art such as painting, inscription, music or drawing
- Exercises, including dancing
- Hosting a virtual gathering (with workmates, family or friends)

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

your improved health. Those at home and abroad or kept apart should keep abreast of the whereabouts and well-being of spouse, family, friends and neighbours.

Stephen: What about the shutting down, the quarantine, let me call it partly alienation and all these inconveniences to ground zero? These amounts to inconveniences and certainly have psychological effects on a majority of citizens?

Dr Wango: This is an illness, and there are risks involved leading to circumstances such as the quarantines. It has several opportunity costs. It indeed feels like one is being denied their rights and all. But what is the problem? COVID-19 is a virus. Under the present crisis and the present circumstances and at best, avoid playing the victim. People need to comprehend what is going on. We need a realistic comprehension of 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 health precautions.

At the same time, we must also clearly avoid compensatory behaviours aimed at compensating for contact, especially now that children and adults are at home. Let me outline some of them.

Adults	Children
- Sports activities (golf, pool, group football)	- Playing and child games
- Shopping at supermarket/convenience store/malls	- Extra classes (coaching, language, and tutorials)
- Holding parties / partying	- Indiscriminate sharing and exchange of items
- Eating out	- Partying (anniversaries and celebrations)
- Drinking sprees (group fun)	- Concerts, art, and other artistic activities
- Family gatherings	- Family gathering
- Family outings and get-together	- Family outings and get-together
- Cinema (group movies)	- Cinemas (group movies)
- Religious and faith meetings (prayers/fellowships)	- Overnight stay away from home
- Other activity (shaking of hands, hugging, kissing)	- Other activity (hugging with a parent, playing with adults)

These are hazardous habits and easily and quickly transmit such a virus. Let us support one another, and at the same time, act bravely. People's lives have been and will be disrupted, but it is also an opportunity to act in a coordinated way and make things better.

I have said it again and again; obtain accurate information about COVID-19. In turn, the government and the media must get more or less coordinated information to the general public.

Stephen: Just as we close out, kindly summarize just what we need to avoid fear and panic, and thus manage the anxiety?

Dr Wango: First, take care of self and family, especially children and the vulnerable people in society such as the aged and the sick. Second, take safety precautions. Third, obtain accurate information and adhere to 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 more significant stress. The fears, worries and anxiety may be triggered by the Coronavirus or other issues. Assure them of their safety and security. Finally, you should pray with your family.

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).