

World Mental Health Day: How Effective Connection with Nature benefits our Mental Health



Dr Geoffrey Wango

“
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have a purpose in
life”

The World Mental Health Day, which is celebrated on 10th October every year aims to reach millions of people in the World to raise awareness on mental health issues. The human mind is quite complex, though intricate. This is because the brain tends to come to grips with its delicate balance in times of joy and happiness, sadness and distress, pleasure or illness. This is chiefly because the human mind has its vast miseries depicted in the functionalities of diverse capabilities evident in lives as we make merry, while at other times, we face frustrations and disappointments.

Mental health is a person's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being. A person's mental health includes his or her emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Mental health is the foundation of thinking, communication, learning, resilience and self-esteem. Thus, mental health is crucial to relationships, personal and emotional well-being and contributes to normal functioning of our daily activities, family, community and society at large.

Mental health and psychiatric disturbance require to be more fully understood as an

illness. This is because psychiatric symptoms are natural experiences emerging in the realm of ordinary daily life as people interact with the environment. In the mental health field, there is a growing awareness that the study of psychiatric symptoms should be extended to the everyday context. This is to provide information on contextual factors and conventional approaches in order to identify effective intervention strategies towards improved health. This includes the person's healthiness, particularly their mental health.

Mental health affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make various choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood. We must strive to have a purpose in life for our lives to be more meaningful. In addition, there are millions of people suffering from mental diseases who are unable to access health services for practical and economic reasons. Therefore, there is need for additional assistance, including the use of digital media.

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Over the course of our life, we experience various life challenges. If unchecked, these issues can psychologically torment us, leading to mental health problems. Mental health problems adversely affect the thinking, mood, and behaviour. Many factors contribute to mental health problems, including:

- Biological factors, such as genes or brain chemistry.
- Life experiences, such as trauma or abuse.
- Family history of mental health problems.

The World Mental Health Day provides a major opportunity for us to work out on various mental health issues and programmes. As a way of improving our health and wellness, the 2021 Mental

Health Awareness Week emphasises on nature and the importance of connecting with it, including the benefits of connecting with our environment in order to improve our health.

Various themes have been discussed and encompassed in the last decade, and this goes a long way to emphasise the importance of mental health.



World Mental Health Day: Themes for the last ten years	
2021	Mental Health in an Unequal World
2020	Move for Mental Health: Let's Invest
2019	Focus on Suicide Prevention
2018	Young People and Mental Health in a Changing World
2017	Mental Health in the Workplace
2016	Psychological First Aid
2015	Dignity in Mental Health
2014	Living a healthy life with Schizophrenia
2013	Mental Health and Older Adults
2012	Depression: A Global Crisis

There is a need for preventive and protective measures with concerted efforts aimed at enhancing the mental health well-being of both children and adults. Teachers and parents, learning institutions, and the community must safeguard children and young people against the ill consequences

of current and future pandemics, including HIV and AIDS, cancer and COVID-19. It is essential that we offer children and young people with hope and faith by frequently talking to them about their lives, school and higher education, work and career. At the same time, we must strive more towards

identifying the various needs of individuals, family and society. This can be done in various ways such as encouraging people to protect themselves and others. This is in order to make health and wellness, and mental health care a reality for all people worldwide.

Mental Health in Contemporary Society

- (1) Mental health issues affect one in four people across the lifespan.
- (2) An estimated 50 -75% of mental health problems develop before 18 years.
- (3) 1 in 10 young people is affected by depression, anxiety or conduct problems. This leads to alcohol and drug abuse, self-injurious behaviours, truancy and suicide, and other deviant tendencies.
- (4) There has been a threefold increase in teenagers reporting self-harm in the last decade. In addition, suicide is one of the highest leading causes of death in the world and the second leading cause of death for young people.
- (5) It is accepted among scholars that there is a high prevalence of anxiety and depression among all countries.



Mental health in traditional societies has had a cultural orientation in that it is embedded in the more religion and traditions of the people. This is the reason why people with mental disturbance are wrongly perceived as 'bewitched' or the condition interpreted as a punishment from the gods for wrongdoing. Thus, it has historically been neglected as far as health is concerned. Additionally, traditional

societies are faced with many challenges, chief among them poverty, uncertain political turmoil, HIV and AIDS, Cancer, Malaria and other diseases. In addition, other health issues seem to have been more prominent, such as infectious diseases, malaria, and maternal and child mortality. This explains the existing inequalities in mental health programmes in developed and developing countries.

Mental health must now take a paradigm shift to ensure improved health and mental health. Three major factors often intensify psychological issues and mental health in traditional societies. (1) First, the stigma associated with mental illness that arises out of the religious-traditional orientation. (2) Second, and arising from (1) above, there is an obvious lack of knowledge about the treatment and extent of mental health. (3) Third and arising from (1) and (2), there is a mistaken belief that mental illnesses cannot be treated. In the end, psychological and mental illnesses join the endless list of acts of the gods rather than the treatment norm.

The significance of mental health, especially arising from the existing inequalities, requires an enhanced understanding of health. Health is now understood as a state of complete physical, social and mental well-being; it is not the absence of disease or infirmity. This is significant because it lays emphasis on wellness, that is, physical,

psychological, mental, spiritual and intellectual wellbeing. Health has three important components. Firstly, healthy living implies the absence of any disease or impairment. Secondly, a healthy person is also able to appropriately or adequately cope with the demands of daily life. Thirdly, the implication is that life has challenges, and therefore

health does not imply the absence of disease, impairment and life challenges. Instead, there is a need for effective strategies to cope with the challenges of everyday living that include the ability to enhance our life skills such as emotional intelligence and resilience.

Mental healthcare access refers to the ease with which individuals can obtain the much needed healthcare. It is defined in terms of the opportunity in which appropriate services are available to meet healthcare needs. This is because if services are available, then an opportunity exists to obtain medical care; conversely, if the opportunity does not exist, then the healthcare services are unavailable. However, mental health services are marked by several barriers such as financial, organisational, social and cultural issues. For example, few hospitals provide for mental health and certainly not in the more rural setting. Besides, the hospitals that have the necessary facilities tend to be highly expensive hence prohibitive. Also, persons with mental health issues are highly stigmatised and discriminated against, especially in more traditional societies. These factors tend to diminish the level of access to mental health services. As a result, inadequate and inaccessible mental healthcare services has exacerbated the existing social-economic disadvantages, stretching the problem even more.

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has had a sporadic effect on people's lives across the World. Both the lockdowns and quarantine have impacted greatly on the general population and also children leading to psychological distress. This is because the restrictions have impact ed negatively on life outcomes for parents and children.

Coronavirus, Lockdown, and Quarantine

Coronavirus has caused great fear, increased uncertainty and anxiety. There are other factors such as the imminent layoffs and joblessness further aggravating the ailing World economy. At a personal level, there is disturbed routine, boredom, withdrawal and isolation. This leads to general low feelings, which in turn leads to reduced interest in activities, frustration and anger, and irritation leading to quarrelling. These will impact mental health as four major themes emerge, that is:

- Negative health outcomes as a result of poor interactions.
- Psychological anxiety and distress symptoms.
- Poor social and emotional responsiveness due to school closure.
- Decreased interest (in studies for children and students, work for adults) leading to feelings of hopelessness.

In behavioural terms, this fear of the unknown is marked by eating disorders (poor appetite or eating too much), sleep disturbances (also lack of sleep or sleeping too much), strained body activities, indigestion and multiple complaints of body aches. This leads to increased frustration and depression.

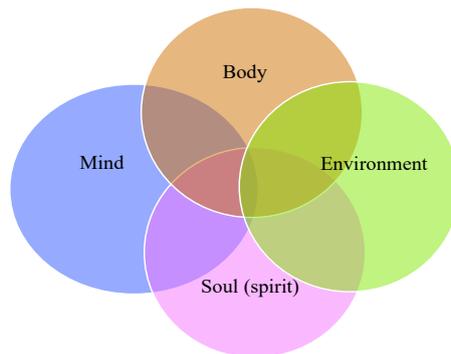


Connectedness with Nature and our Environment: Enhancing our Well-being

There are several ways of improving our lives, including our mental health. Unfortunately, most of these methods are not readily available to a majority of people, and this is partly due to lack of or inadequate health and mental services, as well as the absence of prerequisite information. Another reason is that they are simply unable to devote time to a few activities. Human energy is generated by four things: foods we eat that contain various nutrients which nourish the body (physiologically); inner (intrinsic) motivation, including our thoughts and feelings (the mind, psychological and emotional wellness); the environment, including our relations with others (social and moral perspectives) that enhance our interactions (extrinsic motivation); and, the spiritual acumen (spiritual perspective). This is represented in the interrelatedness between the body, mind, environment, heart and soul.

The interrelatedness between the body, mind and environment is found in their connectedness. Connectedness refers to the way we relate to one another and with nature and this, in turn, becomes our life experience. On one hand, a strong, effective and appropriate connection with nature implies that we feel a close relationship with self, family and others. This is developed in several ways (physical, social, mental (psychological, emotional),

religion (spiritualism) and intellectual) and leads to a greater attachment with self (high self-esteem, optimism), family (sense of belongingness) and other people (acceptability) and our natural surroundings. This enhances our well-being. On the other hand, an inappropriate and thus ineffective connection with self, family and others leads to low self-esteem, regret, pessimism and unacceptability that in turn lead to frustration and depression. This is developed in several ways, such as insecure home or community or abuse (physical or emotional abuse).



Various research have demonstrated that people who are more connected with nature (self, family, community and their natural environment) are usually more appreciative of life, more optimistic, and enjoy happier lives. They in turn, are more appreciative of other people and more likely to report feeling their lives are worthwhile and talk positively about life in general. This is because nature can generate a multitude of

positive emotions, such as calmness, joy and happiness, creativity and innovation, which facilitate greater concentration. Overall, the connectedness with nature is also associated with lower levels of poor mental health since the person is less frustrated and thus has lower depression and anxiety levels.

A major part of this connectedness is the need to live more fulfilling lives. Persons connected with nature are more likely to admire the natural environment and develop a good relationship, such as planting flowers and visiting natural places. This is because they connect with life every day. This brings about a lot of benefits in mental health. There are several ways of improving our connectedness with nature. One of these is by enhancing our mood in several ways, especially in our link with nature. This includes effective interaction with family and friends, colleagues and other acquaintances.

Nature has a very wide definition and includes the sheer warmth from the sun, a walk in the park, planting flowers and keeping a pet. Even watching nature and animal documentaries have been proven to be good for our mental health. This is significant since it is possible to enhance the mental health of many people through the benefits of nature, and this can also be made available to nearly every one of us, no matter our status or where we live.

Over the course of our lives, we experience various life challenges, which if unchecked, can psychologically torment us, leading to mental health problems. Mental health problems adversely affect the thinking, mood, and behaviour. Many factors contribute to mental health problems, including:

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