

Protecting your mental health during Isolation

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to cause stress and worry even in the strongest person. Even though it is imperative to be apprised of COVID-19 containment strategies, the amount of information emanating from social media platforms is overwhelming and at times exaggerated. Some information inflames guilt feelings and despair. Such messages can increase stress and anxiety, hurting individual's mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing.

Emotionally, one may feel overwhelmed, sad, apprehensive, irritable, and alienated. Behaviorally one may experience a functional shift in important areas such as sleep, appetite, energy levels, and change in sex drive. Some individuals may even become accident prone. Others may engage in negative coping (binging, irresponsible sex, excessive consumption of alcohol, and other substances of abuse) as a way of dealing with stress and anxiety associated with COVID-19 pandemic.

The mind may be affected resulting to impaired judgment, inability to make sound decisions, muddled thinking, excessive worrying, and negativity. These may present physically as headaches, malaise, frequent infections, taut muscles, twitches, skin irritation, and breathlessness. Overtime, such unaddressed stress can increase vulnerability to clinical depression, anxiety disorder, ulcers, high blood pressure, type-2 diabetes, atherosclerosis, and arrhythmia.

Our DNA

You may be asking yourself this question. How is it that some people can cope with stress and anxiety induced by COVID-19 scenarios while others cannot? Although stress differences and coping are influenced by our DNA, our attitudes and perceptions are more important. How one views the world or a particular situation can determine whether it causes stress. For example, if you take the attitude that "It's Okey to at stay home. History has shown that this is one of the critical ways to avert spread of infections pandemics and I am happy/obliged/duty bound to be involved in the effort to control COVID-19 spread;," you'll be unlikely to be as stressed as taking the attitude that; "the government is unfair; it should allow us to enjoy freedom of association and movement".

Similarly, people who think that the government has done a good thing to ask us to maintain physical distancing will be less stressed out when they miss out in funeral and wedding functions. However, those who perceive physical distancing as a bad thing; and contend that "I must attend my relative's function" are most likely to feel anxious and stressed. Thus, a positive outlook towards situations and life promotes overall physical and mental wellness while negative thinking and attitudes increases our vulnerability to mental and physical illnesses. So worrying about COVID-19, and how "home stay" will affect your finances, social life, and work will not solve any problem. Instead, it will make you feel bad, loss appetite, lack adequate sleep, reduce creativity and work performance, and you may thus seek relief in harmful lifestyle habits like overeating, smoking, alcohol, and drugs use.

Avoid stress

It is important to learn to accept things that one cannot control. Accept that COVID-19 is real, and it will come to an end. Learn to appreciate the professionally informed efforts the government is putting in place to contain the pandemic. This attitude will help one to cooperate and follow what the government is recommending. Since no one can avoid stress and worry completely, it's important to first recognize signs of impending stress, accept that you are vulnerable and find healthy ways of relaxation and self-care. After acknowledging your need, strengthen yourself with help from others. Reach out to friends, relatives, workmates, or a spiritual mentor. Give them a call, message, or write a mail. Share your feelings and thoughts with someone you trust. Try out a workable routine during “stay home” period to avoid creating time for worrying and ruminating behaviors. If you notice that your stress and anxiety levels are unmanageable, know that it is time to seek help from a professional such as a counselor, clinical psychologist, or a psychiatrist.

During these challenging times, there is value in adopting positive thinking not just for self but also for inspiring others with messages of hope, courage and optimism. This will facilitate mental wellness. While it is vital to acknowledge that COVID-19 situation is real and stressful, it is also important to accept that it is normal to be fearful. However, it is also important to know that prolonged stress and excessive worry can impact a person's health negatively manifesting with symptoms that affect the body, mind, emotions, and behavior.

With the right attitude one will be mentally prepared. One may even view physical isolation as an opportunity to grow, and to engage in activities one was not previously able to in the hustle and bustle of life before COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Lucy Njiru Muriuki is a practicing Clinical Psychologist and Lecturer at Amref International University.

