

WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY

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MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID: October 10th is a day set aside by World Health Organization to mark the World Mental Health Day. It is a special day for global mental health education, awareness and advocacy. It was first celebrated in 1992 at the initiative of the World Federation for Mental Health. The World Federation for Mental Health has declared “Psychological First Aid” as the theme for 2016 World Mental Health Day. In this article we shall examine some of the symptoms and forms of mental health problem. In addition to Psychological First Aid we shall highlight other forms of first aid such as Physical first aid and essentially Spiritual first aid.

Mental Disorder, also known as mental illness refers to sickness of one’s mind or psyche. Mental illness affects one’s mood, one’s thinking and one’s behavior. A mentally disordered person is someone with a sick mind. When the human mind is unhealthy, one is likely to suffer depression, melancholy, anxiety disorder, and schizophrenia and addictive behaviors. The Kin Foundation declares that “Mental Disorder are common in the United States and internationally. An estimated 26.2 percent of Americans or about one in four adults suffer from diagnosable mental disorder in a given year.

Here in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, the statistics of mental disorder is on the increase. Professor Oye Guruje, a psychiatrist with University of Ibadan, called on the government to give priority attention to the management of mental disorder because its burden outweighed that of HIV. “mental illness”, he noted, “is one of the major contributors to disease burden globally; it is the sixth largest burden worldwide and this is much more burdensome than HIV.” According to him, “One out of seven persons have serious mental illnesses, while one in four persons have some form of mental disorder (*Increased Rate of Mental Disorder among Nigerians worries Experts*, Premium Times, October 25, 2015).

Reflecting on the hopeless situation of things in Nigeria, the Catholic Bishop conference went as far as composing a prayer which they titled: “Prayer for Nigeria in Distress.” Distress is an acute mental sickness. Psychological distress is a term that describes unpleasant feelings or emotional discomfort which usually affects one’s level of functioning. The prayer for Nigeria in Distress is an indirect way of acknowledging that Nigerians are under distress. Nigeria as a country cannot be in distress without the Nigerians that make up the country. If majority of Nigerians are in distress it therefore means that psychologically, emotionally and even spiritually, something is wrong somewhere – Nigeria is sick!

So many factors are responsible mental disorder in Nigeria. For instance, unemployment has frustrated so many young people. High cost of living has driven so many Nigerians into depression. Couple with the problem of insecurity, insurgencies, and even terrorism. So many Nigerians are feeling deeply unsecured due to kidnapping, constant bomb blasts, robbery attacks and even the so-called economic recession. These and many other factors are causing mental discomfort, which can easily lead to complete mental disorder.

There are so many forms and symptoms of mental disorder. We have the Emotional and Psychological Symptom, Physical symptoms, and even Spiritual Symptom. Emotional / Psychological Symptoms includes depression, changes in mood of talking and looking, phobia / unnecessary fear, erratic thinking, impulsive actions, anxiety, and restlessness.

Physical Symptoms of Mental Disorder can cause weight loss, loss of appetite (some may even result to eating disorder - excessive eating and drinking, especially alcohol), feeling of fatigue, hotness of body, deep desire to go naked, and loss of libido, malnutrition, and many others. Some may even end up attacking people with destruction of properties.

Spiritual Symptoms of Mental Disorder: Most of the Mental disorder are cursed by spiritual factors. The most common symptom is hearing of strange voices, seeing invisible figures, frightening Nightmares, fear of spiritual objects such as cross, holy water, and anointing oil. The most common spiritual symptom of mental disorder is demoniac possession.

A typical example of a spiritual mental disorder is the case of the mad man who came from the tombs to meet Jesus. The Bible describes him as a violent mad man, "For his hands and feet had often been bound with chains and shackles, but he had torn the chains apart and broken the shackles in pieces. No one was strong enough to subdue him." (Mark 5:3-4) When he came to Jesus he cried out with a loud voice, "Leave me alone, Jesus, Son of the Most High God! I implore you by God – do not torment me!" Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" And he said, "My name is Legion, for we are many." Without apply drugs or force Jesus delivered the man with a prayerful command.

As noted, Psychological First Aid and the support people can provide to those in distress is the theme chosen for 2016 World Health Day. First aid is the assistance given to any person suffering a sudden illness or injury, in view of preventing the condition from getting worse. It includes initial intervention in a serious condition prior to professional medical help being available.

Psychological first aid is an extension of the concept of first aid to cover mental health. It is a technique designed to reduce the occurrence of post-traumatic stress disorder. It was developed by the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (NC-PTSD), a section of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, in 2006.

Psychological First Aid is meant to protect patients from further harm. It gives the patient the opportunity to talk without pressure. Help givers must be disposed to listen to patients attentively and empathetically. The patient, especially those who are fed up with life and are prone to suicide must be given adequate time and hope. They actually need those who can understand them and relate with them the way they are and gradually bring them to the normal position of reasoning. Violent and harsh treatment should be reduced, and if possible avoided completely. After this initial first aid, it is always advisable to refer the patient to a place where he or she could get a professional treatment and attention.

Psychological First Aid is also an evidence-informed approach for assisting children, adolescents, adults, and families in the aftermath of disaster and terrorism. Here in Nigeria, so many people with mental illness need psychological first aid but those who need it urgently are the internally displaced persons, especially in the North-East; those in the Niger Delta areas where so many people have lost their lives on bomb blasts. So many people are traumatized. We should not just wait for them to break down completely. They need psychological First Aid – the earlier the better!

Psychological First Aid is not the only remedy to Mental Disorder. Pope Francis advocates for Integral human development. On August 30, 2016 the Holy Father announced a new mega-dicastery merging the Vatican offices for Justice and Peace, Migrants, charity and healthcare, dedicated to “Promoting Integral Human Development.” This new office will take effect from January 1, 2017. It will be headed by Cardinal Peter Turkson, the president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

This dicastery, says the Holy Father, will be competent “particularly in issues regarding migrants, those in need, the sick, the excluded and marginalized, the imprisoned and the unemployed, as well as victims of armed conflict, natural disasters, and all forms of slavery and torture.” In a nutshell, they will take care of people who are affected psychologically due to war, natural disaster, unemployment, etc. With this, there is hope for our brethren who are suffering from Mental disorder.

Apart from the spiritual and psychological first aid there is also a physical first aid for those who are experiencing mental disorder. For instance, those who are suffering from schizophrenia or psychotic depression can be treated with Antipsychotics olanzapine or clozapine; those suffering from bipolar disorder and convulsion disorder can be treated with mood stabilizers such as lithium tablets and anticonvulsants like Depakote. Antidepressants such as paxil, Zoloft Prozac and SSRIs can be used to treat depression. These drugs are best when prescribed by medical professionals. The good news is that there is hope for those suffering from mental disorder!

We established a mental Rehabilitation Centre here at Maryland Egoro Amede Ekpoma, Edo State of Nigeria. God has used this centre to deliver so many people, especially young Nigerians from Mental disorder. One thing that is so special about this centre is that we approach the problem of mental disorder from a holistic human perspective. We are applying what the Holy Father Pope Francis describes as Integral Human development. We are not just treating our patients with drugs; we do a lot of counseling, and even deliverance because about 70% of those who are mentally sick are those who are possessed. The moment they are delivered from those demons they will simply become calm.

I wish all those who are taking care of people with mental illness, especially the World Federation for Mental Health, a very Happy World Mental Health Day! I also use this medium to appeal to our government and even religious leaders to pay attention to person with mental disorder. Indeed, they are human beings like us and they deserve the care and love of all.

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