



MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN THE COVID-19 ERA AMONG LGBT PEOPLE IN NIGERIA



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases continue to rise globally. It is reported to be over 3.5 million with the number of death over 250,000 and over 1.2 million have recovered ([WHO Situation Report 106 on COVID-19](#), 5th May, 2020). The lock down orders and procedures being put in place, has an adverse effect on the mental health of vulnerable groups in the society most especially the LGBT communities in Nigeria and across the world.



However, adequate provisions have not been put in place to cater to the specific needs of LGBT people as a vulnerable group in Nigeria, neither is there a suitable socio-economic or legal environment created to ensure the mental wellbeing of LGBT people in Nigeria. Lack of research, funding, personnel and political will to put in proper measures are some of the problems affecting the proper access to good health and wellness for LGBT people in Nigeria.

We have therefore recommended that there be an abolishment of the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act which has hindered access to health to LGBT people and also a review of the legislation on mental health to include the special needs of LGBT people in order for Nigeria to achieve its sustainable development goals without leaving anyone out as required under international human rights standards.

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization, ^[1] “Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.” WHO further stresses that, it is more than just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities as health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.



The American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology defines mental health as a “state of mind characterized by emotional well-being, good behavioural adjustment, relative freedom from anxiety and disabling symptoms, and a capacity to establish constructive relationships and cope with the ordinary demands and stresses of life.” ^[2]

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood to adolescence through adulthood as it is one of the important aspect of a person’s holistic health and wellbeing (intellectual, social, emotional, mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing. It encompasses all aspect of life as the lack of one can affect all the others.

STATISTICAL REPRESENTATION OF MENTAL HEALTH IN NIGERIA



3 in every 10 Nigerians are believed to suffer from one mental disorder or the other.

Ministry of Health, 2018

In Nigeria, it is estimated that 20-30% of the entire population are believed to suffer from one mental disorder or the other. ^[3] For a country like Nigeria with a population of over 200 million, it is an alarming number. More alarming is the fact that little attention is paid to mental health issues in Nigeria as the level of awareness of the Nigerian public on mental health issues is poor making the misconceptions regarding mental health continue to flourish. ^[4]

In its 2017 World Health Day Data, the World Health Organization, revealed that about 7 million Nigerians suffer from one of the most ignored and misunderstood form of mental disorder in the country which is depression. ^[5]

MENTAL HEALTH AND LGBT PEOPLE IN NIGERIA

The criminalization of same sex relations in Nigeria, coupled with the lack of social acceptance and negative narratives about LGBT people have been the major cause of violence and discrimination

¹ World Health Organisation, “Mental Health: Strengthening our Response”. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>

² APA Dictionary of Psychology, “Mental Health” <https://dictionary.apa.org/mental-health>

³ Ebuka Onyeji, “Three in Ten Nigerians suffer from Mental Disorders -Officials” *Premium Times* (November 15, 2018) <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/health/health-news/295794-three-in-ten-nigerians-suffer-from-mental-disorders-official.html>

⁴ Dauda Eneyamire Suleiman, (2017) “Mental health disorders in Nigeria: A highly neglected disease” *Annals of Nigerian Medicine* (Wolters Kluwer – Medknow)

⁵ note (3)

against LGBT people in Nigeria. [6] These factors have put on a huge strain on LGBT people and have increased the likelihood of mental health problems and low life-satisfaction among LGBT people relative to heterosexual individuals.

Not much research has been done on the mental health of LGBT people in Nigeria but a few researches bothering on the coping mechanism of LGBT people to stress, depression and anxiety have been very instrumental to aiding people understanding how important mental health is to LGBT people in Nigeria.

According to a research carried out by the Bisi Alimi Foundation on the effect of homo/bi/transphobia on LGBT people in Nigeria, [7] mental health issues among LGBT people in Nigeria is prevalent and is mostly caused by **stigma, family rejection, community exclusion and isolation** among others. It further stated that,

“Global research on mental health for LGBT people suggests higher levels of anxiety, depression, or other mental illnesses than in straight populations. Lesbian, bisexual and Transgender people in particular have been noted to have poor mental health and higher rates of suicide and self-harm.” [8] It however decried the fact that the provision and availability of mental health services was really low and even the ones available were not open and professional enough when it came to rendering services to LGBT people.



SOME ROOT TRIGGERS OF MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS



Every human being has some risk of developing a mental health disorder regardless of age, sex, income, ethnicity or sexual orientation although due to some natural or environmental factors, some are at a higher risk than others. Poor mental health could result from rapid social change, violence, socio-economic pressures, stressful work conditions, sexual orientation or gender discrimination, social exclusion, unhealthy lifestyle, physical ill-health and human rights violations.

⁶ Olakunle Oginni, “How do Nigerian Gay and Bisexual Men cope? This is what they told us” *The Conversation* (May 19, 2019) <https://theconversation.com/how-do-nigerian-gay-and-bisexual-men-cope-this-is-what-they-told-us-117121>
⁷ Bisi Alimi Foundation, (2017) “Not dancing to their music”: The Effects of Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia on the lives of LGBT people in Nigeria. Pp. 11-14 <https://www.bisialimifoundation.org/site/bisialimifoundation/assets/pdf/not-dancing-to-their-music-main-copy.pdf>
⁸ Ibid, page 9

TYPES OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND SIGNS TO WATCH OUT FOR

There are more than 200 classified forms of mental illnesses. Some of the more common disorders are depression, bipolar disorder, dementia, schizophrenia and anxiety disorders.



Some of the signs to watch out for in evaluating your mental health are; Feeling anxious or worried, feeling depressed or unhappy, unusual emotional outbursts, sleep

problems, weight or appetite changes, quiet and being withdrawn, substance abuse, feeling guilty or worthless, changes in behaviour or feelings, pulling away from people and usual activities, having low or no energy, feeling numb or like nothing matters, feeling helpless or hopeless, hearing voices or believing things that are not true, thinking of suicide or harming yourself or others, inability to perform daily tasks like getting to work or school.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MENTAL HEALTH OF LGBT PEOPLE

The World Health Organization has raised a lot of concern about the response to the psychological and mental health of people in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.^[9] This concern is especially targeted towards the most vulnerable population in the society.

The main psychological impact of the pandemic to date is the elevated rates of stress or anxiety especially at the inception when the news of the status of the virus infection was raised to that of a global pandemic. However, as new measures and impacts are introduced such as lockdown measures, isolation and quarantine; which has had a huge effect on many people's usual activities, routines or livelihoods; the levels of loneliness, depression, harmful alcohol and drug use, and self-harm or suicidal behaviour are also expected to rise.

Vulnerable persons such as LGBT people who before the pandemic were prone to mental health issues, will find it more difficult in a time like this to cope mentally. In our previous paper on the effect of COVID-19 on LGBT people in Nigeria,^[10] we itemised some triggering factors that could affect LGBT people psychologically and could lead to negative coping mechanisms such as alcohol/substance abuse, self-harm and in extreme cases, suicide.

One of such triggering factors is the lockdown. Most LGBT people are trapped indoors with their abusers who could be intimate partners or family members. Also, access to healthcare for LGBT people has been hampered.

Another factor is that owing to the increase in the use of the internet, there is a significant rise in cases of cyberviolence and bullying against LGBT people.

Lastly, the pandemic has created economic burden on LGBT people who are vulnerable due to family rejection and therefore cannot fend for themselves.

⁹ WHO note (1)

¹⁰ Bisi Alimi Foundation, (2020), "COVID-19 and Its Effect on LGBT People in Nigeria" https://www.bisialimifoundation.org/site/bisialimifoundation/assets/pdf/baf_policy_document.pdf

COPING MECHANISMS FOR MENTAL HEALTH

The first step to coping with your mental health in the face of adversity is to **KNOW ONE'S SELF** by regularly checking in yourself. Regular check in will help you to know how best to evaluate your mental health and seek mental health support when necessary.

It is important to note that the best form of treatment or coping mechanism for mental health should be done based on instructions from a professional mental health practitioner. When feeling any of the signs or symptoms of mental health disorder listed above, consult a therapist or a psychologist.



However, there are few self-help coping mechanisms that can help keep one mentally healthy especially in this period of the COVID-19 pandemic. You must not be feeling any of the symptoms to practice these mechanisms. They include;

- Mindfulness and relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga and regular deep breathing exercises.
- Journaling
- Dancing
- Listening to music; especially music that will uplift your spirit and make you happy. Nature music can be used at night in case of insomnia.
- Sleep and rest
- Wholehearted connection with supportive networks including family and friends.
- Creativity like composing poems or songs, painting or whatever you love doing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The major problems relating to mental health in Nigeria are; the obvious low priority accorded to mental health in terms of policy, research, funding and personnel. Another problem is the inadequacy of the legal framework on mental health to provide a standard for quality mental healthcare in Nigeria. ^[11]

In this era of the COVID-19 pandemic and also post COVID-19, it is therefore very important for the government and organizations to promote and support actions and programmes that would improve the mental health of LGBT people especially in creating a suitable environment that supports mental wellness. These include;

- In creating a suitable environment, it is important to abolish discriminatory laws and policies like the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act and also put in place anti-discriminatory laws and campaigns that will safeguard the rights of people and ensure the unhindered access to quality healthcare for all.
- A complete review of the current legislation on Mental Health to include the special needs of LGBT persons, the principles of non-discrimination and confidentiality and incorporation

¹¹ Adegboyega O. Ogunlesi and Adegboyega Ogunwale (2012), Mental Health Legislation in Nigeria: Current Learnings and Future Yearnings *International Psychiatry* Vol 9 No 3 pp 62-64
file:///C:/Users/WINDOW/Downloads/Mental_health_legislation_in_Nigeria_current_leani.pdf

of the WHO recommendations for acceptable mental health policy and effective mental health legislation. ^[12]

- The immediate inclusion of LGBT people as a group for special emphasis under the National Policy for Mental Health Service Delivery seeing their vulnerability to mental health issues in Nigeria.
- An inclusion of LGBT specific programmes in the Sustainable Development Goals programmes as it relates to the holistic wellbeing of persons (leaving no one behind) as captured under Goal 3 on Good Health and Wellbeing. This will entail the inclusion of mental health programmes in the HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment programmes for Key Populations in Nigeria.
- Funding and carrying out of quality and evidence-based research on the mental health of LGBT people in Nigeria.
- Provision of quality mental health facilities to assist vulnerable people especially LGBT people and those who have been under quarantine due to having the virus as they could be victims of stigmatization.
- Proper funding for mental health specific programmes for LGBT people and sensitization on mental health and coping mechanisms for mental wellness.
- In this period of social distancing and isolation, virtual meditation sessions and online therapy sessions can be organized to aid people cope.
- Training of mental health professionals on diversity, inclusion and non-discrimination in service delivery.

AVAILABLE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR LGBT PEOPLE IN NIGERIA

- There are organizations that offer psychosocial services and mental health support such as TIERS, INCREASE and so on. Below are some of the contacts one can reach out to for mental health support.
TIERS Lagos: Email therapy@initiative4equality.org or whatsapp +2348115984370
INCREASE Minna: Email increse2001@yahoo.co.uk or darlyndotty@gmail.com or call +2348034500714
THEDI, Makurdi: Email esandtcservices@gmail.com or call any of the numbers, +234 814 429 6824, +234 809 035 9382
- The Bisi Alimi Foundation also currently has an online meditation session which holds every morning in this COVID-19 era. If interested to join, email info@bisialimifoundation.org

For any information you would like to get about the Bisi Alimi Foundation, visit our website at www.bisialimifoundation.org

For any questions, comments or inquiries, you can email us at info@bisialimifoundation.org or contact Sesugh Ivande at sesugh.ivande@bisialimifoundation.org

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¹² World Health Organisation (WHO) (2003), "Mental health legislation and human rights" https://www.who.int/mental_health/policy/services/7_legislation%20HR_WEB_07.pdf