Counselling a People Ambushed in Fear: A Contemporary Challenge

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Abstract

The epidemic of crises in various forms ravaging our dear nation Nigeria has plunged a good number of her citizens into a life of fear. Most people feel threatened by one thing or the other and so live with the fear of being harmed everyday of their lives. This opinion paper X-ray the reality of fear in our contemporary society against the counselling responsibility of the Counsellor. Some useful counselling techniques were identified with which counsellors could support people to manage their fears. ThePaper recommends The CBT as a helpful tool for the Counsellor.

Introduction

Everyone fears something right from when we were children until we grow old, we all have fears and even the strongest or greatest of men have been filled with fear at least once in their life. Fear is a common human emotion that is deeply wired in our subconscious and conscious mind. While it is natural for us to fear it doesn't mean that fear should control our lives since uncontrolled fear can lead to irrational thinking, behaviors, and worst, spiritual paralysis and death. Due to the current situation of daily crises in our beloved country Nigeria, it seems that the pangs of fear have gripped us stronger than ever irrespective of our age, gender, societal status and the likes. On this backdrop, this paper shall discuss the reality of fear in our contemporary Nigeria, highlighting what fear is, how Nigerians have been gripped by fear and how we can confront and overcome it.

The concept of fear

Burton (2011) defines fear as one of the seven universal emotions experienced by everyone around the world. Fear arises with the threat of harm, physical, emotional, or psychological, real or imagined. While traditionally considered a "negative" emotion, fear actually serves an important role in keeping us safe as it mobilizes us to cope with potential danger. Fear can sometimes take place immediately following surprise and often oscillates with the experience of anger. The universal trigger for fear is the threat of harm, real or imagined. This threat can be for our physical, emotional or psychological well-being. There are certain things that trigger fear in most of us, like darkness or loss of visibility of surroundings, Heights and flying, Social interaction and/or rejection, Snakes, rodents, spiders and other animals, Death etc.

The universal function of fear is to avoid or reduce harm. Depending on what we have learned in the past about what can protect us in dangerous situations, we are capable of doing many things we wouldn't typically be able, or willing, to do in order to stop the threat. According to Gray (1987), the immediate threat of harm focuses our attention, mobilizing us to cope with the danger. In this way, fear can actually save our lives by forcing us to react without having to think about it (e.g., jumping out of the way of a car coming at us). Lewis and Haviland-Jones (1999) on the other hand avers that fear is a natural, powerful, and primitive human emotion. It involves a universal biochemical response as well as a high individual emotional response. Fear alerts us to the presence of danger or the threat of harm, whether that danger is physical or psychological. Sometimes fear stems from real threats, but it can also originate from imagined dangers. Fear can also be a symptom of some mental health conditions including panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, phobias, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Ohman (2000) specifically asserts that, fear is a subconscious response induced by a perceived threat, which causes a change in our behavior. While it is a negative emotion, it is also a limiting belief that can be uncomfortable and crippling. He defines two classes of fear – "Pathological Fear", which is also known as phobia and the "Everyday Fear" that stops us. Psychologists have

agreed that the issue of being afraid is a product of the mind. There is no room for fear when we respond to that which is present and not imagine something that does not exist since once the limiting belief is gone there is nothing you cannot achieve. Overcoming fear opens a person up to limitless opportunities and reveals different things about the individual that he or she can do and accomplish. Most fears people experience has to do with negative and contemplative thoughts, which keeps running through the subconscious.

Living with fear can be uncomfortable and crippling. But being fearless does not mean eliminating fear. It involves knowing how to leverage fear. A neuropsychologist, Theo Tsaousides (2015), presents seven things one need to know about fear.

1. Fear is Healthy

Fear is hardwired in your brain, and for good reason. Contrary to what many people think, the feeling of fear is neither abnormal nor a sign of weakness. The capacity to be afraid is part of normal brain function. In fact, a lack of fear may be a sign of serious brain damage.

2. Fear Comes in Many Shades

Fear is an inherently unpleasant experience that can range from anticipating the results of a medical checkup, to hearing news of a deadly terrorist attack. Horrifying events can leave a permanent mark on your subconscious, which may require professional help.

3. Fear is not as Automatic as You Think

Fear is part instinct, part learned, part taught. Some fears are instinctive: Pain, for example, causes fear because of its implications for survival. Other fears are learned: We learn to be afraid of certain people, places, or situations because of negative associations and past experiences. A near-drowning incident, for example, may cause fear each time you get close to a body of water. Other fears are taught: Cultural norms often dictate whether something should be feared or not. Think, for example, about how certain social groups are feared and persecuted because of a societally-created impression that they are dangerous.

4. You Don’t Need to be in Danger to be Scared.

Fear is also partly imagined, and so it can arise in the absence of something scary. In fact, because our brains are so efficient, we begin to fear a range of stimuli that are not scary (conditioned fear) or not even present (anticipatory anxiety). We get scared because of what we imagine could happen. Thislow-grade, objectless fear can turn into chronic anxiety about nothing specific, and become debilitating.

5. The More Scared You Feel, The Scarier Things Will Seem

Through a process called ‘potentiation’, your fear response is amplified if you are already in a state of fear. When you are primed for fear, even harmless events seem scary. For example, by watching a horror movie, a tickle on your neck will startle you and make you jump in terror.

6. Fear Dictates the Actions You Take

Actions motivated by fear fall into four types—freeze, fight, flight, or fright. Freeze means you stop what you are doing and focus on the fearful stimulus to decide what to do next (e.g., you read a letter that your company will be laying off people). Next, you choose either fight or flight. You decide whether to deal with the threat directly (tell your boss why you shouldn’t be laid off) or work around it (start looking for another job). When the fear is overwhelming, you experience fright: You neither fight nor flee; in fact, you do nothing but obsess about the layoff, complain, but you take no action.

7. The More Real the Threat, the More Heroic Your Actions

We react differently to real and imagined threats. Imagined threats cause paralysis. Being scared about all the bad things that may or may not happen in the future makes you worry a lot but take little action. You are stuck in a state of fear, overwhelmed but not knowing what to do. Real threats, on the other hand, cause frenzy. When the threat is imminent and identifiable, you jump to action immediately and without flinching. This is why people are much more likely to change their eating habits after a serious health scare (e.g., a heart attack) than after just reading statistics

about the deleterious effect of a diet based on fried foods. If you want to mobilize your troops, you have to put yourself in danger.

The reality of fear in our contemporary Nigeria

It is an unfortunate reality as well as common knowledge that, in spite of its resources, Nigeria is still as underdeveloped and unfortunate as it is. Hansen (2020) reports that, former president and would-be elder statesman Olusegun Obasanjo on October 1, 2020, the day Nigeria marked 60 years of independence from colonial rule, claimed that Nigeria is fast drifting toward a failed and badly divided state. Of course, Obasanjo's statement is self-serving. The political class refuses to accept any responsibility for six decades of venal governance and in blaming President Muhammadu Buhari, Obasanjo conveniently ignores his own eight years as president, during which civilians inherited the state apparatus from their military predecessors and insistently retained the same corrupt, abusive system of governance under the new, allegedly democratic dispensation.

Often it was simply a matter of changing from officer's uniform to mufti; old Nigerian wine in new bottles. Nevertheless, there is more than a little truth to Obasanjo's contention regarding looming state failure and this failure which is visible in almost if not all spheres of the nation are the fans that blow the embers of fear into flame. While the northeast insurrection led by the dreadful Boko Haram groups is obviously the most prominent, the post-colonial Nigerian state is arguably unravelling in all parts of the country: shilla boys, secessionists, bandits, highwaymen, vigilantes, kidnappers, jihadists, bank robbers, terrorists and unknown gunmen, all presided over by a rent seeking political class of parasites and predators varociously looting the public weal and abusing their trust. Safe behind their high walls and protected by the security forces, they remain oblivious to the lived experience of the vast majority of Nigerians who eat fear for breakfast and insecurity for lunch and supper.

Fear dominates the average Nigerian's life and on this note, Ibrahim (2021) recently cry out that the climate of fear in Nigeria today is palpable. We are afraid of the insurgents, of the security forces, of the Civilian JTF and the vigilante groups that we ourselves set up. We live in terror

because each week, our president assures us that the situation would improve, but it only gets worse. If you are rich, you hire your own. If you are poor, you simply take your chances. Most are poor. Unfortunate as this assertion may sound, it is the reality of contemporary Nigeria and this has led many people to ask. How did we get here? Below are some areas which have fueled the fire of fear in contemporary Nigeria.

1. **The Trouble with Law Enforcement**

This would not have surprised Frantz Fanon, French West Indian psychiatrist and political philosopher, who while observing the political class then coming to power in Africa, presciently predicted the consequences. (Fanon, 1963) The mode of governance Fanon saw emerging six decades ago is also responsible for virtually all of the conditions mentioned above by Obasanjo and Ibrahim. The Nigeria Police Force has been identified as the single most corrupt government agency. There is an almost two-thirds probability that in any single interaction with the police, the citizen will be required to pay a bribe. According to the ICRC Amnesty International study (2016), the Police Force functions for the most part as a criminal organization itself. Torture and extortion are part of its modus operandi. Allegedly, the Police regularly kidnap or as they say "detain" young people off the streets for no crime just to demand a bribe which they term as "bail". Ironically, there is a sign in the police station which says "Bail is Free". Hansen (2020) corroborates this Amnesty report as he said he himself has paid the bail for three young people in the past eight months. There is no arrest record, no trial date and no receipt for this so-called bail. It disappears into the pockets of the recipients who allegedly share a cut with their superiors.

The Nigerian Army is a little better when it comes to respect for human rights but even at that, abuses occur constantly and everywhere, including summary executions. A Nigerian army captain once told someone who reminded him that Nigeria was obliged by treaty to adhere to international human rights law, "In the bush, I'm the law." (Hansen, 2020). The normal function of an army is to protect a nation from external aggression but this is not so in Nigeria. The army is deployed, not simply stationed, in 32 of the country's 36 states. The primary duty of the Nigerian Army is to provide what elsewhere would be "police" functions; keeping public order,

protecting property. Primarily this defense is of the governing kleptocracy and as such, human rights exist primarily for those who can afford to pay for them.

2. Insurgency and Insecurity

People are constantly living in fear because, Nigeria may not be the most poorly governed state on the planet but is definitely a contender. Mohammed (2014) remarks that fear and anxiety are emotions that a teenager, a blind man and two brothers in Nigeria had in common after outbreaks of violence forced them to flee so quickly, they lost track of their family. Thirteen-year-old Abba was playing with friends when volleys of gunfire sent the town of Mubi into panic one afternoon. Abba ran into nearby mountains. Now separated from his family, the teen travelled nearly 200 kilometers north, mostly on foot, to the city of Maiduguri. Months passed as he settled into the routine of life in a camp for displaced people. Violence forced two brothers, Mohammed, 17, and Sadiq, 15, to flee twice. Their family was first pushed out of their home town of Gwoza. They resettled in Mubi, but the swift onset of violence there forced a fast flight. Mohammadu, a 66-year-old blind man was displaced multiple times. Travel was difficult. Fleeing villagers once left him behind, abandoning him on the road until some women helped him find his way. (Mohammed, 2014.). These are not just stories but realities that are relatable to millions of Nigerians. Schools have been attacked, people have been kidnapped, killed or rendered homeless and poor.

Figures released by the International Crisis Group (2020) indicate that more than 40,000 people have been killed by the Boko Haram alone since the insurgency began. Other crises and acts of violence have displaced more than half a million inhabitants, ravaged the economy of an already impoverished nation and put stress on relations between Muslims and Christians. Education has been singled out for violent attacks with lethal regularity since early 2012. No less than 20 schools have been burnt. According to Mohammed (2014) these burnings, which started as revenge for the military's assault on Islamic schools at Maiduguri in January 2012, have since escalated and become a war strategy of Boko Haram. The group ascribes the rot in governance, corruption, conspicuous consumption of the ruling class as well as their exclusion and marginality in contemporary Nigerian society to western education and the secular system it

gave rise to. The educated elites, especially in northern Nigeria, have not been good role models in the eyes of their uneducated compatriots. This is because they are living examples of corruption, conspicuous consumption and oppression of their unlettered compatriots and co-religionists.

Furthermore, Dunn (2018) avers that after Boko Haram insurgents were driven out of urban Maiduguri in June 2013, with help of the youth vigilante group dubbed the civilian JTF, they declared inhabitants of these cities as enemies. The attack on schools and unarmed civilians is a new and dangerous phase of the insurgency which has left a cloud of fear over the nation. These attacks have forced the affected state governments to close down schools and colleges for prolonged periods. This is in an area that is reckoned to be educationally poor-performing even by Nigerian standards. This brings to the fore the vulnerability of all citizens and exposes the inability of the state to effectively counter the insurgency, despite the stupendous amount of money and manpower directed at the efforts.

The escalation of this insurgency caught the security agencies unprepared. Attempts to quell the insurgency have been uncoordinated, exacerbated by bitter rivalry between the different armed services and agencies. On top of this, several incidences of extra-judicial killings, detention without trial, torture, burning of villages, looting and rape of women have all inflamed rather than contained the violence.

3. Lack of Political Will

The situation in the northeast is very complex. The most important ingredients for resolution of the emergency are political will on the side of the government currently in short supply. The government must be willing to address the underlying grievances, open channels for dialogue with sect members that are open to it, and vigorously follow up on a new strategy of soft options such as infrastructure and education investment. The International Crisis group (2020) reports that insurgency has set back education in an area with some of the world's worst levels of education and human development. For many children in these communities, education remains their surest way out of poverty and destitution. The fear of Boko Haram and other insurgents has

forced many parents to withdraw their children from schools, and this can only add to an already explosive mix of the large pool of uneducated and unemployed youth and debilitating poverty. The people are scared and constantly living in fear because those at the top do not have any will or an organized plan to rescue the situation. Citizens are constantly living under fear for their lives, their jobs, their means of survival and all what not while the political elite in their usual myopic ways are eating up the treasury at the expense of the populace. Why shouldn't we be scared when those who we elected to look after us do not care if we perish?

Counseling as aHelping Tool

Living in the geographical enclave called Nigeria these days obviously exposes the individual to fear arising from one form of threat or the other, physical, emotional or psychological, real or imagined. This challenge to contemporary living calls for some professional assistance. People need to be equipped to face the challenge of fear posed by the current situation in our country. This however, requires the service of someone with the adequate knowledge and skills. Here the counsellor comes in. Biswalo (1996), defines counselling as a process of helping an individual to accept and to use information and advice so that he or she can either solve his or her present problem or cope with it successfully. Giving the fact that Nigerians are living in an environment infested with all kinds of fear, counselling becomes an essential tool to enable people cope. Kolo (2015), explains that counselling is a help that assist the client to explore him and the situation. Exploring is the work of the client to do but how to do it is the responsibility of the counsellor. The exploration is to help the individual to understand himself as a person with strength and weakness, and pursue actions, behaviours and goals that he or she has competitive advantage. Counselling a people ambushed by fear could assist them to gain clearer understanding of both themselves and the situation and then try out appropriate actions. Fear can make it difficult for people to perform their day to day tasks. But counselling provides professional assistance to deal with this. It can help people process the feelings of fear that affects the quality of their lives. Therapy can support people in managing fear by helping them to understand what is causing their fear, put fear into perspective and set realistic expectations for the future. The present situation in our country where people are ambush by fear require the services of professional

counsellors. The government should therefore look into ways of making the services of counsellors available to her citizens. Individuals also should employ the services of counsellors in their times of difficulties.

USEFUL COUNSELLING TECHNIQUE AT A TIME LIKE THIS

Many counselling techniques can be used to help people overcome fear. Which technique is used may depend on what is causing a person's fear. Fear brought on by a phobia, fear caused by anxiety, fear brought on by a specific event, and fear with no known cause may require different techniques. In a situation as in Nigeria's Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), can be used to help people to manage fear.

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

This is a type of psychotherapy that helps one become aware of inaccurate or negative thinking, so that one can view challenging situations more clearly and respond to them more effectively. It focuses in helping patients to see how their thoughts are impacting their behaviour. According to Hofmann, Asnaani, Vonk, Sawyer, and Fang, (2012),cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a type of psychotherapeutic treatment that helps people learn how to identify and change destructive or disturbing thought patterns that have a negative influence on behavior and emotions. CBT therefore, aims to rid persons of overpowering negative thoughts that leads to certain behaviour. It focuses on providing one with tools to solve one's current problems. Cassaday (2020) holds that CBT is a type of therapy where a psychotherapist or therapist uses a structured process to help their clients quickly become aware of negative or inaccurate thinking patterns so they can better cope and respond to them in a more effective manner. This is achieved through various techniques.

CBT Techniques

Counsellors can leverage on their professional techniques to assist individuals to get rid of the over-powering negative thoughts that leads to fear. The cognitive behavioural therapy offers

such techniques. Ann (2019) gave nine CBT techniques for better mental health. These can be helpful for this work.

1**. Cognitive Restructuring or Reframing**

This involves taking a hard look at negative thought patterns. Perhaps you tend to over-generalize, assume the worst will happen, or place far too much importance on minor details. Thinking this way can affect what you do and it can even become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Counsellors can ask about individual‘s thought process in certain situations so that such individual can identify negative patterns. Once one is aware of them, one can learn how to reframe those thoughts so that they are more positive and productive.

2. **Guided Discovery**

In guided discovery, the counsellors will acquaint themselves with the client’s viewpoint. Then they will ask questions designed to challenge the client’s beliefs and broaden their thinking. This will help them learn to see things from other perspectives, especially those that one may not have considered before. This can help the individual choose a more helpful path.

3. **Exposure Therapy**

Exposure therapy can be used to confront fears and phobias. The counsellor will slowly expose you to the things that provoke fear or anxiety, while providing guidance on how to cope with them in the moment. This can be done in small increments. Eventually, exposure can make one feel less vulnerable and more confident in one’s coping abilities.

4. **Journaling and Thought Records**

Writing down one’s thoughts is a way of getting in touch with one’s thoughts. The counsellor may ask the individual to list negative thoughts that occurred to him or her between sessions, as well as positive thoughts. So that one can choose the positive instead. Another writing exercise is to keep track of the new thoughts and new behaviours one put into practice since the last session. Putting it in writing can help one see how far one has come.

5. **Activity Scheduling and Behaviour Activation**

If there's an activity one tends to put off or avoid due to fear or anxiety, getting it on your calendar can help. Once the burden of decision is gone, one may be more likely to follow through. Activity scheduling can help establish good habits and provide ample opportunities to put what one has learned into practice.

6. **Behavioural Experiments**

Behavioural experiments are typically used for anxiety disorders that involve catastrophic thinking. Before embarking on a task that normally makes one anxious, one will be asked to predict what will happen. Later, one will talk about whether the prediction came true.

Over time, one may start to see that the predicted catastrophe is actually not very likely to happen. One will likely start with lower-anxiety tasks and build up from there.

7. **Relaxation and Stress Reduction Techniques**

In CBT, one may be taught some progressive relaxation techniques, such as:

deep breathing exercises, muscle relaxation and imagery.

This enables one learn practical skills to help lower stress and increase one's sense of control. This can be helpful in dealing with phobias, social anxieties, and other stressors.

8. **Role Playing**

Role playing can help one work through different behaviours in potentially difficult situations. Playing out possible scenarios can lessen fear and can be used for: improving problem solving skills, gaining familiarity and confidence in certain situations

practicing social skills, assertiveness training, improving communication skills

9. **Successive Approximation**

This involves taking tasks that seem overwhelming and breaking them into smaller, more achievable steps. Each successive step builds upon the previous steps so one gain confidence as one goes, bit by bit.

These techniques can be of great help to people living in an environment overtaken by fear. Counsellors can use them to assist people suffering from fear and anxiety, especially in our contemporary world where every page of our print media and every news broadcast is flooded with fear generating items.

CONCLUSION

The reality of many people in contemporary Nigeria living in fear cannot be over emphasized. Living in a fear ridden environment is such an uncomfortable experience. Fear is an emotion that occurs when a person feels threatened. Such a person believes that the feared situation is inherently dangerous, as a result, this leads to negative thoughts. Living in fear may cause a person to experience some level of anxiety and generally unpleasant, thus the need to help those in such situations is vital. Counsellors can support people to manage their fears by assisting them to understand what is causing their fears, put the fears into perspective and set realistic expectations. The CBT is hereby recommended as a helpful tool which the counselor could use.

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