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## HOW TO AVOID SLIDING INTO DEPRESSION

BY JAMES KAHONGEH

Kenyans are teetering on the edge of hopelessness, and this is driving them to suicide, psychosocial experts have observed.

No day goes by without a Kenyan taking their life in what psychologists worry is the highest rate of suicides to rock the country. As Covid-19 continues to torpedo the economy and incomes, families are finding themselves on the verge of financial ruin, with many unable to cope with the pressure. "We are at a time of great hopelessness. Our people, sadly, are finding themselves with nothing meaningful to live for," observes Mr Ken Munyua, a psychologist.

While 2020 was devastating for most people, many Kenyans had hoped that circumstances would change for the better soon and that 2021 would be different, he says.

"It's not clear when things will stabilise, but it doesn't look like that will happen soon. With no end of agony in sight, people are giving up and taking their lives," adds Mr Munyua.

Globally, depression is considered the biggest trigger of suicides. Findings of a 2017 report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) show that Kenya is the sixth most depressed country in Africa, with 1.9 million diagnosed cases. The number could be higher, with most cases going undiagnosed and therefore not managed, WHO warns.

Covid-19 has only added fuel to the situation. Is it possible to avoid sliding into the dark hole of depression? Mr Munyua believes it is.

"When things are not going on well, surround yourself with positivity. Engage people who instill hope in you. Most importantly, seek professional help when the situation escalates," he recommends. Psychologist Sheila Wachira agrees, noting that bottling up emotions when one is overwhelmed is often the genesis of depression. According to Ms Wachira, willingness to accommodate family members who are going through depression, encouraging and loving them and offering emotional and financial support is key.

"It's important to be understanding. This calls for a lot of patience within the family," she says. On keeping depression at bay, Mu-

nyua advises against overthinking situations. "Follow a simple routine of self-care. Put yourself first. Exercise regularly and one day at a time." In the past one year, thousands of Kenyans have lost their livelihood as the effects of the pandemic take a toll on the economy. How can those affected cope with the pressures of lost income to avoid slipping into depression?

Acceptance, however difficult, is key, Ms Wachira says. "Accept that your financial situation has changed and be willing to make the necessary adjustments in your expenses," she advises. Rather than struggling to pay rent in an expensive neighbourhood or school fees in a pricey school, against the backdrop of shrinking incomes, Sheila says it's important to downscale until when things start to look up. Mr Munyua adds: "Do something new, however menial it might look. Start small and dedicate yourself to it."

He acknowledges that it's possible to detect and foil depression before it gets into full swing. "When you start losing interest in your passions, things are not right. Suddenly becoming antisocial and secluded is an indicator too," he warns, saying that Kenya should be on the lookout for any sudden change of behaviour among family, co-workers and friends.

But what are some of the proven ways in which families can care for depressed kids? Spending time with them to encourage them is a good point to start, he says.

"Reach out to them directly or through close family members (for friends). Make sure you stay positive. Avoid negative talk. Remind them of the good times," Mr Munyua advises, adding that it's important to reassure the patient that they are not alone, and that they will pull through. Ms Wachira says even as they offer support, people should avoid being judgmental. "Do not attempt to make decisions on behalf of your [depressed] kid. Simply assist them in making the right decision and respect it." More than ever before, she observes, this turbulent time calls for families, friends and social support systems such as church to stay ever closer and to look after their members.