

- Mental health

Breaking COVID-19 lockdown rules: Is it a matter of practicality or psychology?

NewsDay (Zimbabwe) · 26 Mar 2021 · 9 · Innocent Sifelani ■ Innocent Sifelani is a psychologist and treasurer of the Zimbabwe Psychological Association. He writes here in his personal capacity.

“Kuno kwaita mabasa, Achachema mumwe ndiani, achanyaradza

mumwe ndiani?” sang the late great musician and national hero Oliver Mtshodza. The song carries the message of today as many succumb to COVID-19.

Governments across the world have in consultation with the World Health Organisation (WHO) set up guidelines and protocols that can help reduce the spread of this deadly pandemic.

Everyone wants this chapter behind them, they want to get back to their lives as evidenced by the mantra: “When all this ends, when we get back to normal”.

It is then mind-boggling how the public seems to violate the very recommendations that guarantee their safe return to normalcy.

Despite the upsurge of positive cases and fatalities, defiance with regards to COVID-19 restrictions is a common sight.

Reports on partying masses, people moving around without masks, vendors engaged in their day-to-day pursuits, scenes of people in crowded places et cetera continue to dominate various media platforms.

This defiance can best be understood using psychology which many have misunderstood to be a subject matter related to mental health disorders and their treatment.

Psychology helps us to understand and predict human behaviour.

The ability and eagerness by the public to follow rules is multi-faceted and is influenced by several factors such as the populace's understanding of ever-changing rules, perceptions on whether or not people think they are being treated fairly and a feeling of fatigue.

If the outcome and benefits of promulgated measures to contain the spread of the virus are not effectively communicated, the motivation to adhere to set guidelines is compromised and breaking of COVID-19 rules becomes inevitable.

Individuals' sense of injustice has an impact on their willingness to abide by set guidelines and restrictions.

If individuals perceive that adherence to COVID-19 rules is putting them on the losing side, a sense of injustice creeps in.

The sense of injustice can resultantly affect an individual's effect, cognition and behaviour.

A perceived breakdown in government trust can contribute to non-compliance and people following their own choices.

Other factors which can lead to public's trust on government being undermined include vague messages, policy inconsistency and celebrated values which are not implemented.

The populace, therefore, becomes reluctant in settling for higher personal value and the related behavioural compliance.

When people see others, especially those in positions of authority not following rules, apathy will likely creep in.

Apparently, people might feel that their efforts are in vain and hence give up all attempts to be compliant to restrictions meant to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Even in animal kingdom, animals will react with contempt and aggression if they perceive they are being treated unfairly.

As proposed by the “broken window theory”, noticeable signs of crime or a disregard of rules create an environment that encourages others to do the same.

In the same regard, pictures depicting real or perceived violation of rules can influence the behaviour of others, as can prominent persons who disregard the rules.

As time goes on, the brain's ability to process a crisis can either change for better or worse. Given the protracted COVID-19 crisis, individuals are gradually getting demotivated to follow stipulated protective behaviours and this attitude is fuelled by a number of perceptions, emotions and experiences.

WHO has noted that a demotivated attitude is a natural response to prolonged health crisis.

Understandably, the resultant response usually manifests itself in lack of appetite to adhere to COVID-19 guidelines such as social distancing and mask wearing.

Sometimes people find it hard to be compliant to rules because of shared human psychological frailties such as fatigue.

COVID fatigue leads individuals to assuming lower risk perceptions related to the pandemic. For some people, the perceived cost of adherence to the COVID-19 rules may outweigh the perceived risks related to the virus.

When perception of personal risk is weakened, the willingness to adopt preventive behaviour diminishes.

Many people are struggling as a result of economic hardships that have been worsened by the global pandemic.

Zimbabwe's economy is largely informal.

The lockdown measures, therefore, do not favour informal traders who have to hustle each day for a living.

The adage: “People are not in the same boat, but are facing the same storm” holds water in view of the coping stamina for individuals under the COVID-19 lockdown measures.

When confronted by hunger, breaking of COVID-19 rules in pursuit of survival is unavoidable.

In this regard, non-adherence is a matter of practicality and not psychology.

Unlike hand hygiene and social distancing, the success of lockdown and self-isolation restrictions is so much dependent on support from other people.

Support in the form of shopping, income and adequate space is mandatory to promote adherence to lockdown and self-isolation.

Consequently, the low adherence rates might be suggestive of the fact that the reasons for non-compliance have less to do with psychological motivation than with available resources.

If adequate support is not availed to enable the populace to follow the rules, the escape route becomes breaking of COVID-19 rules.

It can be asserted that breaking of COVID-19 rules is both a matter of practicality and psychology.

This calls for different stakeholders to put their hands on the deck in an effort to promote adherence to COVID-19 restrictions.

For the practicality aspect, the government must take a leading role in providing leadership and desirable support.

It is further recommended that mental health professionals such as psychologists be involved to help address the psychological aspect related to non-compliance to rules.

There is need for continued effort in mainstreaming mental health and psychology to help ensure better outcomes in dealing with the diverse population of Zimbabwe in the fight against COVID-19.