- Drinking water

Water and well-being

How the quality of water can impact our mental and physical health

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As the rainy season comes in, let us reflect on the significance of water to our mental health.



In the Filipino language, there are many water-based psychological metaphors. Immediately I can think of “pagdaloy” (to flow), as in the flow of thoughts (like “daloy ng isip”), feelings (like “pag-daloy ng luha”), and conversations (like “daloy ng usapan”). A conversation moderator or event facilitator is called “tagapagdaloy.” I also think of “ragasa” (surge), which is often used to describe flash flooding. It can also be used to describe the surge of emotions: “pagragasa ng damdamin.”
Another word, “kulo” (boiling), has more implications. Kulo is something that happens within; it is a psychological experience. When we are angry, we
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say that our blood is boiling (“kumukulo ang dugo”). We also say that a person who is stoic is often boiling within: “Ang taong walang kibo, nasa loob ang kulo.” When someone has a surprise or scheme, we call it a “pakulo,” as in they boiled it and prepared it for us. We can connect this to the slang phrase “Let them cook,” as in, “Let them do their thing.”
We also use the word “babad,” or marinate, to refer to how much and how long we are immersed in something. I am a psychologist, so I am immersed in psychological research and practice—I might say, then, “Babad ako sa larangan ng sikolohiya.” But we also use the word “babad” when we are spending too much time on something. What did we use to call spending too much time on the phone or television? “Telebabad.”
We take it for granted that we have clean water to drink. The World Health Organization has estimated that one in four people do not have access to clean drinking water. That is more than two billion people globally. Remember that you cannot just drink any water. For example, you cannot drink saltwater because it has too much salt, which will ironically cause dehydration. Your kidneys will not be able to process it.
Water is also relevant to our everyday sanitation and hygiene. Think of the disgusting smells of blocked canals, murky brown tap water, and stench from stagnant pools. There are bacteria and parasites that thrive in these places, and they cause disease and death. A person can get infected through contaminated or improperly filtered water.
Dengue and malaria also thrive in stagnant and dirty water. Every year, thousands of Filipinos suffer from these diseases. Children are the most affected by this.

A person can only survive a few days without clean water to drink. Due to the rising temperature caused by global warming, people without access to water may suffer dehydration and heat stroke. The idea that we have to drink eight glasses of water a day is just a standard. It is more important, actually, to listen to your body. When you are thirsty, drink; when you are no longer thirsty, stop drinking. The body's senses are very sensitive to the balance of water and salt in your body.

Water scarcity—the lack of water—can also lead to worry and distress, especially when a person feels that they have to beg for clean water. A person may experience anxiety about their unsafe environments, especially when they know that there are higher incidences of water-borne illnesses such as cholera, leptospirosis, or dengue in their area.

Fluid loss caused by dehydration can lead to higher stress levels, irritability, and lack of focus. You will be unable to remember things properly, and you might even have trouble sleeping. Lack of sleep has its own mental health troubles.

The water crisis we face is not just a personal problem. It is a societal issue. A nation with sickly citizens is not a strong nation. If we let the climate emergency rage on, we will continue to experience the worst of water: through stronger typhoons that destroy homes and livelihoods, through unsanitized water that can cause severe sickness, and through lack of clean drinking water that can lead to dehydration. All of these cases have been shown to cause mental distress.

There is hope that if we work together, we can make important changes. We can pressure big businesses to stop dumping their industrial waste into water sources. We can demand better sanitation in hazard-prone areas.

Water is a basic human need— more than half the composition of the human body is made of water. It is necessary to our survival.