

Therapists busy fighting Venezuela's emotional crisis

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In Venezuela, if the hunger, armed robbers and medicine shortages don't kill you, then the demons of depression and anxiety just might.

Suffering long queues for rations and one of the world's highest murder rates, citizens are losing their tempers—and their hope, psychologists warn.

Plunged into depression after the death of his mother, a failed relationship and being targeted three times by robbers, Omar Mendoza did what many Venezuelans are doing—he called a therapist.

"I had to seek help," Mendoza, a 45-year-old lawyer, told AFP, sitting in a black leather chair in his therapist's waiting room.

"Everyone is complaining that the situation is getting worse in the street, at home, at work, in the queues. You feel like there is no way out."

'Emotional cocktail'

A group set up late last year to offer mental health support, Psychologists To The Rescue, says Venezuela has been shaken up into an "emotional cocktail."

"Stress has shot up in the crisis and tolerance has declined," says one of its founders, Liliana Castiglione.

"We are seeing cases of ulcers, heart attacks, suicides and great aggression in the street," she told AFP.

Rumors of danger spread on the internet, fueling what she calls Venezuela's "collective stress."

"Desperation has taken hold of many people," says Castiglione. "That is just one step away from depression, which leads to apathy and idleness."

Supermarket rage

The anger and frustration stemming from Venezuela's economic crisis and the resulting political tensions are increasingly evident on the once cheerful streets of this South American sunspot.

Marling Duran, 27, breaks into a rage when she gets to the front of a long queue outside a Caracas supermarket, only to find there are no diapers left.

She is seven months pregnant and has been waiting in the hot sun for eight hours.

"How can that not make me want to cry?" she says.

"It makes you furious, queuing for hours and coming away with just one or two items, or nothing. I am tired of this. It goes from bad to worse."

'Am I dying?'

Another top psychological torment is fear—of not finding food and medicine, or of falling victim to crime.

Queuing outside the supermarket, Lidubina Calzadilla, 70, already suffers from [high blood pressure](#) and a varicose ulcer.

Prices for Venezuela's crucial oil exports have fallen and it cannot import the supplies that patients like her need.

The mess is making Calzadilla even more anxious.

"I get depressed," she says. "I get palpitations and I think to myself, am I dying already?"

Ministry of Joy

The political opposition blames the chaos on the economic management of socialist President Nicolas Maduro.

Tensions have risen as he resists their efforts to call a referendum on removing him from office.

Maduro brands the crisis a capitalist conspiracy. He vows to defend the "socialist revolution" launched by his late predecessor Hugo Chavez.

His government has set up what it calls a "Vice-Ministry For Supreme Social Happiness of the People."

It is charged with handling social welfare programs for vulnerable members of society.

"We will have a happy Christmas," Maduro promised recently.

Losing faith

Psychologists To the Rescue offers therapy sessions by video call because some patients are afraid to go out at night.

Despite surviving three attempted robberies in the street, Mendoza is one of those who comes in person to the office of the group's co-founder Stefania Aguzzi.

Venezuelans have a reputation among Latin Americans for cheerfulness. But Mendoza fears that is changing.

He has a daughter of seven and a son of 17, who wants to leave the country for a better life elsewhere.

"We are on the verge of collapse. People have lost their sense of belief. The worst thing that can happen to us is that we stop believing," he says.

"But when I go to wash and there is no soap, or I have no deodorant because there is none available, or it is too expensive—then it is very hard to be optimistic."

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