

Know yourself to better help others

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Credit: Susann Mielke/Pixabay

It took 15 years for psychologist Elizabeth Mutunga's father to be diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, after he began forgetting what day it was.

The most common form of dementia, Alzheimer's affects memory, thinking and behavior, and cases are increasing worldwide.

With nowhere to turn to for support, Mutunga decided to study the [human mind](#), before going on in 2016 to set up Alzheimer's and Dementia Organization Kenya, which has now helped more than 60,000 people living with dementia.

Mutunga explains to SciDev.Net how she came to realize that [psychology](#) was her calling.

Could you briefly take me through your journey in psychology?

After my dad got unwell I had a lot of anger in me, and I did not know what to do with myself. So, I went to one of the colleges in Kenya that offers counseling and I did a certificate course.

Once I did my certificate I thought this is what I really want to do. I did a higher diploma. I realized this is where my calling is and finally I did my degree. It has been quite useful for me as an individual, even processing all the things that I went through with my dad, when he was unwell with dementia, and even personal issues in life. How to deal with uncertainties for example. It's been much easier because of what I went through in my training.

Could COVID-19 have an impact on the future of dementia research, for example at your Alzheimer's and Dementia Organization Kenya? How prevalent is Alzheimer's in Kenya and Sub-Saharan Africa?

COVID-19 has played a big role in taking us back. We were working on a project with STRiDE (Strengthening Responses to Dementia in Developing Countries), but a lot of work we were planning to do in the

field we had to stop.

As it is in Kenya, there are no numbers. We don't have solid numbers, especially in Africa, because a lot of people still hide their loved ones ... and it's still a condition that people are starting to understand. In Kenya, it's about 61,000 people with the condition, but I believe there are more people—the numbers we have are the people who have reached out to the organization.

Psychology seems like something of an unorthodox choice for study in Sub-Saharan Africa, as we often hear that [mental health](#) is not well understood in the region. But is that perception right or is it a myth?

I think it is a myth. Because a lot of people who are studying psychology are women—there are men in the field, but a lot of women study psychology. And a lot of people feel it is quite important for them to understand themselves before they give services to others. So, a lot of people are going into the field of psychology and it's becoming quite lucrative, especially now. So yes, there are a lot of people in the field. Because once you are self-aware about your own issues you are able to better help other people better.

In regards to psychology, if you go to certain rural areas—and actually in some urban areas—there is the perception that mental health issues are really not that significant and shouldn't be given that much attention. Would you agree?

It's true, that is the perception. But I think it is changing. If I can speak about Kenya, I have noticed a lot of work is being done in mental health awareness and the mental health space. It is becoming very important that people understand that 'it is okay not to be okay'—that is the phrase,

especially in Kenya. They are allowing people to reach out and there are numbers that have been put out, toll free numbers, where people can call to talk to somebody, if they are having issues that they are going through. So, I think it is changing with time, but initially yes, it was never thought that it was very important. People thought, "What is mental illness? Get a hold of yourself and work on yourself."

Things are changing. Even in the [rural areas](#), I know that there are places where people can actually go and get help. They can actually go into maybe a hospital and there is a counselor and there are psychologists. I know even the Ministry of Health has been employing psychologists and counselors to help families who are going through mental health issues.

When young people decide to study psychology, in some instances their parents would discourage them. Is this something you've come across?

It's a phrase that I've heard—in fact one of the times it was actually said by my boss. When I told him I was doing psychology he said, "That is not a course." And I'm thinking, "Really?" It's just a misunderstanding, as soon as you say you're a psychologist [people] become very self-aware and they're like, "You're reading my mind." A lot of people still think it's not really an important course, but actually it's needed, it's a course that will help a lot of people, even the individual themselves.

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