

When bad news becomes the norm, how do we cope?

From fears about family safety and rising living costs to workplace pressure and constant exposure to distressing news, many Ugandans are experiencing growing stress in everyday life and quietly turning to faith, humour and small lifestyle changes to cope.

BY GLORIA IRANKUNDA

At around 11pm, Miriam Nakato quietly gets out of bed to check the front door one more time. The 34-year-old mother of three, who lives in Kyaliwajjala, a Kampala suburb, says this has become part of her nightly routine. Before sleeping, she checks the padlocks several times and reminds the children never to open the gate for strangers.

"Nowadays you hear too many things: kidnaps, murders, robberies, accidents. Even when your children are inside the house, your mind is not at peace," Nakato shares.

Like many Ugandans, she says anxiety has quietly seeped into everyday life. Rising living costs, disturbing crime stories, political tension and an endless stream of alarming updates on social media have left people carrying an invisible emotional weight.

Parenting watchfully

Nakato no longer allows her 10-year-

old daughter to walk alone to a nearby shop, something she once considered normal. "You cannot fully trust anyone," she says. "Even when children are at school, you keep worrying."

Across Kampala, many parents now live in a constant state of alertness. Conversations about safety have become routine: children are taught early not to speak to strangers, not to accept lifts, and to memorise emergency contacts. For working parents, fear often clashes with economic reality.

"You cannot stop working just because you are scared," says Joseph Kagawa, an accountant in Ntinda and father of two. "You leave your children with a maid or at school and spend the whole day hoping everything is okay." He constantly checks in with his wife and follows school WhatsApp groups closely.

Sarah Nanyanzi, a teacher at St Mary's Junior Academy in Wakiso, says schools are feeling the pressure too. "If a school van is delayed by 20 minutes, phones start ringing." Schools have tightened security and monitor pickups more closely. "People are more fearful now than before, and children also absorb that fear," she notes.

Hidden exhaustion

Beyond parenting concerns, quiet anxiety is also surfacing among young professionals navigating career pressure and an unpredictable future.

At a café in Nakasero, 29-year-old communications officer Sharon Atuhaire scrolls through X during her lunch break. Within minutes, she en-

counters stories about layoffs, corruption scandals and violent incidents. "You open your phone for a short break and suddenly your mood changes, but you still have to return to your desk and be productive," she says with a laugh.

Atuhaire says many young professionals feel mentally exhausted even when they appear composed. "There is pressure to keep pushing, work hard, plan your future, support family members, and stay optimistic even when everything feels unstable." Her sleep and concentration have changed over the past year, especially after heavy exposure to online news. "Sometimes you carry anxiety you cannot even explain. You just feel mentally heavy."

For 32-year-old entrepreneur Brian Ssenyonga, uncertainty comes from economic pressure. The owner of a small printing business in Kisaasi says customer numbers fluctuate while operating costs rise.

"You wake up every day trying to survive, then you add all the bad news, and it becomes mentally draining." He adds that many hide their struggles because vulnerability is often mistaken for weakness.

When news takes a mental toll

Mental health experts say constant exposure to distressing information gradually affects emotional well-being.

Counsellor and psychologist Angela Nyonyozi explains that many Ugandans are experiencing news anxiety; emotional fatigue caused by repeated exposure to disturbing content.

HOW TO HELP A FRIEND WHO IS SILENTLY STRUGGLING

You do not need to be a therapist to offer support. Sometimes the smallest gestures matter most.

•Do not bypass the discomfort. Instead of "Do not worry," try: "I can see you are going through a lot. I am here."

•Listen without rushing to fix. Many anxious people just need to feel heard, not problem-solved.

•Check in quietly. A message saying "No pressure to reply, but thinking of you" can feel lighter than "How are you?"

•Offer specific help. Instead of "Let me know if you need anything," try: "I am heading to the market. What can I bring you?"

•Stay consistent. Anxiety does not follow a schedule. Regular check-ins matter more than crisis responses.

"The human brain is not designed to constantly process fear. When people consume alarming news every day without emotional breaks, the body remains in a prolonged state of stress." Symptoms include poor sleep, irritability, panic, emotional numbness and difficulty concentrating.

She notes that social media and WhatsApp groups intensify fear because information spreads rapidly, often unverified. "People wake up and immediately check distressing messages, and others sleep while scrolling through graphic stories." While staying informed is important, overexposure can create a sense that danger is constant. "Your mind starts believing danger is everywhere all the time."

Her advice is to create emotional boundaries around news consumption, especially at night. "You do not have to absorb every disturbing update to remain informed."

Seeking comfort in faith

In a country where faith plays a central role, many Ugandans turn to religion for emotional reassurance.

Ruth Kemigisa, a fruit vendor, says prayer has become her main coping tool. "When things feel uncertain, prayer keeps me calm. You may not control what is happening, but faith helps you feel less alone."

Pastor Peter Muwanguzi of a Pentecostal church in Rubaga says he increasingly counsels people dealing with fear, hopelessness and exhaustion.

"Many are worried about the future, their safety, finances, families." He believes faith provides grounding. "As Ugandans, we have always relied on God during difficult moments. Faith reminds people that hard times do not last forever."

Emotional survival

Many Ugandans are adopting practical coping strategies beyond their faith. For instance, Atuhaire has decided to stop watching the news after 10pm. "I realised I was going to bed angry or anxious. Now, I either read a book or watch something light before sleeping." Nakato, on the other hand, avoids exposing her children to distressing television content, such as road crashes or violent scenes.

Humour remains a crucial coping mechanism as well. On social media, memes and jokes often emerge shortly after distressing national events. "Ugandans joke about everything," Ssenyonga observes. "Sometimes, laughter is how people survive mentally." However, beneath the humour lies a sense of emotional fatigue.

Nyonyozi warns that coping does not always equate to healing. "Some people continue to function while being emotionally overwhelmed. Human beings are adept at adapting, but adaptation does not necessarily mean wellness."

Carrying on, one day at a time

Coping often begins with small behavioural changes, such as reducing late-night news exposure, talking openly about feelings, and allowing oneself to rest mentally without feeling guilty.

According to the 2025 State of Uganda Population Report by the Ministry of Health, approximately 24.2 percent of adults and 22.9 percent of children are affected by mental health conditions. Experts emphasise that coping is possible. "It is not about avoiding the world," Nyonyozi says, "but about staying informed without becoming overwhelmed."

A man scrolls through distressing news on a mobile phone, reflecting the growing exposure to constant and often unsettling updates that many Ugandans say is adding to everyday stress. PHOTO/FILE

