



Just Because You Feel Paranoid ... **...Doesn't Mean Someone is Not Out To Get You**

by: Tedla W. Giorgis, Ph.D.

An actual exchange:

Patient: ሰዎች ይከታተሉኛል
Dr. Tedla: እነማን ናቸው?
Patient: እንዲያውም በቴሌቪዝን ስለእኔ ያወራሉ
Dr. Tedla: ምን ይላሉ?
Patient: እኔ ምን አውቃለሁ? ወሬአቸው አያልቅም። እባክህ አቁሙ በላቸው!
ሌት ከቀን አያርፉም። እኔ አሁንስ ደክመኝ።
Dr. Tedla: ምን ልበላቸው?
Patient: ጥሩ ጥያቄ! አየህ፤ “ምን ልበላቸው?” ስትል ደስ አለኝ። ምክንያቱም እንዳሉ አመነከኝ ማለት ነው። ስለዚህ እንደዚህ በላቸው...

Guidelines for Treatment: Concept of “Healthy Paranoia”

According to the American Psychological Association Guidelines for Providers of Psychological Services to Ethnic, Linguistic, and Culturally Diverse Populations: “Psychologists seek to help a client determine whether a 'problem' stems from racism or bias in others so that the client does not inappropriately personalize problems.”

Illustrative Statement: The concept of 'healthy paranoia,' whereby ethnic minorities may develop defensive behaviors in response to discrimination, illustrates this principle.”

Go ahead and criticize (shoot the messenger - ጉዳዩ አይደለም!)

Let me begin by saying that this is a very difficult topic to handle in an Internet forum, without an intellectual give-and-take discourse. No matter what I write, my words will piss someone off (ዘራፍ፤ ችረ የት አባቱን), frighten someone else (ጉድ ፈላን) and inspire yet others (ምን ይሻላል?) Hopefully, I will at least get my

Seleda readers to consider my serious concern about how our current reality in the US, and traditional Ethiopian cultural values, have predisposed us not to communicate, thus causing many of us to develop paranoid ideation regarding our environment. Rather than blame the messenger, which is a favorite pastime of many, I hope my readers will start to think about their **own** values and their implications about the future of Ethiopians in the Diaspora in particular, and Ethiopia in general.

Our common complaint

As Ethiopians in the US, our most common complaint is that we are overwhelmed by endless family and work demands (የሰላም ጉድ!) while gaining little satisfaction from our quality of life (አይደለም አገራችን ምንም ዓይነት!). Often we are at a loss to understand how these demands transform us, causing frustration, depression, hostility, and anger, even including feelings of paranoia. Many of us who migrated to the US are still trying to grasp our reality using methods that worked well when we were back in Ethiopia. Unfortunately, stuck with our old style of thinking, and unable to reformulate our outlook and questions, we seem to have nowhere to go.

In recent years, both politically and economically, dramatic changes that directly affect our daily living have been taking place both in Ethiopia and the US. Since there is very little open and honest communication among us, we have not been able to help each other understand the profound changes in our reality. In fact, we go out of our way to hide our feelings of anxiety and frustration from each other. Furthermore, due to the relentless pressures that we face daily, some of us have fallen ill because of our inability to cope, and some finally agree to seek help from mental health professionals like me. However, the longer that people wait to seek help, the less likely it is that we, as helper professionals, can perform miracles.

Throughout my 25 years of experience in clinical psychology consultations, I have observed that we Ethiopian parents have caused rifts with our children because we discourage open, honest and genuine communication. It is unfortunate that we are so obsessed with proving a point that we have not understood the importance of such communication. I have also encountered many Ethiopian parents who have been dragged to court or reported to Child Protective Services because of their inability to communicate with their children, leading them to resort in desperation to corporal punishment. Because of the hierarchical and feudal culture from which we come, we have great difficulty establishing genuine and effective dialogue, even with those most important to us, our children.

Of course, establishing two-way communication requires risk and openness, and naturally takes time. I believe that time so invested can lead to better understanding, tolerance, and in some cases, problem-solving that seems to have eluded us for centuries. If such communication is established, we could all spare ourselves the second-guessing of each other's motives that can take us to the verge of paranoia. I believe we would then be much better equipped to deal with our politically and ethnically charged environment.

When we communicate with each other, many of us fail to try to make our personal or professional judgments reflect, and be seen to reflect, assessments of strengths and weaknesses, successes and errors. We are so ready to criticize and point out shortcomings in each other that we have failed to understand the importance of praise. In fact, when we praise another person, we fear that the other person will take advantage of the praise we bestowed upon them (ዛሬ ያመሰግኑትን ነገ ማግኑ ያስቸግራል ::). I believe that praise is at least as important as criticism, for it strengthens the willingness needed to tackle difficulties, and provides assurance that one not only recognizes and appreciates agreement but also tolerates and respects differences. And it also takes much less energy!

እድሜ ለDV, according to many of the community-based Ethiopian organizations that provide services and networking in the United States, there is a surge in the number of Ethiopians residing here, and most of the major ethnic and language groups are now represented. Creating harmony and promoting understanding and effective communication in such a highly ethnically, culturally, socio-economically, and linguistically diverse population is not an easy task. So far, due to various political, social and personal reasons, we have not been able to develop an accepting atmosphere in which all of us can feel safe enough to discuss what we are thinking and feeling. For it is through acceptance and open discussion within a supportive atmosphere that we as Ethiopians can encourage each other to take the personal risks necessary for productive, rewarding and enriching relationships. In order to provide such an atmosphere, we must develop specific communication competencies.

Despite earnest intentions to give accurate and meaningful feedback, we may sometimes unconsciously erect barriers to doing so. Not out of choice, some of us are Tigreans, some Amharas, some Oromos, and so on. The tendency to erect barriers may be especially strong when we are interacting with others whose ethnicity, language, or nationality differs from ours. These barriers often derive from our own needs, beliefs, prejudices, preferences, values, or fears, and they may frequently take the form of assumptions about others -- for example, "ግልፍተኛ ትግሬ", "ቡዳ ጎጃሜ አማራ", "ግድርድር ጎጃሜ." Quite often these assumptions are far from reality. However, because of our unexamined need to

explain people through stereotyping, we keep making these assumptions without questioning their validity.

Making assumptions often takes the form of noting observable facts about another person, developing a theory to explain those facts, and then treating the other person as if our theory is proven. For example, in trying to develop a better relationship with another person, this process might mean observing that his/her diction (pronunciation) may be different from ours, and assuming, therefore, that he/she cannot understand what we have said. Using characteristics of others to make broad assumptions about their abilities or personality is sometimes called "pigeonholing."

"Pigeonholing" can also result in our making other persons responsible for our feelings. For example, if I assume that some other person is after me, then this assumption justifies or rationalizes my paranoia. This process could easily involve another person who may, in reality, feel that *I* am after *him*.

Two things about assumptions:

1. We need to recognize that all of us make some assumptions based on stereotypes associated with others' race, ethnicity, nationality, professional affiliation, gender, age, religion, or other characteristics.
2. We should not take our assumptions too seriously. We cannot know the other person's experience, only our own perceptions of that experience. Any conclusions or theories that we may have about others may be accurate, or they may be only our assumptions.

A simple illustration: the "rational thinker" versus "the paranoid"

Presented with the same evidence for a mystery, the rational thinker and the paranoid respond very differently.

The rational thinker	The paranoid
1. Checks the evidence carefully and doesn't rely on uncertain evidence	1. Grabs onto a few pieces of evidence and defends them inflexibly (መንግስቱ ነው የነገረኝ፡፡ ከዚህ በላይ ምን ልበልህ?)

2. Doesn't care which evidence s/he must let go.	2. Seemingly irrationally seizes onto something and won't let go (ነገርኩህ አይደል! እነዚህ ሰዎች ለማጥፋት ነው የመጡት!)
3. Seeks a realistic answer in simple and familiar processes.	3. Invokes complex, unrealistic scenarios controlled by powerful forces behind the scenes (ይሄ ሁሉ እኮ የእግዜር ቁጣ ነው። ሰይጣንም ሳይኖርበት አይቀርም።)
4. Accepts only what s/he can critically assess (falsifiable ideas).	4. Deals in explanations that can never be critically assessed (unfalsifiable theories) (ወይኔ! ሞተ እንጂ እሱ ቢኖር ኖሮ ብዙ ጉድ ያወጣ ነበር!)
5. Is willing to live with unresolved explanations for long periods.	5. Demands quick, even immediate explanations (በል እስቲ ተናገር! የት አለ? አሁን ደሞ "yes and no" ይላል። መሀል ሰፋሪ!)
6. Accepts the roles of chance and human foibles.	6. Invents scenarios where nothing ever goes wrong (ቆይ፣ ምን አለኝ በለኝ! ለጊዜው ይሰራ እንጂ ከትንሽ ጊዜ ሩሳ ይበላሻል፤ እንደውም ይከስራል!)
7. Uses the same rational approach to understand all aspects of his/her life.	7. Approaches many other "events" in the same irrational, paranoid way (i.e., people are consistent across their lives.) (ከጊዜ ጋር የሚቀየር አህያ ብቻ ነው። እንደውም እስከት!)
8. Finds empowering explanations.	8. Feels powerless before these huge forces (victims). (አሁንም ምን ሊደረግ ይቻላል? (not እኔ ላደርግ እችላለሁ።) እግዚአብሔር እያሉ እስከሚያልፍ ማየት ነው።)
9. Accepts all demonstrated evidence.	9. Will not face evidence that destroys his/her theory (ይሄ ማስረጃ ያቀረበው ሀሰት ነው። ልክ ወይም እውነት ቢሆን ኖሮ ድሮ ገና ባየነው። መቼ አጣነው!)
10. Is willing to live with some fraction of unexplained or	10. Insists on fitting everything into his/her explanation, often by explaining difficult items as further evidence of conspiracy (መቼ አጣሁት! ስለው የነበረ ነገር እኮ ነው። ሁሉም የሚያስበው ሊያጠፋኝ ነው!)

contradictory evidence.	
11. Tries to keep everything in proportion.	11. Often seizes single pieces of evidence and blows them out of proportion (ይሄው፤ አየነው አይደል! የሁሉም መጨረሻው ድሮም ቢሆን ይሄው ነው።)
12. Will change ideas as new evidence emerges.	12. Sticks to preconceived notions regardless of new evidence (የፈለጉትን ይበሉ፤ መልሱ እንደሆነ ይሄ ነው። አይኔን ግንባር ያርገው!)
13. Open, flexible, empowered, strong.	13. Preconceived, rigid, victim-like, cowardly (ወንድ ልጅ ሞትን አይፈራም!)

“Healthy paranoia” ብሎ ነገር አለ! ወይ ጉድ! እውነትም አለ!

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