

Mental Health: A Perspective from Uganda By Namuyanja Hajara

2 February 2019|Mental Health in Africa



Mental health challenges maybe unseen, but it is real, present and dangerous if unaddressed.

By Namuyanja Hajara, Changemaker, OurCause, Uganda.

According to World Health Organization, mental health refers to a state of wellbeing in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with normal stress of life, work productively, fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

Basing on the definition mental health challenges encompass the emotional, physical, social and the psychological feeling/understanding. There are various mental health problems such as:-

(a) Depression: referring to constant sadness.

(b) Bi-polar disorder: referring to the extreme and depressive phases more so characterized by sadness.

(c) Anxiety: referring to intense attacks of fear, questioning involving a variety of feelings that can be either bad or good.

These various forms of mental health problems not only change the person but rather affect how a person thinks, feels, relates, views and reacts to different occurrences in everyday life. In addition it controls and determines how individuals make choices in their lives.

It should be noted, the reaction of an individual bases on the intensity, the time it lasted, stage it reached, reactions of those around and their response in trying to help the patient (the person with the mental health challenge).

We cannot attribute mental health problems to one cause because there are quite a number such as abuse, loss of a loved one, joblessness, brain factors, family history, drug use among others depending on the circumstances. Largely the usage of drugs such as marijuana, cocaine among others seems to be the most leading cause of mental health problems among the Ugandan youth. For instance according to New vision newspaper dated **7th/03/201**, 45% of the youth in Uganda abuse drugs resulting into mental health challenges.

Here in Uganda there is very less awareness surrounding mental health that is in form of speaking, doing sensitization drives, breaking the stigma or encouraging people to come forward. However a small number that understands the gravity of mental health challenges tries to speak out. Honestly mental health challenges are spoken about to the general public incasetwo or more cases are committed by culprits who have are believed to be mentally challenged which also doesn't last long.

The most challenging issue is the mentality among Ugandans who consider every person who comes forward as having mental challenges as an INSANE or MAD individual.

The way the families, friends and communities view mental health challenges differs and they are as follows:-

Families

This depends on what family though some parents are usually supportive and engage in getting educated about it whenever they take their affected relatives for counselling and medication.

Some families consider and look at mental health centers as hiding places for their mentally challenged children, relatives among others. This widens the gap of them not knowing or understanding the problem as they should since everything is left up to counsellors.

Other families lock them up inside their houses in order to avoid disturbance or shame from the community.

In most families the mentally challenged people are usually undermined, misunderstood, and distanced from, hidden, unaccepted and seen as bad omens.

Friends

With friends, less of them understand or try to understand.

The over generalization basing on what they heard or saw on their mentally challenged friends.

Always feeling the extreme need to question or be proved by the mentally challenged people, their questions are usually not to understand or know the real issue but to check the credibility of the mentally affected people such as if they can get a job, do this or that.

Community

The community is very judgmental, highly opinionated about something they don't know or understand but only under the umbrella of referring to someone as Insane or mad.

The community largely mistakes and has continually failed to distinguish mental health challenges from witchcraft practices. There is always attachment from their judgment that mental health challenges are either from witchcraft practices that a family may have done wrongly or didn't do and thus it is why they have mentally sick or unstable individuals in their families.

The over criticism and judgment from people is uncalled for yet sadly it is part and parcel of everyday live with in our community.

Personally I believe they aren't words that can explain the pain, shame and over demanding pressure on mentally challenged people having to prove themselves to their families, friends and communities.

However there is persistent need to engage the whole community in activities that bring awareness about mental health such as

- Engaging and involving people
- Mental health workshops
- Interactions
- Awareness drives
- Breaking of the stigma among people through interactions
- More sensitization so as people distinguish between witchcraft and mental health.
- Personal and outreach programs in various communities.