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READERS

TUESDAY NOVEMBER 25, 2025

# FEARLESS

# Fearless Gen Z

TEENAGERS ARE  
DELETING OLD-SCHOOL  
HIV PANIC

BY RANELL DICKSON  
NSEREKO

For years, the word HIV moved in whispers that carried fear, shame, and heavy silence. But a new wave is rewriting that script. Across school corridors, social media timelines, walkways, and late-night group chats, Uganda's **Gen Z** is proving that the cure for stigma begins with knowledge, honesty, and compassion.

Today, the hush has been replaced by real talk. At lunch tables, in youth clubs, and during **TikTok** lives, teenagers speak openly about HIV because they have seen what silence does. It kills confidence, derails dreams, and steals lives. Media personality and HIV activist Edwin Katamba, widely known as MC Kats, puts it simply: "The **Gen Z** wants to talk, learn, and support each other without

judgment."

## A DIGITAL REVOLUTION OF AWARENESS

Social media has shifted from being seen as a distraction to becoming a megaphone for awareness. Influencers, peer educators, and youth activists use

**TikTok**, **Instagram** and **X** to spread facts instead of fear. Hashtags like **#KnowYourStatus** and **#StopTheStigma** create safe online corners where teens ask questions, share stories, and find encouragement.

"We use humour and creativity to educate," says **TikTok** creator Trevor TeeVibes Mbabazi, famous for skits on relationships and safe sex. "When young people see information

from someone who looks and talks like them, it hits differently."

## PEER POWER IN REAL TIME

In schools and universities, peer groups have taken centre stage. Youth-focused organisations like Reach A Hand Uganda and Uganda

Youth and Adolescent Health Forum train ambassadors who deliver accurate information through debates, school talks, and community events.

"Teenagers listen to each other more than to adults," says youth health specialist Dr. Brenda Nakiboneka. "Peer influence can save lives when used wisely. **Gen Z** is proving that every single day."

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# What's KAWA NOT KAWA



ESIHO ETINAK ETANG, 16YRS FORM THREE  
ST. JOSEPH'S NSAMBYA (JOGINSA)

## KAWA?

...when you know most slang and where to use it with the right pronunciation.

## NOT KAWA?

...when you use the wrong slang, pronounce it wrongly and in the wrong situation and your friends notice. Ah!

SEND US UR DOPE PHOTO AND TEXT US  
WHAT'S KAWA-WHAT'S NOT VIA OUR  
WHATSAPP: +256 783 002 805.

# EDITOR'S WAGWEZ!

Hey Squadrino! Jump in!

Your value isn't measured by who's texting you at midnight or who leaves you on blue ticks. I have seen many teens lose self-esteem because someone did not reply to their texts. Don't shrink for someone else's silence. Stand tall. Fill your nights with prayer, music, study, and self-love. When that notification comes,

you'll know it's extra, not essential. Walk like you're chosen, laugh like you're forgiven, and love yourself first, because your worth is already declared. Stay bold, stay faithful. Always.

HUMPHREY WAMPULA  
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## FROM STIGMA TO STRENGTH

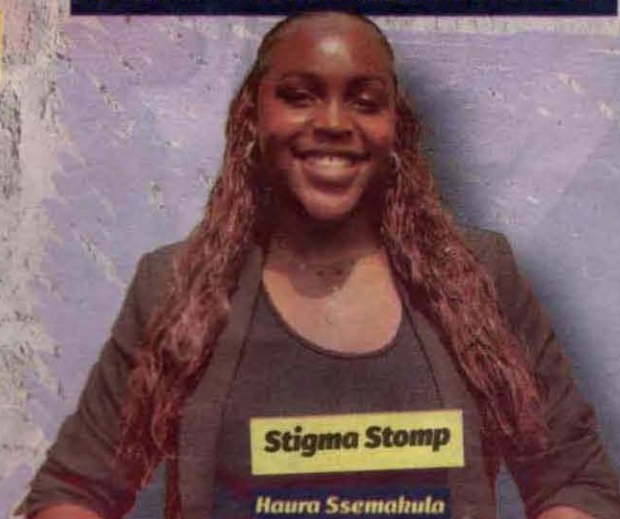
One of the biggest shifts is in attitude. Young people living with HIV are stepping into the light as creators, students, leaders, and change-makers. They are defined by their talents and ambitions, not their status. Nineteen-year-old university student Allan Mututa, born with HIV, says it with a full chest: "We are not victims. We are survivors, and we are proud to live fully and love openly."

## A FUTURE WITHOUT FEAR

Uganda's fight against HIV is far from over, but Gen Z's courage is painting a new future. They are using their creativity, voices, and platforms to show that HIV is not a death sentence. It is a reminder that awareness, empathy, and community can build a healthier world. Silence is no longer strength. Speaking up is.

# TEENS REACT

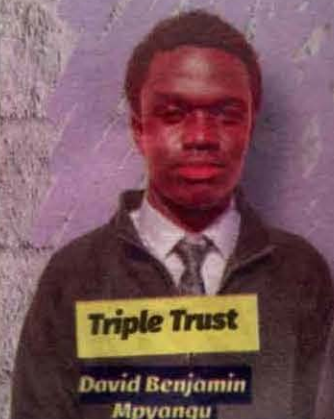
## Taibah International School



### Stigma Stomp

Haura Ssemahula

We grew up with better sex ed and real conversations, so talking about HIV feels normal for us. The internet and health campaigns have shown HIV is a medical condition you manage, not a secret you bury. We're breaking the silence our parents carried and choosing facts over fear.



### Triple Trust

David Benjamin Mpyangu



### Policy Pulse

Opio Joshua Junior



### Gossip Gauge

Bradley Atugonza



### Chat Heals

Christine Guweddeko

Teachers, doctors, and other young people each bring something different to HIV talks. Teens trust teachers to provide structure, and doctors deliver facts and care. We need all three working together to make conversations useful and safe.

A disclosure in class highlights the gap between ignorance and empathy. Some will avoid the person from fear, while others will step up with support and factual questions. Schools must protect privacy, stop bullying, and turn those moments into lessons about science and kindness.

If someone told the class they were living with HIV, reactions would show who is informed and who is still scared. Some classmates would respond with support and normalcy, others might react with gossip or distance because of old myths. Moments like that test whether your friends chooses compassion or rumours.

When we talk openly about HIV, it chips away at stereotypes and turns panic into understanding. Honest conversations build a community where people feel safe instead of shamed. Still, many teens worry about being judged, so making those chats feel safe matters a lot.



## EXPERT'S NUGGET

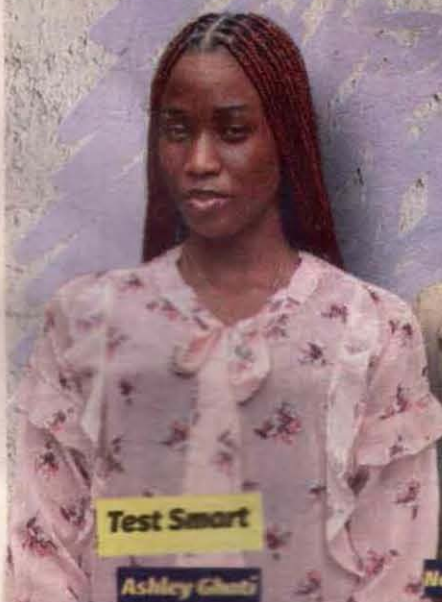
"Social media is powerful but double-edged," says Nambassa. It has opened doors for youth-friendly HIV education through videos, infographics, and online discussions that feel relatable and stigma-free. Virtual communities have also emerged, giving teens especially those living with HIV places to share, heal, and find support. But she warns of dangers. False cures spread faster than facts, and some teens fear being

judged for interacting with HIV content. Her advice to adults is simple. "Create safe spaces where young people can talk freely. Listen without interrogation and guide with honesty." To teens she says, "Protect yourself because you have a great future of many possibilities ahead. Know the facts, abstain and test to know your status. HIV is not the end. It is one chapter in a bigger, hopeful story."

Birah Sharon Nambassa, Clinical Psychologist



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**Test Smart**

**Ashley Ghati**

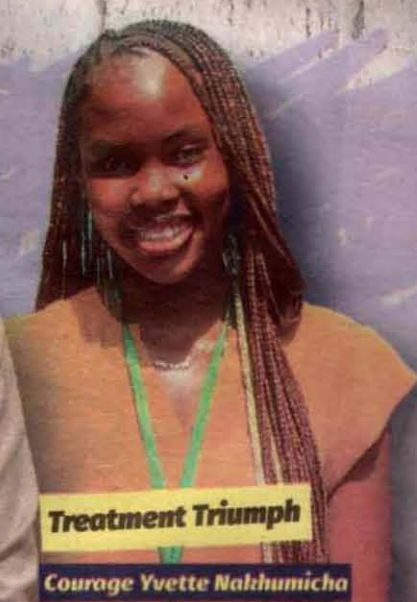
Don't be scared of the topic, learn about it. Knowledge protects you; you know how HIV spreads, and test regularly. If you test positive, your life keeps going; you are not alone and you can still build the future you want.



**Feed Facts**

**Nambasa Naseem Maseembe**

Social media spreads myths faster than real medical advice because drama goes viral. Reliable sources exist, but they often get drowned out by sensational posts. If we want the truth to win, teens must learn to fact-check, follow credible health pages, and think twice before sharing viral claims.



**Treatment Triumph**

**Courage Yvette Nalhumicha**

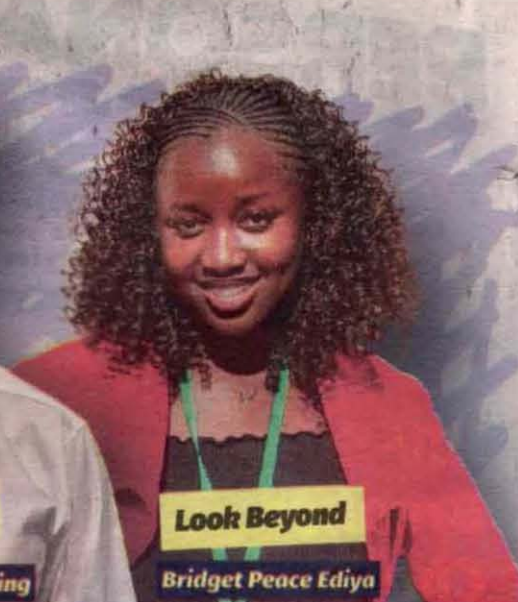
My parents' generation treated HIV like a sentence, but ARVs changed that story. Now people living with HIV can lead full lives, and social media and support groups help make that normal. There is still stigma, but treatment and storytelling make openness easier.



**U=U Unheard**

**Murungi Faith Blessing**

Stigma eats at students in school. Lots of learners on treatment feel they must hide because others don't understand that someone on effective therapy and with an undetectable viral load cannot transmit HIV. Until we replace fear with facts, many young people will keep suffering in silence.



**Look Beyond**

**Bridget Peace Ediya**

You can't tell who has HIV by looking at them, so testing is the only way to know. Early testing and treatment keep people healthy and protect others. Learning about HIV early gives you the power to make safer choices and support friends.

## PEER POWER

**HOW TO BE A SAFE SPACE FOR HIV CONVERSATIONS.**

ILLUSTRATION BY GOOGLE BANANA/  
PROMPT BY HUMPHREY WAMPULA.

The best approach to HIV conversations combines multiple voices. The most effective support system involves youth, teachers, and doctors working together, but true empathy and safety start with you.



**Listen, Don't Interrogate.**

When a friend opens up, validate their feelings and offer support, not judgment. Your first role is to be a compassionate listener.



**Maintain Confidentiality.**

Disclosure is a critical and sensitive moment. Respect their privacy and actively work to prevent gossip or bullying.



**Treat Them The Same.**

Knowing someone's HIV status doesn't change who they are as a person. Be the friend they need, not a source of rumors.



"Parents and teachers must create safe spaces for young people to talk freely."

—Birah Sharon Nambassa, Clinical Psychologist





# PERSONALITY TEST

**INSTRUCTIONS:** To answer, circle the option that best identifies you.  
Flip paper upside-down to view results.

## HIV-Stigma Breaker Challenge

### TEST

**When someone brings up HIV in a conversation, you...**

- A.** Listen quietly but wish you knew more.
- B.** Crack a joke to ease the tension.
- C.** Share something you recently learned online.
- D.** Dive straight in with real talk and facts.

**A TikTok influencer says something suspicious about HIV. You...**

- A.** Scroll past and hope others know the truth.
- B.** Check the comments to see if anyone has corrected them.
- C.** Fact-check using WHO or RAHU content before believing anything.
- D.** Stitch the video (or imagine stitching it) with the correct information.

**Your school announces an HIV awareness talk. What's your vibe?**

- A.** Attend quietly and take mental notes.
- B.** Sit with your friends whispering "Eh, today we suffer."
- C.** Ask questions no one else is brave enough to ask.
- D.** Volunteer to help, speak, or even create content around it.

**A friend admits they fear getting tested. You...**

- A.** Tell them you understand the fear.
- B.** Laugh nervously because you don't know what to say.
- C.** Encourage them gently by explaining how testing works.
- D.** Offer to go with them, no hesitation.

**You're in a group that debating HIV myths. Your move?**

- A.** Read quietly so you don't say something wrong.
- B.** Drop emojis to avoid catching

**Results:**  
Mostly A: The Quiet Ally  
Mostly B: The Reluctant Observer  
Mostly C: The Digital Fact-Checker  
Mostly D: The Fearless Advocate

hands.

- C.** Type a long paragraph correcting the myths.
- D.** Send voice notes delivering TED-Talk energy.

**A student at school reveals they're living with HIV. You...**

- A.** Feel worried for them but unsure how to express support.
- B.** Get awkward because you don't want to say the wrong thing.
- C.** Treat them the same and correct anyone spreading nonsense.
- D.** Check on them privately to make sure they're okay.

### WORRR'D

**Mostly A: The Quiet Ally**

You're supportive, thoughtful, and willing to learn. You may not speak loudly, but you care deeply and pay attention. With more confidence, you can become a powerful advocate. **Your Advice:** Start by asking questions. Curiosity is the first step to courage.

**Mostly B: The Reluctant Observer**

You know HIV matters, but sometimes the topic feels heavy or awkward. You're not avoidant; you just fear saying the wrong thing. **Your Advice:** Swap silence for small steps. Even one shared fact can shift the whole conversation.

**Mostly C: The Digital Fact-Checker**

You're the friend who knows the science, the stats, and the right sources. Your brain is half human, half RAHU pamphlet.

**Your Advice:** Upgrade from "informing" to "influencing." Your knowledge can shape your entire circle.

**Mostly D: The Fearless Advocate**

You talk openly, support confidently, and shut down stigma with facts and empathy. You are pure Gen Z power. **Your Advice:** Lead with empathy, not pressure. Help others rise at their own pace.

## TEEN VISION

TEEN VISION IS ON WHATSAPP

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GOT QUESTIONS? GOT CHALLENGES AT SCHOOL? IN YOUR LIFE? WRITE TO US AT [teenvision@newvision.co.ug](mailto:teenvision@newvision.co.ug)

## DEAR TEEN VISION

**Kevin, 17, Kigezi High School, Kabale.**

I recently joined a WhatsApp study group, but the boys in the group keep sharing sexual memes and porn. At first I ignored it, but now they are adding me to private chats and asking if I "fear girls." I don't want to be rude, but I also don't want this kind of content. How do I exit this without looking weak?

**Advice:**

Kevin, it is not weakness to choose the best smart choice for yourself. In fact, that is strength. Sexual content shared in study groups not only distracts you but also exposes you to unhealthy pressure, guilt, and curiosity that can easily lead to harmful behaviour. You have every right to protect your mind from what does not build you. Calmly leave the group and tell one of the admins privately that you prefer a serious environment because you are focusing on your academics. You don't need to defend your values to people who are not serious about their own futures.

Surround yourself with boys who make you sharper, not those who pull you backward. Every time you choose self-control over peer pressure, you secure your future. Walking away from nonsense is not cowardice, it is wisdom.

**Glo, 16, Bweranyangi Girls' Secondary School, Bushenyi.**

My best friend and I liked the same boy, but she didn't know I had feelings for him. Recently, she started dating him, and now both of them keep showing off in front of me. I feel hurt, jealous, and betrayed, but I don't want to lose my friend or embarrass myself. What should I do?

**Advice:**

Gloria, teenage emotions can feel loud and overwhelming, especially when friendship and crushes collide. But this is a good moment to practice maturity. A crush is not a commitment, and no one owes you a relationship. Your feelings are valid, but so is the fact that your friend acted on hers and did not make the smart choice of abstaining from romantic relations. Instead of feeding the jealousy, take a step back and give yourself emotional space. This isn't the time to chase boys or compete. That only complicates things further. Focus on rebuilding calmness within yourself. This is a great opportunity for to consider making smart choices like choosing healthy relationships that are not romantic but focused on academics and social growth. Real friendships survive uncomfortable feelings, but they also need honesty and boundaries. Most importantly, keep your self-respect. Never fight for someone's attention. Your worth is far greater than a boy's validation.

**Aisha, 15, Trinity College Nabbingo, Wakiso.**

Two of my classmates have been spreading rumors that I'm "too holy" because I refuse to date or flirt like they do. They even made fun of me in the dorm, saying I act like my mother. I try to ignore them. How can I stay strong?

**Advice:**

Aisha, standing for your values will always attract attention, both good and bad. What matters is that you are choosing yourself and your future over childish pressure. People often mock what they secretly admire or wish they had the strength to follow. You are focused, disciplined, and wise. The future belongs to girls who protect their dreams, not those who trade them for temporary attention.

**Counselors answering your questions from Reach A Hand, Uganda.**



JOASH SSEBUNYU



JOAN ATUMWINE NUNGU



SHARON ADANIRA