

Silent killer roars as teens battle emotional disorders

Experts say many children appear confident, yet they are uninformed. They think they know what they are doing, but they do not.

BY JOAN SALMON

A study published by PLOS Global Public Health on June 12, 2025, reveals that one in five secondary school students exhibits signs of emotional disorders.

These include anxiety, depression and adjustment disorders, often characterised by excessive worry, sadness, fear and mood instability.

While the findings have raised alarm, Ms Ketra Kizito Kisekka-Ntale, a counselling psychologist, began observing this trend much earlier; during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"It was during that period when I saw an influx of children seeking counselling for anxiety and other mental health challenges," she says.

Previously, Ms Kizito's work largely involved adults, including clients in the diaspora. Encountering so many distressed children came as a shock.

"What was even more painful was the absence of parents. Many were too busy to engage, even when I repeatedly contacted them," she adds.

A teenager's silent crisis

One case remains etched in her memory. A teenage girl presented with both emotional and physical distress. She had been using the morning-after pill and was bleeding heavily, fearing her organs had failed.

Ms Kizito later discovered that the girl had been purchasing P2 pills from a pharmacy. When asked whether her parents were aware, the answer was telling.

"No, my mum leaves early and returns late. My dad travelled," the 16-year-old said.

Ms Kizito explained the possible side effects of the pill, including hormonal imbalance.

"From my experience, many teenagers fear pregnancy more than HIV. Perhaps it is because they have not witnessed the physical devastation of HIV/Aids as our generation did," she says.

With the girl's consent, Ms Kizito contacted her mother. Appointments were repeatedly postponed until she finally asked: "What is it you cannot tell me over the phone?"

Parents missing in action

Ms Kizito says the incident reflects a broader pattern of parental absence and child neglect. Experience has shown her that many children appear confident, yet they are uninformed. They think they know what they are doing, but they do not. She believes early knowledge reduces regret later in life.

"It is better to experience life with some understanding than to say, 'I wish I had known,'" she adds.

Rather than waiting for children to seek help, many of whom are unaware of counselling services or fear stigma, Ms Kizito took her work into the community.



Mr Emmanuel Gitta, a youth and adolescent counsellor with the Empowered Teen programme, speaks to teenagers during a session. PHOTO/COURTESY OF THE EMPOWERED TEEN PROGRAMME

She now conducts extensive pro bono counselling through churches and community outreach programmes.

Building children before they break

These efforts led to the creation of Empowered Teen, a programme designed to equip young people with life skills and mental health awareness.

"When you build a child, you build a nation. It is also easier to build a child than to repair a broken adult," she says.

Although initially designed for teenagers, the programme was expanded to include pre-teens aged 10 to 12. That is because that is the age when the confusion begins.

Empowered Teen runs an annual boot camp every December. For the past two years, it has been hosted at St Francis Primary School, Ntinda, Kampala. The first camp attracted 85 participants, while attendance has since grown to over 100.

"We separate pre-teens and teenagers to ensure the information shared is age-appropriate," she says.

Empowerment through connection

Mr Emmanuel Gitta, a youth and adolescent counsellor with the programme, says empowerment begins with understanding children's lived experiences.

"Through meaningful conversations, we understand where the children are emotionally and how best to support them," he says.

The programme also uses team-building activities that require children to solve problems together. This builds trust and confidence and teaches them that it is okay to ask for help.

Some participants receive one-on-one counselling during or after the camp, with several continuing sessions long-term.

"We have observed positive behavioural and emotional changes. Empowered children often go on to support their peers, creating a cycle of wellbeing," Mr Gitta says.

Ms Mackline Praise Asaba, a facilitator with the programme, says the camp is crucial in helping teenagers cope with life's pressures, which are now amplified

by technology.

"The programme equips teenagers with skills in career guidance, emotional regulation, coping mechanisms and recognising child abuse," she says.

She adds that the sessions encourage accountability and responsible decision-making. "The convention helps teenagers take ownership of their lives and make informed choices."

Media pressure and identity

One major focus of the camp is media awareness. During Covid-19 lockdown, children relied heavily on digital devices for learning. While necessary, increased screen time has contributed to mental health challenges.

"We shifted from trying to block gadget use to teaching children how to use devices safely and responsibly," Ms Kizito says.

The programme also addresses inequality and social comparison.

"Not every child owns the same phone or shoes, but their purpose remains the same. We empower children to be confident regardless of what they have or

lack," she explains.

The aim is to help children understand that identity is rooted in character, not possessions.

In an era marked by gender identity confusion, drug abuse and substance use, Ms Asaba says the programme empowers children to stand up for themselves.

"As they become more grounded, they navigate challenges better and are able to empower others," she says.

This creates a ripple effect that extends beyond the camp into schools and communities.

When roles are reversed

Despite its impact, the programme faces challenges. Ms Kizito notes a growing tendency among parents to surrender decision-making to children.

"When we approach parents at school events about enrolling their child, some ask the child, 'Do you want to attend?' While explanation is important, asking for permission reverses parental roles," she says.

Children often decline, especially because the programme addresses sensitive issues such as media abuse and risky behaviour.

"The parent is meant to guide the child, yet many are abandoning that responsibility," she adds.

Some children attend expecting entertainment rather than learning. Nonetheless, sessions are designed to be practical, engaging and under one hour.

"For those who stay, the transformation is clear," she says.

Seeking help too late

Another recurring challenge is parents seeking help only after problems have escalated.

Ms Kizito says it raises the question of why intervention did not happen earlier. "It is easier to groom a child than to rescue one who is already drowning."

She recalls being called to assist a 10-year-old who had slept for two consecutive days after eating a biscuit laced with drugs.

"In such cases, parents expect instant results. Yet children who have abused drugs require months of psychiatric care before counselling can begin," she explains.

This misunderstanding often fuels frustration and the belief that counselling is ineffective, prompting parents to move from one counsellor to another.

Ms Kizito says stigma around counselling remains widespread, with many viewing it as necessary only for severe mental illness. Yet many people live with anxiety or depression at varying levels. She hopes counselling will eventually be integrated into the school curriculum.

"Children may fear speaking to senior teachers due to confidentiality concerns. Counsellors are professionally bound to confidentiality, which allows children to open up," she explains.

A shared responsibility

Ms Kizito believes effective parenting requires a three-cord strand: parents, teachers and children. That is why Empowered Teen also conducts parent training sessions immediately after Teen camps.

Here, facilitators share general concerns raised by children, without identifying individuals, to bridge communication gaps and encourage intentional parenting.

"If parents are not empowered, they may unknowingly undo the progress made with their children," she says.

The programme also supports candidates transitioning from Primary Seven and Senior Six, helping them manage academic pressure, independence and new freedoms. "We engage parents on school selection and remind them to look beyond grades. Every child has talents that deserve recognition," Ms Kizito says.

TESTIMONIES

Noble Tumushime, Namugongo Secondary and Vocational School: "We were taught about teen-related issues such as sexual harassment and abuse, abstinence, and making healthy choices.

Young people today are exposed to a lot, often more than parents realise. Being empowered early helps us respond better to pressures like drug abuse and risky sexual behaviour.

We also learned that people living with HIV or STDs deserve care and respect, and that self-worth does not diminish because of illness. This knowledge strengthens us mentally and emotionally.

Many young people struggle with confidence. This programme helped me build composure and

confidence. I have since taken on a leadership role at my school as a Chief Judge, which requires confidence in decision-making. The mentorship has been invaluable. I returned this year with my parents' support, knowing there is always more to learn."

Amalia Magoba, St Joseph's Senior Secondary School, Nagalam: "Last year's Teen Empowerment programme was a very enriching experience. I learned about drug abuse, mental health and how to relate better with others.

We also made friends and learned the importance of respecting elders. We were taught that drugs

are harmful and recovery from addiction is costly. We also learned that drugs can be hidden in unsuspected items like cookies or bread, so vigilance is important. Being around bad company, such as smokers, also poses health risks.

Through activities like poetry, aerobics and teamwork, we built friendships naturally.

After the camp, I became more confident, improved my presentation skills and learned how to connect better with others.

I also deepened my faith through a session with a priest and learned important life skills such as etiquette. I am eager to build on what I learned and explore more topics, including teenage pregnancy."