

WORRIED ABOUT WELLBEING? ASK OUR EXPERTS

By Ibrahim Ruhweza

Uganda, a country where nearly 78% of the population is under 30 according to Uganda Bureau of Statistics, is facing a quiet mental health emergency. The World Health Organisation estimates that over seven million Ugandans suffer from depression or anxiety, with suicide rates among youth rising steadily.

Experts say the signs often start at home. Are parents unknowingly nurturing the very trauma they seek to protect their children from?

Adrian Ivan Kakinda, a counselling psychologist and lecturer at Kyambogo University, does not hesitate to connect the dots:

"There is a deep emotional disconnect in many Ugandan homes. We live in a society where children's feelings are dismissed. Some parents laugh when a child says they are sad. Others say: You are too young to be tired of life! That statement alone can push a child further into isolation," he says.

IS POOR PARENTING FUELLING MENTAL ILLNESS AMONG YOUTH?

Kakinda shares the haunting memory of a teenage boy who felt invisible in his own home. The boy told him: "I feel like I am a mistake."

That confession was not because his parents were abusive or not providing materially; they were emotionally absent. Such emotional starvation is just as harmful as physical neglect.

Kakinda adds that for many parents, a sad, withdrawn child is often labelled as anti-social. But in reality, they are silently battling unknown demons.

SCHOOL PRESSURE

Uganda's academic system is another affliction. A child comes home with 78% and the parent asks: Where is the other 22%?

Kakinda says such remarks may seem like motivation, but to a struggling child, they communicate one thing: 'You are not enough.'

That's how anxiety, self-hate



When something does not seem right with a child, parents are urged to step in, not with fear, but with dialogue

and hopelessness start.

IS YOUR HOME SAFE?

Angela Nsimbi, a recovery mental health coach and team lead at Heart2Heart Chat, a mental health programme, believes that family dynamics play a huge role in shaping a child's mental wellness.

"We have many households operating on emotional autopilot," Nsimbi says.

"Fathers are either physically absent or emotionally disengaged. And mothers, burdened by survival, become emotionally numb. It's not that they don't love their children; they are too exhausted to show it," she says.

Nsimbi stresses the dangers of ignoring household boundaries and the trauma that follows.

"A mentally healthy home

is also a safe home. You can't have girls sharing rooms with older boys and then act surprised when something tragic happens. We have seen defilement and incest cases arise from such negligence. Victims are left traumatised, ashamed and mentally scarred," she says.

THE DIGITAL ERROR

Nsimbi also highlights how

today's children are exposed to uncensored content, often without parental supervision. Children watch violent videos and pornography, sometimes at age 10 or 11, which distorts their world view and leaves them emotionally overwhelmed. She urges parents to step in, not with fear, but with dialogue.

A WAKE-UP CALL

Many parents mistakenly think material provision can substitute emotional connection Kakinda believes the solution lies in a return to "village parenting", a community model of care and emotional nurturing.

"We need to reawaken emotional literacy in parenting. Schools must teach it during parent meetings. Communities must normalise counselling. Every Ugandan parent should ask: 'Do I understand my child's emotions, or do I only know what they did?'"