

# When young people are supported, they reach their full potential

What could young people achieve if they were truly supported — not only praised when they succeed, but believed in when they struggle? I ask myself this question often.

I have sat across from young people who are incredibly bright, creative, and full of ideas, yet speak about themselves with doubt. Not because they lack ability, but because no one ever took the time to support their mental well-being. No one reminded them that it's okay to struggle. No one consistently told them they matter.

Many young people today are not failing. They are overwhelmed. They are carrying expectations, pressure, and silent battles — often alone. And that is the real issue.

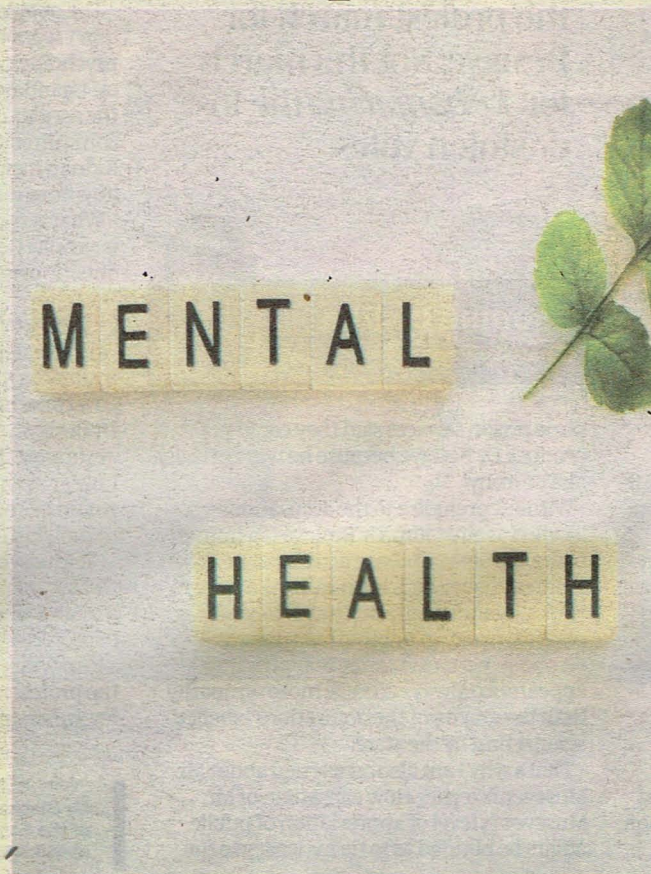
Young people do not lack potential. They lack consistent, intentional support.

In Uganda, research paints a worrying picture. Studies show that about two to three out of every 10 adolescents live with a diagnosable mental health condition such as depression or anxiety.

Even more concerning, up to six or seven out of every 10 adolescents report struggling with emotional or psychological challenges that affect their well-being, relationships, and school performance. These are not rare cases — they are everyday realities in our schools, homes, and communities.

Support needs to start early, especially during adolescence. This is the stage where confidence is built or broken, where identity begins to form, and where young people start asking difficult questions about who they are and where they belong.

When mental health support, guidance, mentorship, and education are missing at this stage, the impact lasts far longer than



we like to admit. Anxiety becomes normal. Self-doubt feels permanent. Asking for help starts to feel like weakness.

That is not a personal failure.

It is a systems failure.

Young people are ambitious. They dream big. They want to build, lead, and contribute. But ambition alone is not enough when resources and opportunities are limited.

I've seen how the constant struggle to make ends meet, combined with repeated disappointments, slowly wears young people down. Over time, hope begins to fade. Motivation drops. Mental health suffers.

Not because they stopped caring — but because they kept trying without support.

Access changes everything. Access to opportunities. To mentorship. To education. To platforms. To people who open doors instead of closing them. When access exists, young people grow. When it doesn't, potential is quietly lost.

One of the simplest — yet most powerful — forms of support is belief.

Young people need safe spaces where they can speak freely. Where they can be nervous. Where they can make mistakes without being labelled as failures. Where someone listens, truly listens, and says, "I hear you."

Mistakes are part of learning. Anxiety does not mean weakness. Growth is rarely comfort-

able.

Yet we often expect young people to be confident, resilient, and ready — without giving them the support that builds those qualities.

Too often, young people are invited into rooms discussing world challenges, but not given a real voice. They are present, but not included. Heard, but not listened to.

Do not just invite young people into the room. Give them a real seat at the table. Treat them as partners. Let them contribute. Let them lead. Let them fail and learn. Give them chances, platforms, and responsibility.

Young people are already leading — often quietly, often without recognition, and often against significant odds.

Through my work with Vital Minds Initiative Uganda, I have seen what happens when young people are supported mentally and emotionally. I've seen confidence return. I've seen purpose take shape. I've seen young people begin to believe in themselves again.

This is a message to parents, educators, employers, policymakers, and community leaders:

Supporting young people is not charity. It is not optional. It is an investment in our shared future. Listen to them. Believe in them. Create safe spaces. Provide resources and opportunities. Partner with them.

When young people are supported — consistently and intentionally — they don't just reach their potential.

They go far beyond it. And all of us benefit.

---

Alexis Ssekabembe,  
Community Psychologist  
& Co-Founder  
Vital Minds Initiative Uganda.