



Butabika National Referral Mental Hospital. PHOTO/FILE

**Concern.** Several young people have cut their lives short due to mental health challenges triggered by academic stress, the pressure to excel, bullying, the lack of parental love, relationship challenges and economic hardships.

As most schools and parents celebrated improved performance in the recently released A-Level results, the administration of Men-go Senior Secondary School was in a somber mood as it struggled to come to terms with a tragic incident, involving one of their former students, who reportedly committed suicide, after she scored 19 points instead of 20, the top mark.

This student is among several young people, who have cut their lives short due to mental health challenges triggered by academic stress, including the pressure to excel, bullying, the lack of parental love, relationship challenges and economic hardships.

While giving a keynote address during a one-day training programme for teachers organised by the College of Education and External Studies, Makerere University on March 21, the Education Service Commission chairperson, Prof Sam Luboga acknowledged that students face multiple challenges.

"In addition to academic pressure, these days, students face complex families, values, absent parents. The anxiety and depression caused by corporal punishment still persists despite our claim to be civilised, gender-based violence in the form of sexual harassment and molestation, teenage pregnancy and child motherhood all cause mental health issues," he noted.

Prof Luboga explained that such vices are greatly responsible for a mental health crisis contributing to the growing number of suicide among young people in Uganda. In 2021, the Ugan-

## Address students' mental health challenges, parents, teachers told



The Chairperson of Education Service Commission, Prof Sam Luboga (left), interacts with Prof Anthony Muwagga, the principal of College of Education and External Studies at Makerere University, during the mental health training in Kampala on March 21. PHOTO/JANE NAFULA

da Police Force reported a significant increase in suicide cases, especially among young people between 15 and 19 years. Over 400 cases of suicide were recorded in 2020.

Prof Luboga stressed the need for stakeholders to recognise and respond to the mental health challenges and needs of learners and address them before the situation gets out of hand.

He believes that identifying and addressing the warning signs of someone who has intentions of committing suicide, such as withdrawal from social interactions, persistent sadness, and irritability, not concentrating on classwork, absenteeism from school and declining academic performance could help save the situation.

He also encouraged those entrusted with caring for young people, including teachers and caretakers to be ethical and desist from being the source of

their suffering.

"Your students are young, attractive and vulnerable. When I was teaching in the medical school, I used to allow girls to come and see me but only in pairs. I could keep the door open and I sat behind a huge table separating me from the students. Lead by example," Prof Luboga emphasised.

He also encourages teachers to understand their students and support them accordingly, noting that there are no slow learners, but differently abled students, who use different means to comprehend content. To teach students how not to read hard but learn.

"Some learn by listening, visual learners learn by seeing, demonstrate to them, practical learners learn by doing, create opportunities for hands-on involvement, social learners learn best in groups," he explained.

"When students perform below our

expectations, encourage them to consider the growth mindset, which is the opposite of the fixed mindset."

Prof Anthony Muwagga Muggaga, the principal in the College of Education and External Studies at Makerere University, said psychosocial challenges persist among students and teachers. He cited examples of students who had taken their lives over less than expected results, as well as a teacher who committed suicide after he was transferred to another school.

He says demoting, dismissing or paying little attention to weak learners in some schools was equally affecting the mental health of learners.

"Her parents were forced to take her

to be supported.

He suggests that the Ministry of Education and Sports should consider enhancing a policy on counselling and guidance in school to offset the social challenges that continue to manifest within the school environment.

The first deputy vice chancellor of Makerere University, Prof Sarah Ssali noted that the thematic and competence based curricula was also causing psychosocial challenges to students and teachers and that the institution was ready to assist through short courses and retooling teachers to handle these complexities.

Dr Augustine Mugabo, co-investigator and facilitator, says school children face challenges beyond academics and that all stakeholders should give a listening ear to students who are troubled. Dr Mugabo, who is also the former chairperson of the Association of Secondary School Headteachers of Uganda and former headteacher of St Henry's College Kitovu in Masaka City, called for a strengthened referral system for mental health management to ensure timely response.

"If you are a teacher, refer to the headteacher, while the head teachers can partner with parents to refer the affected child to a health facility for further management," he said.

Dr Henry Nsubuga, the director of Makerere University Counselling Centre, says: "We are having students who are emotionally broken. They are sexually harassed, they lack basic needs and they are from broken families. One time a certain girl said she feared to return home because whenever she goes back, her guardian who pays her school fees rapes her and forces her to take pills to prevent pregnancy."

Prof Naome Namayanja, co-principal investigator and facilitator, says Uganda is ranked among the top six countries in Africa burdened by mental health issues.

**Advice.** Some learn by listening, visual learners learn by seeing, demonstrate to them, practical learners learn by doing, create opportunities for hands-on involvement, social learners learn best in groups. When students perform below our expectations, encourage them to consider the growth mindset, which is the opposite of the fixed mindset. **is that tomorrow?" Education Service Commission chairperson, Prof Sam Luboga**

to another school, where she eventually scored Aggregate 43," he recalled. "She was admitted to another school, where she scored AAB in A-Level and is now at Kyambogo University on a government scholarship."

He also acknowledged that some headteachers have also become hypertensive due to repeated warnings by their supervisors, over a school's academic performance and equally need