

Mental Health Challenges – An African Perspective

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Abstract— Growing up in West Africa in the 1970s was not a walk in the park. From the time you were born, life's challenges come at you and sometimes throw you off the curves. What are simple solutions in developed countries become huge problems for us. Clean water for example would not flow from taps in our kitchens like we saw in movies. We would have to walk long distances to fetch water and fill drums from a public tap. We would repeat this cycle day after day. I grew up in a middle class family as my parents were educated with good paying jobs. And so when my father could afford it he built his own house and drilled his own water borehole in the compound so we could have good or rather portable water supply at home, there really were no affordable medium of testing if the water was actually portable but we fetched from our taps, drank it and got used to the water. So one can conclude "it served its means".

Index Terms— Mental Health, mental illness, WHO, depression, Neuropsychiatric Hospitals, stigmatization, mentally unstable and mental well being.

1 INTRODUCTION

FOR long time, I struggled with understanding why mental health was a thing. What was the big deal? Why couldn't people just face their life challenges like every other person and rise above them? 'People just come up with these new buzz words to get attention' I said to myself. Well, I'll go with the flow as see where it takes us.

2 DISCUSSION

I am sure your mouth is agape by now wondering who in the world this is or thinks like this. Growing up in West Africa in the 1970s was not a walk in the park. From the time you were born, life's challenges come at you and sometimes throw you off the curves. What are simple solutions in developed countries become huge problems for us. Clean water for example would not flow from taps in our kitchens like we saw in movies. We would have to walk long distances to fetch water and fill drums from a public tap. We would repeat this cycle day after day. I grew up in a middle class family as my parents were educated with good paying jobs. And so when my father could afford it he built his own house and drilled his own water borehole in the compound so we could have good or rather portable water supply at home, there really were no affordable medium of testing if the water was actually portable but we fetched from our taps, drank it and got used to the water. So one can conclude "it served its means".

As a teenager, I remember my house getting flooded almost every raining season. It was stressful for me knowing we might not be lucky this year or the next year, we always rode on the back of "hope". Yes, my father made many interventions but once the rains came and the water levels rose, those interventions would give way and then were back in trouble again. There was no time to sit down and be sad. You woke up the next morning, sucked in your breath and faced the day. We celebrated little victories and laughter became a part of our coping mechanism. We laughed at ourselves, played like young children and faced the discipline of the rod when we were naughty. Faith became a big part of our lives. I looked

forward to going to church every Sunday, singing along with the choir and listening to our charismatic pastor as he preached hope for better days. Did better days come? Yes and no. The country grew worse in all sectors but I moved on with my education, got a good job, married the love of my life and I'm happy.

So you see, we didn't stop to think about mental health. Did it mean that some people were not struggling mentally? Yes there were, but we are all struggling so why is yours so different. 'You can cope, you will cope' we would say. So when mental health became more topical, many of us chucked it up as a Western and developed countries' problem. They don't have to worry about basic needs like we did, where to drive on a good road is luxury. They are not resilient hence when confronted with issues they buckled easily and that is the reason why they (the Western and developed countries) have so many cases.

As the years progressed, we saw people struggle with different mental health challenges. People began to speak up and say they had been diagnosed and needed help. We still struggled to understand this. And then, more suicide cases popped up. It was not prevalent with a particular generation but cut across millennial and baby boomers. People were not coping. It became a real issue. The World Health Organization (WHO) in its report documents that one (1) out every four (4) Nigerians, some fifty (50) million people are suffering from some sort of Mental Illness or the other. Nigeria has the highest caseload of depression in Africa and sadly ranks 15th in the World in the frequency of suicide. The issue, it would seem, has always been there. It is either we did not recognize it as such or we did not care much about it. The difference now is that more and more people are speaking up.

I have seen first-hand how challenging mental health can be and I understand better now. Reflecting on my own mental health, I recognize some of the symptoms at different occasions. I have learned to develop coping mechanisms to manage stress and anxiety. My faith has played a big part and my family as well. As Africans, we must know that when people say are not ok it is not a sign of weakness but of courage to

speak up. We must begin to empathize and be patient to listen without any misconceptions of what we think the person might be going through. It is just enough to listen and share the "It is ok not to be ok" message as much as we can.

2.2 Coping Mechanisms

I have seen first-hand how challenging mental health can be and I understand better now. Reflecting on my own mental health, I recognize some of the symptoms at different occasions. I have learned to develop coping mechanisms to manage stress and anxiety. My faith has played a big part and my family as well. As Africans, we must know that when people say are not ok it is not a sign of weakness but of courage to speak up. We must begin to empathize and be patient to listen without any misconceptions of what we think the person might be going through. It is just enough to listen and share the "It is ok not to be ok" message as much as we can. Unfortunately, the Nigeria's Healthcare system is not equipped to provide the required care for mental health patients. In Nigeria, there are only eight (8) Neuropsychiatric Hospitals (compared to 24 such hospitals in South Africa) with abysmally low budget, staffing issues, very demoralized health workers who are actively looking the leave the country for better opportunities elsewhere. WHO estimates that less than 10% of Mental Health patients have access to the care they desperately need.

There are things we can all do to provide support to people with Mental Health challenges (Billings, A. G et al, 1984). We must continue to speak about Mental Health issues and normalize discussion around the illness by encouraging people struggling with mental issues to seek help. We must look out for one another.

2.3 Societal Obstacles

One big obstacle to getting help is the fear of stigmatization. We stigmatize people who are diagnosed and tag them mentally unstable. They are referred to as "Mad" and left as destitute roaming the streets and feeding off trash bins. We are extremely biased and blind to this illness. How do we move on from here?

Educate! Educate! Educate!!! I say. You cannot understand if you don't know. You cannot help if you don't know. You cannot intervene if you don't know. The World Health Mental Day celebrated on 10th October every year is a good opportunity for governments and institutions to raise awareness on

will need to add this as part of their curriculum. We need to create awareness. Together we can beat the stigma, help each other and provide support (Moll, J et al, 2006). Again, it's okay to say I'm Not Okay.



2.4 A Helping Hand

There are signs of Mental Illness that we should all look out for amongst our friends and relatives. These are as follow, and in no particular order of occurrence

- Feeling sad or down
- Confused thinking and/or lack of concentration
- Extreme Mood swings
- Having excessive fears, anxieties, and guilt
- Withdrawal from friends and family and activities
- Significant tiredness, low energy and inability to sleep

There are a little but profound steps we can take to maintain our mental wellbeing. These are as follow:

- Connect with other people. Initiate and maintain healthy relationship with others
- Be physically active. Physical activity is also good for our mental well being
- Learn new skill sets
- Be generous. Learn to give to others
- Be mentally alert. Read

4 CONCLUSION

Now, it is important to understand the importance stemming from the misconceptions and stigma connecting mental health issues, many people, particularly in Africa, suffer in huge silence and do not seek the required solution / treatment for their conditions. We must all be in the place of promoting the awareness on mental health as this is a vital initiative to improve understanding of mental health illnesses and intensify

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this topic using all forms of media channels. Family units need to add this as part of the dinner table conversations. Schools

access to health care for people in need of the treatment.

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