

CHALLENGING MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA IN KILIFI COUNTY ONE CONVERSATION AT A TIME

By Emmanuel Ngilah



A Mental health Champion engages with community members at Petanguo, Ganze Sub County on 21st July 2022, during a social contact activity. Photo by Emmanuel Ngila

I find it absurd how little is known about mental health in my society in spite of us being in an era of free access to information thanks to the internet and mobile phone technology. What is of particular concern are the deeply embedded myths and misconceptions held by communities particularly in the coastal part of Kenya where I am currently based.

There's so much misleading information on mental health which is not only propagated through chitchat in the villages, but also through the mainstream and social media, with people making jokes and spreading misinformation on mental health and by extension, mental health conditions.

This has without a doubt contributed to increased stigma around mental health which has in turn had a detrimental effect on the socioeconomic wellbeing of youth in this region as they are not able to fully participate in society.

Due to stigma or fear of stigma, young people with mental health conditions are forced to withdraw from social relationships and interactions, work, family roles and other community duties. Moreover, the youth develop low self-esteem which ends up diminishing their hope in life.

Unsurprisingly, a significant number of people potentially experiencing mental health conditions will delay seeking access to medical and psychosocial support for fear of being judged and labelled. Unlike other areas of health that are stigmatized such as reproductive health, you will still witness youth and women in health care facilities seeking for these services but the same does not translate to mental health. So much stigma is tied to institutions such as Port Reitz in Mombasa and Mathare in Nairobi that offer mental health services, that whenever they are referenced, they are done so in the form of a slur.

It's not all gloom, however.



“Let’s speak without fear of what people will say.”



“People with disabilities are able to live their lives normally like everybody else.”

Community members at Petanguo, Ganze Sub County sharing lessons they have learnt on mental health and disability inclusion during a social contact activity on 21st July 2022. Photos by Emmanuel Ngila

I have had the privilege on a number of occasions to join a team from Basic Needs Basic Rights Kenya who are implementing an initiative in Kilifi County to promote mental health advocacy and sensitization through the social contact approach.

The social contact approach in a nutshell, entails having young brave individuals with a lived experience of having a mental health condition, sharing their stories publicly with other members of their community through one-on-one conversations. These individuals are known as Mental Health Champions.

On one of these occasions, I accompanied the team to the expansive Ganze Sub County in Kilifi County, where the team was visiting selected remote parts within the sub county, where the champions were in action, bravely sharing their lived experiences with the community.

As the champions engage the community, they create a safe space for community members to feel comfortable enough to open up. I find it interesting how a significant number of community members are prompted to open up about their own stories or that of a loved one, once they hear the champions share their own experiences. It becomes evident that some of these individuals are themselves potentially having a mental condition or know of someone who potentially has a mental health condition, based on how similar their experiences are with those of the champions.

During these social contact activities, I learn that it is important for a Community Health Volunteer popularly referred to as a CHV to be around as they are tasked with handling referrals to health centers. Whenever a community member reveals to a champion that they suspect they may have a mental health condition, this community member is referred to the CHV who in turn is meant to refer this individual to the health center for assessment and possible diagnosis and treatment.

It is important to emphasize on the need for referral to a health center for proper diagnosis because there is a common practice within this community where members opt to consult religious leaders or traditional healers, as opposed to healthcare facilities for their medical needs including mental health. It is more so because potential mental health conditions and other forms of physical disabilities in individuals, are attributed to curses as a punishment for their wrong doings. Therefore, community members hold strong beliefs that these are not medical conditions but rather spiritual problems that are best handled by religious or traditional healers.

Whereas this initiative is just in its early stages of implementation, I am convinced that it is timely, as there is a need to promote talks and safe spaces for community members to share and find solutions to their conditions, enhance access to counselling services, and increase access to medical professionals and support.

It's a high time we begun to proactively challenge mental health stigma by increasing access to factual information and creating opportunities for brave people who are able to live productive lives in spite of their mental health conditions to share their stories of triumph with others in their community.

As a young person, I am fired up and ready to play my part in inspiring other youth to work round the clock to dispel mental health related stigma.

I know it's possible, attainable and doable provided we have the will to do it.

This initiative is part of the Inclusive Communities project, which is a collaboration by Basic Needs Basic Rights Kenya, CBM Global Disability Inclusion, and the County Government of Kilifi, with funding from Irish Aid.



Story compiled by Emmanuel Ngilah a healthcare worker and community member residing in Kilifi County, as part of an initiative by the Inclusive Communities Program to give community members an opportunity to self-document the program's progress and impact.