

## MENTAL ILLNESS IS NOT A CURSE, IT'S A HEALTH CONDITION

By Lucas Kalama



*Cornelius Juma, a Mental Health Champion engages community members in Petanguo, Ganze Sub County during a social contact activity on 21<sup>st</sup> July 2022. Photo by Emmanuel Ngila*

*“Stawisha Afya Akili.”* Loosely translated as, “Nourish your mental health.”

*“Si laana, ni Ugonjwa wa Akili.”* Translated as, “It’s not a curse, it’s a mental illness.”

*“Si uchawi, ni ugonjwa wa Akili.”* Translated as, “It’s not witchcraft, it’s a mental illness.”

*“Afya Ya Kiakili Bora, Ni Maisha Bora.”* Loosely translated as, “Good mental health leads to a healthier life.”

These are the messages that Mental Health Champions have brought with them to the community in the small town of Marereni in the vast Magarini Sub County in Kilifi County.

The champions are looking to dispel the common myths and misconception around mental health in this community with the intention of fighting stigma and discrimination, and they carry these messages on t-shirts, posters, and wrist bands, some of which they will give to some community members for keepsake.

Why are they called Mental Health Champions?

The Mental Health Champions are a group of young men and women from within this community, who have a lived experience of having a mental health condition. These individuals use their personal stories and knowledge on mental health to challenge and reduce stigma against people with mental health conditions in the community.

They engage the community through social contact activities that entail having one-on-one conversations around mental health, with members of the public, majority of who may not have any experiences with mental health conditions. The idea is to normalize these kinds of conversations therefore, champions will often have these activities in well trafficked public areas such as markets.

During these social contact activities, the champions are also accompanied by Community Health Volunteers who are tasked with making referrals to the health center in the event a champion engages an individual who is likely to be having a mental health condition or reveals that they have a relative back at home who may be having a mental health condition and currently not receiving any form of treatment.



*A Community Health Volunteer engages community members in Petanguo, Ganze Sub County, to establish whether there is need to refer them to a health center for assessment following a social contact activity with Mental Health Champions on 21<sup>st</sup> July 2022. Photo by Emmanuel Ngila*

These social contact activities are structured in a way that encourages interactivity, as community members are given opportunities to share feedback on their key takeaways from the conversations.

As a parting shot, the champions urge these community members to go and share this new-found knowledge with other people in their communities.

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 Lucas Kalama, a 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.*