

Teacher who became a psychiatric nurse

Charity Namuswe left the classroom to heal young minds. Now she is fighting stigma, one counselling session at a time.

BY GEOFFREY OYET OKWERA

Some people are drawn to certain professions by financial rewards. For Charity Namuswe, the assistant nursing officer in the Psychiatry Department at Bbaale Health Centre IV in Kayunga, the journey into mental health was driven instead by passion and a deep sense of purpose.

From the beginning of her career, Namuswe was motivated by a desire to make a difference in the lives of people struggling with mental health challenges. At a time when awareness was still limited in many communities, she felt a strong calling to help break the silence, reduce stigma, and offer compassionate care to those often overlooked.

Working in psychiatry requires patience, empathy, and resilience. Each day she encounters patients and families dealing with complex emotional and psychological struggles. Rather than seeing these as burdens, Namuswe views them as opportunities to educate, counsel, and advocate for a better understanding of mental health.

Her work extends beyond the health facility. She takes part in awareness drives, community outreach, and sensitisation programmes aimed at encouraging people to seek help early and speak more openly about mental health. For her, the greatest reward is not financial, but the visible impact of restored hope, improved well-being, and changing attitudes in the communities she serves.

The journey

Namuswe initially worked as a primary school teacher. Determined to gain professional skills in the field, she enrolled for specialised training at Butabika School of Psychiatric Nursing in Kampala. After completing her studies, she began her active service at Kangukumira Health Centre IV in Kayunga.

She spent nine years there, a period that shaped her professional growth and deepened her understanding of community mental health needs. During this time, she worked closely with patients and their families, offering care, counselling, and continuous sensitisation to reduce stigma. The experience strengthened her commitment to early intervention and greater public awareness.

She was later transferred to Bbaale Health Centre IV, where she continues to serve in the psychiatry department. She remains devoted to improving access to mental health services through counselling, awareness drives, and compassionate care.

The drive for mental health

Namuswe says her passion for mental health began when she noticed many teenagers around her were quietly struggling, particularly with issues

STATE OF MENTAL HEALTH IN UGANDA

The 2025 State of Uganda Population Report describes mental health as a silent emergency affecting both adults and children. It indicates that approximately 24.2 percent of adults and 22.9 percent of children are experiencing mental health challenges, with cases rising by 71 percent between 2021 and 2024.

Juliet Nakku, executive director at Butabika Hospital, has also emphasised the urgent need to address the country's mental health burden. Dr Nakku confirms that approximately 74 percent of youths are struggling with mental health challenges, underscoring the need for stronger awareness, prevention, and support systems within communities.

linked to drug abuse, alcohol misuse, and risky sexual behaviour.

She notes that some young people grow up without adequate parental attention and emotional support. This psychological neglect can leave them feeling isolated, misunderstood, and vulnerable. In search of acceptance and belonging, many turn to peers already engaged in harmful habits such as drug abuse, binge drinking, and smoking opium, eventually adopting risky lifestyles.

These experiences strengthened her resolve to focus on mental health awareness, early counselling, and community sensitisation to help young people make safer and healthier life choices.

Bridging the gap

To address the growing mental health gap, Namuswe has gone beyond her routine facility duties. She established the Namuswe Charity Foundation, an initiative aimed at counselling and guiding youths facing mental health challenges.

Through the foundation, she creates safe spaces where young people can speak openly about their struggles, receive counselling, and gain life skills for better decision-making. The initiative reflects her belief that community-driven solutions and early intervention are essential.

She observes that mental illness has no single known cause. Medical professionals link it to several predisposing factors, including hereditary conditions, alcoholism, drug abuse, significant loss, or feelings of failure after unmet life goals, which can lead to deep depression.

At Butabika Hospital, youths and adolescents make up the majority of mental health patients. Namuswe stresses the need to support this group through youth corners, friendly spaces within health facilities that offer counselling, guidance, and mental health support in a safe environment.

She explains that in severe cases, patients are referred to specialised centres with better equipment and capacity for advanced care. When treatment is followed consistently, significant improvement and recovery are possible.

Challenges and call to action

Namuswe says stigma remains the biggest challenge, describing it as more dangerous than the illness itself. It discourages people from seeking help, delays treatment, and often leads to isolation and discrimination.

She also points out that the number of mental health workers remains very low, with only about two to four nurses on average assigned to each public health facility. Yet the Ministry of Health recommends at least seven specialised health workers in psychiatry per facility. As a result, many cases go unrecorded and untreated.

According to Namuswe, mental health services need stronger integration through one-stop centres. At her facility, about 65 patients regularly come for medication refills. However, some lack caregivers and are unable to return for follow-ups, which remains a major challenge.

She calls on government to prioritise mental health by increasing the number of psychiatric health workers across public facilities.

WISH
NAMUSWE
ADVOCATES
FOR ONE-STOP
CENTRES



Charity Namuswe in her uniform at Bbaale Health Centre IV. PHOTO/GEOFFREY OYET OKWERA