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Group therapy gives hope to HIV patients battling depression

BY ISMAIL BATEGEKA

MASINDI. A new study in Uganda has found that group therapy is helping people living with HIV overcome depression and improve their mental well-being.

The research, conducted by the Medical Research Council and the LSHTM Uganda Research Unit over the last two years, showed that patients who participated in Group Support Psychotherapy (GSP) became emotionally stronger, developed better coping skills and received encouragement from others facing similar challenges.

Researchers said the therapy is helping many patients regain hope and live healthier lives.

Speaking during the dissemination of the findings to HIV prevention stakeholders in the Bunyoro Sub-region at the weekend, the lead researcher, Prof.

Etheldreda Nakimuli, said depression remains one of the biggest mental health challenges affecting people living with HIV.

Issue

She said many patients silently struggle with stress, stigma, loneliness and poverty, which can affect their emotional well-being and adherence to HIV treatment.

"Some patients lose hope, isolate themselves from others or stop taking their medication properly because of depression," Prof Nakimuli said.

The study focused on people living with HIV who had mild to moderate depression. Researchers compared two groups of participants, with one group receiving GSP and the other Group HIV Education.

"The aim was to understand what changes help patients recover emotionally after two months and even af-

ter six months," she explained.

According to the findings, many participants started healing after openly sharing their experiences, fears and emotions during therapy sessions.

Some participants said prayer and spiritual beliefs gave them strength and hope, while others said talking to fellow patients helped them feel less lonely.

"Recovery happened step by step. At first, people focused on emotional healing by accepting their situation and expressing their feelings. Later, they developed confidence, stronger relationships and better ways of handling stress," Prof Nakimuli said.

Implications

Dr Wilson Mbabazi of Bulima Hospital, said the findings are important because mental health services remain limited in many health facilities despite progress in HIV treatment.

"Many hospitals provide HIV medicine, but patients continue suffering from stress, sadness and hopelessness without proper counselling," Dr Mbabazi said.

He added that group therapy could offer a simple and affordable solution because patients encourage one another and realise they are not alone in their struggles.

The therapy also helps reduce stigma by creating a safe environment where patients can freely share their experiences.

Mental health workers have welcomed the findings, saying depression can affect treatment adherence among people living with HIV.

"When patients feel emotionally supported, they are more likely to continue taking their medication and attend hospital appointments," said Mr Ellan Bategeka, a social support officer in Masindi.