

Unemployment and stress are some of the factors reported to be fuelling mental health challenges among young people in West Nile.

BY FELIX WAROM OKELLO

On the outside, Frank (not real name given the sensitivity of the matter) looked like every other young person in the busy Arua City.

At 33, he attended university, laughed with friends, and felt that he would achieve his dreams and realise them to the fullest.

His parents and relatives knew he was doing well. He was a hardworking student. But inside, Frank was fighting an invisible battle.

Every morning, he woke up tired, even after a full night's sleep. Tasks like attending lectures, replying to messages and phone calls, or studying felt overwhelming. He constantly worried about his future, his grades, and whether he would ever find a job after graduation. The pressure weighed heavily on him.

Across communities in the West Nile Sub-region, mental health challenges have become a growing burden for young people. It is common to see young, middle-aged, and elderly men suspected to be suffering from mental illnesses, on the streets of urban centres.

They are easily spotted at garbage collection points, hotels, and begging on the streets for some bites for the day. Some of them move around chewing *mairungi* (khat), smoking opium openly, while others take alcohol.

While previous generations struggled mainly with physical survival and economic hardship, today's youth in the region are fighting a silent but grave struggle—the battle within their minds.

Causes

One of the biggest sources of stress for young people is academic and career pressure. From an early age, many youth are told that their future depends entirely on their academic performance.

They live in a world where a university degree or diploma is seen as the only path to someone's success. But as graduation approaches, reality becomes disquieting. The jobs, especially in public institutions, are scarce, with high competition, and the fear of unemployment grows. This leads to disillusionment and a stressed mind.

And the case is true with Frank, whose fear of failing to get a paying job was constant. Each time he heard about graduates who remained jobless for years, his anxiety increased. He began to question his abilities.

Frank, who had these unanswered lingering questions, said: "What if I fail to pass at the university? What if I disappoint my family? What if my future crumbles?"

These thoughts weighed him down, turning hope into worry. Social media platforms like TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, or X—often show examples of perfect lives—successful entrepreneurs, happy relationships, expensive lifestyles, and early achievements.

Regrettably, Frank, like several youth, had unrealistic expectations. He often scrolled through his phone for inspiration. His former classmates were

West Nile youth grapple with mental disorders



A man reportedly grappling with mental health challenges, holds his head in deep thought on the streets of Arua City on Monday. PHOTOS: FELIX WAROM OKELLO



A young man eats *mairungi* (khat), which is widely cited as one of the most abused substances fuelling mental illnesses in West Nile Sub-region.

posting about their life achievements such as businesses they were starting or running, scholarships secured abroad, and exciting career opportunities, among others. Instead of feeling inspired, Frank felt left behind. He began to believe he was not doing enough, even when he was trying his best.

This constant comparison to the progress of former classmates and

peers slowly damaged his self-esteem. He stopped celebrating his small achievements like birthdays, going to functions of his friends, and focused only on what he lacked.

Frank is now feeling depressed, lonely, and wandering in Arua City with no job. The 2024 Uganda Bureau of Statistics Census report puts youth unemployment at 64 percent across the 13 districts in West Nile, which has a

exhaustion, and exhaustion turned into emotional numbness. This made him feel out of place, a failure in life. We sometimes help him with what to eat, but sometimes he can disappear from the town to an unknown destination for months," he stated.

Mental health struggles also affect physical health and behaviour. Youth experiencing anxiety or depression may have trouble sleeping, lose their appetite, or experience constant fatigue.

Some turn to alcohol, drugs, or unhealthy habits to escape emotional pain. Others lose motivation, leading to poor academic performance or dropping out of school.

Stereotype about mental illness

In some communities in the sub-region, mental health is not taken seriously but rather looked at as a curse or bad omen. Those suffering from mental illnesses are usually abandoned and, or, deemed as misfits in the community.

As a result, some migrate from their villages to urban centres to seek sympathy from middle-class people who assist them with food and clothing.

A case in point is a woman whose name could not be established, but has lived in Arua City for decades. Ms Selsa Adiru, a resident, noted: "This woman has been in this town for some time now. People have nicknamed her Oku'ika'. She lives at the mercy of God because few people offer food to her. Most times, she would get food from the garbage pits or move to hotels to eat the leftovers."

The Director of Voice of Restoration International in West Nile, Mr Daniel Dratibi, urged local leaders to push for mental health and psychosocial support for the youth in their areas.

"There is a new face of a mentally ill person in every trading centre, town, and city in West Nile due to alcohol, drug, and substance abuse. Do you see any leader promoting by-laws/ordinances in that regard? Sadly, the few organisations dedicated to mental health and psychosocial support, alcohol, drug, and substance prevention and treatment are not supported in relation to funding," Mr Dratibi said.

He added: "Money and mental health move together. We should say no to drugs. Financial crisis is affecting mental health... Some people are confused by titles and so cannot rediscover themselves to move out of financial problems."

Mr Dratibi has been combing both rural and urban schools to discourage learners and their peers from consuming *mairungi*, excessive alcohol consumption, among others.

Ms Jascinta Aciyani, a parent in Kango Sub-county, Zombo District, said: "Our youth should learn healthy coping skills like balancing work and rest, building supportive friendships, seeking help when needed, and understanding that success is a journey, not a race."

"Life is never perfect... If you are faced with struggles, speak to a friend or neighbour about the problem so that you can be helped. Do not die silently because the burden is heavy," she added.

MENTAL HEALTH CASES SINCE 2021			
# SUB-REGIONS	WEST NILE	YEAR	
224,181	46,177	2021	
237,638	39,601	2022	
280,229	63,774	2023	
311,453	62,340	2024	

Source: MOH 2025 State of Uganda Population Report on Mental Health

population of 3.9 million.

Family expectations

Family expectations also play a major role. Several young people carry the hopes of their entire families. Parents invest their savings in their children's education and expect success in return. While this support is given with love, it can also create intense pressure.

Frank feared failure not just for himself, but for the people who believed in him. The thought of disappointing them increased his anxiety and made him hide his struggles instead of speaking about them. Financial challenges add an extra layer to the burden.

His story is akin to that of Mr Job Asiku, 30, who is grappling with mental health challenges. His friend, Mr Levy Adaku, who knew him from the village in Vurra in Arua District, said: "This boy struggled with school fees, daily expenses, and supporting family members. Balancing studies with part-time work or worrying about basic needs affects concentration and emotional stability."

Mr Adaku added that Mr Asiku was always worried about what to eat.

"The stress he underwent turned into

KEY STATISTICS

The Ministry of Health 2025 State of Uganda Population Report on Mental Health indicates facility-reported cases increased by over 70 percent between 2021 and 2024 (from 494,326 to 843,295 cases) nationwide. It noted that roughly 24 percent of

adults and 23 percent of children suffer from mental illness, with depression and anxiety being the most common, often driven by poverty, substance abuse, and trauma.

It also said from 2021 to 2024, West Nile Sub-region contributed close to 35 percent of mental health cases across the country.