

EDITORIAL

Govt must take mental health issues seriously

There is a rich body of evidence indicative of the fact that misery appears to be escalating at an alarming scale in Uganda. Estimates suggest that up to half of Uganda's population faces mental health challenges. The grimly negative outlook is driven by a range of factors, including economic pressures, climate-related disasters, and increased food insecurity.

So often mental health challenges in Uganda and their attendant effects are talked about in, almost, abstract terms. This precludes many, if not all, from grasping just how the toll can be devastatingly personal. As the profoundly troubling episode that culminated in Mike Mutebi spending a couple of days shirtless in a banana plantation continues to be handled with the necessary clinical sensitivity, its details have helped humanise what is at any rate an abstract problem.

Mutebi, who this past weekend went AWOL after a get-together with his church members, needs little or no introduction to a country that is intoxicated by football. The trained accountant wrote his greatest chapters at KCCA FC where he became

the first Ugandan coach to reach the money-spinning group stages of the Caf Champions League. But after being handed a pink slip by the club in March 2021, the eloquent tactician—so accustomed to being met with media scrums during his heyday—slipped into a punishing cycle of loneliness.

His mental challenges are what assail a growing number of Ugandans.

In recent times, the number of prescriptions dispensed has been suggestive of some kind of fight being mounted.

This is, in many respects, a work in progress. Bouts of stigma are not hard to make out. Psychological conditions are still stigmatised in Uganda. The widely accepted, if erroneous view that mental illness comes about through weakness of character lingers on today.

Critical steps should be taken to address such misconceptions as an "it's okay to not be okay" message continues to be drilled down. Specifically, for Mutebi, the spaces in which he operated, first as a player, and later as a coach, are as unforgiving as they can get.

Football places huge mental and emotional demands on people in its value chain. It barely helps matters that the media can be hysterical in its treatment of sporting failure. While in the trenches, this unbearable weight continued to bear down on Mutebi.

When the spotlight stopped illuminating his every action, the celebrated coach fell prey to the loneliness pandemic. Others fall prey to alcoholism or other similar addictions.

Evidently, there is a great deal that the government must be intentional about. It, for instance, is hardly a good look that talking therapies in the country are conspicuous by their absence. Also, there is a dire need to cultivate an environment that will encourage people to speak out.

What is not in dispute is that in this era of the Internet, social media and the focus on status, appearance as well as material success, mental health challenges are bound not to be in scant supply. Alive to this, government policy must have a role to play when it comes to dealing with rising anxiety levels.

The issue:

Mental health

Our view:

There is a dire need to cultivate an environment that will encourage people to speak out. Government policy must have a role to play when it comes to dealing with rising anxiety levels.

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