

# Breaking the Silence: There can be no health without mental health

It was difficult to believe that the confident and self-assured man standing by me had for years suffered from severe mental health issues, was ostracised by his family, and left destitute.

My encounter with Ahmad (not his real name) was one of the most memorable moments of my recent 'Ghana Grand' cycle ride, from Tumu to Accra.

Ahmad, who joined us for the 20km ride out of Tamale that morning had, just five years earlier, been found chained to a tree having suffered from recurrent psychotic incidents.

Basic Needs Ghana, a UK Aid funded organisation helping those with mental health challenges, not only found him and helped connect him to Ghanaian psychiatric services but offered ongoing counselling. Ahmad is now married, has two children and – serendipitously – runs a bicycle repair shop.

Thanks to the Basic Needs self-help group, and good community care, Ahmad has become the family breadwinner and owner of a thriving business. He is supporting others in his community to lead equally rewarding and prosperous lives. He is not a “cost” to society; he is an active contributor.

Mental health remains a taboo and is one of the most neglected issues of our time. But this is – thankfully – starting to change. Around the world, mental health, neurological and substance use conditions (MNS) are the leading cause of disability and ill health and it is coming – literally – at a cost to the global economy; estimated at \$16.3 trillion between 2010-2030.

The message is loud and clear: there can be no health, no lasting wealth, without mental health. UK-Ghana Partnership on Mental Health

The UK is proud of our global leadership in Mental Health, demonstrated by our hosting of the first ever Global Ministerial Mental Health Summit in 2018. The Summit united leaders around a commitment to address key mental health challenges, to tackle stigma and discrimination, to increase investment in mental health, and improve access to mental health services and research.

Whether it is family, friends, neighbours or colleagues, the chances are that we all know someone who is affected. 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health problem each year. We will continue to work to ensure that everyone experiencing a mental health problem gets support and respect. But there is much that needs to be done in the UK – and elsewhere.

The UK Government has been investing £10 million (GHS 65 million) of UK Aid to support mental health services across Ghana. Our support has centred on improving access to quality community based mental health care services; and supporting the gradual erosion of stigma.

The UK shares His Excellency The President Nana Akufo-Addo's vision for a self-reliant Ghana. "Ghana Beyond Aid" must leave no one behind, and that includes every Ghanaian affected by a mental health condition. We welcome the leadership and foresight behind the decision to make mental health a priority. Backing this commitment with sufficient resourcing and appropriate legislation will be the key to affecting real change. We have seen considerable change in a short space of time. All districts in Ghana now provide mental health services compared to 32 districts just six years ago. More than 5,000 health workers have been trained on how to treat mental health conditions, with more than 100,000 people receiving treatment for mental health conditions in 2018. Community self-help groups like the one I visited in Tamale have reached 32,827 people, reuniting many with lived experience with their families and providing the tools to enable them live productive lives.

Looking ahead, with UK support, 250,000 Ghanaians will have access to quality mental health services. We are working with the Government of Ghana and the World Health Organisation to put human rights at the heart of Ghana's approach to mental health.

World Mental Health Day 2019 This year, the main theme of World Mental Health Day 2019 (10 October) is suicide prevention. Attempted suicide is a criminal offence in Ghana. It's not for me or the UK to argue the rights and wrongs of this decision. Whatever the laws says, the impact of suicide on families and our communities is devastating and long-lasting. According to the WHO, more than 800,000 people die by suicide a year – mostly men – making it the principal cause of death among young people. Suicide is a global public health problem.

A conversation is healthy. But what is more important is that, together, we nurture an environment in which people receive support so that fewer people decide to take their own lives. The factors and causes are wide-ranging but mental health plays a significant part. As the writer Simone de Beauvoir captured "what chills your spine when you read an account of suicide...[is] what happened inside that heart immediately before". Suicide prevention and support must be part of the solution. Addressing the stigma and discrimination around mental health will support the full, active inclusion of those suffering.

Individuals, families, communities, schools and offices all have a role to play. Working together to improve access to quality mental health services, particularly in more remote areas, will help address the desperation experienced by those suffering the most.

For our part, the UK Government will continue to work with Ghanaian partners at the grassroots to erode the stigma and discrimination around mental health. Next month, a UK Aid supported programme will address stigma among the urban youth, who are among the most vulnerable but are also the key to securing Ghana's long-term future.

As we mark World Mental Health Day, let us recognise that mental health issues can touch us all; and vow to take action to break the stigma as a

first step to protecting our mental health and wellbeing. For me, meeting Ahmad will always be a reminder of the power of hope; the power that we all have in our communities to give hope to others who need it most.