

PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

Mental health literacy among young people in Africa: A keystone for social development

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Abstract

Mental health literacy plays a vital role in addressing mental health challenges among young people in Africa. This paper examines the present state of mental health literacy among African youth, identifies key barriers to its enhancement, and proposes strategies for improvement. Mental health literacy, defined as the knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders that aid in their recognition, management, and prevention, is particularly crucial for young people as it facilitates early recognition of mental health difficulties and promotes help-seeking behaviors. The paper indicates that Africa faces significant challenges, including limited mental health professionals, inadequate support for common mental disorders, and insufficient tailored interventions for youth. The paper concludes that addressing mental health literacy among African youth requires a collaborative approach involving policymakers, educators, healthcare providers, and community leaders.

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1. Introduction

Mental health literacy is a crucial component in addressing mental health issues among young people in Africa. The term refers to the knowledge and beliefs about mental health disorders that aid in their recognition, management, and prevention (Olsson & Kennedy, 2010). Enhancing mental health literacy is particularly important for young people as it helps them recognize mental health difficulties in themselves and others, leading to timely help-seeking behaviors (Yan *et al.*, 2022). This is significant in Africa, where there is limited knowledge on how to tackle mental health problems among young people. This limited knowledge of how to effectively address mental health challenges in Africa is a significant barrier that perpetuates a multitude of interconnected issues, exacerbating the region's mental health crisis. There is a prevailing lack of dedicated mental health policies across many African nations, with nearly half of these countries lacking any form of structured mental health framework (Essien & Asamoah, 2020). This deficiency in policy development, coupled with severe underfunding of mental health services, results in dire outcomes for individuals seeking care. Many patients are left without access to essential medications and treatments due to high costs and limited availability (Chidarikire *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, the stigma surrounding mental health issues further complicates the situation, leading to reluctance among individuals to seek help, exacerbating the burden of mental

disorders within communities (Chibanda *et al.*, 2020; Hart & Norris, 2024).

A study by Carvalho & Vale-Dias (2021) showed that good mental health literacy can lead to better mental health outcomes and improved coping mechanisms for life challenges. However, Africa faces challenges such as a shortage of mental health service professionals, inadequate support for common mental health disorders among young people, and a lack of mental health literacy interventions tailored to the needs of young people (Mutero *et al.*, 2022). Research has shown that mental health literacy is crucial in early identification and intervention when psychological problems develop (Dias *et al.*, 2018). Inadequate mental health literacy implies that many individuals may misinterpret symptoms or fail to recognize the importance of seeking help, contributing to the underutilization of mental health services (Lestari *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, barriers, such as limited access to educational resources exacerbate the issue, making it difficult for educators, and healthcare providers to deliver effective mental health literacy programs (Yulianti *et al.*, 2022). The absence of these interventions fosters an environment where individuals endure avoidable psychological distress, which can escalate to severe mental disorders and adversely affect social, economic, and educational outcomes (Lahti *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, the intergenerational transmission of mental health literacy is crucial; children raised in families where mental health issues are stigmatized are less likely to seek help or understand their mental health, perpetuating a cycle of ignorance and stigma (Wang *et al.*, 2024). Ultimately, without targeted mental health literacy initiatives, Africa's challenges will persist, hindering the continent's overall health progression and the well-being of its population.

School-based interventions have been effective in improving young people's mental health literacy levels, which in turn positively impact their mental health status (Lam, 2014). Educators play a crucial role in this process, as they need to have sufficient mental health literacy to recognize early signs of developing psychiatric symptoms among young people.

In Africa, initiatives like the African Guide have been developed to implement school mental health literacy curricula, aiming to improve mental health knowledge and attitudes among educators and young people (Kutcher *et al.*, 2015; 2017). These efforts are essential for social development, as mental health literacy not only helps in early recognition and intervention for mental disorders but also reduces the stigma associated with mental illness (Ito-Jaeger *et al.*, 2021).

2. Present state of mental health literacy among African youth

The present state of mental health literacy among African youths remains critically low, contributing to significant challenges in addressing mental health issues across the continent. A major factor behind this state of affairs is the insufficient implementation of mental health literacy programs in educational settings. Studies indicate that incorporating structured mental health literacy interventions into school curricula can effectively enhance knowledge and attitudes toward mental health issues, thus promoting help-seeking behavior among youth (McLuckie *et al.*, 2014). Unfortunately, these programs are often absent or under-resourced in many African countries, perpetuating a cycle of ignorance and stigma regarding mental health.

Cultural beliefs and societal stigma significantly exacerbate the issue, often deterring youths from discussing or seeking help for their mental health problems (McCann *et al.*, 2017). Existing social norms and pre-judices often lead to discrimination against those experiencing mental health challenges, fostering a lack of trust in mental health services (Fauk *et al.*, 2021). Studies among specific populations, such as Sub-Saharan African migrants, indicate that inadequate mental health literacy significantly interferes with help-seeking behaviors, revealing a critical need for targeted educational initiatives (McCann *et al.*, 2017).

A study by Reavley & Jorm (2011) showed that there is limited knowledge on how to tackle mental health problems among youth in Africa, highlighting the need for interventions to enhance mental health literacy. Factors influencing mental health literacy in different African contexts include urban-rural differences, social support, and the impact of cultural beliefs on perceptions of mental health (Mutero *et al.*, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Efforts to enhance mental health literacy among young people in Africa have included school-based interventions and the development of tailored curricula to improve knowledge and attitudes towards mental health. Initiatives like the African Guide have focused on improving mental health literacy through interventions that cover various aspects of mental health, including obtaining and maintaining good mental health, understanding mental disorders and treatments, and enhancing help-seeking efficacy (Kutcher *et al.*, 2017).

3. Barriers to enhancing mental health literacy

Enhancing mental health literacy among young people in Africa faces multiple barriers, including stigma, cultural

beliefs, limited access to mental health services, and inadequate education on mental well-being (Hart & Norris, 2024). Mental health issues are often misunderstood or viewed as a spiritual problem, leading to discrimination and reluctance to seek help (Amone-P'Olak *et al.*, 2023). Many communities associate mental illnesses with supernatural causes, making traditional healing practices the preferred approach over professional intervention. In addition, there is a lack of trained mental health professionals and inadequate healthcare infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, limiting access to proper diagnosis and treatment (Kutcher *et al.*, 2019).

Education systems rarely include mental health topics in their curricula, leaving young people unaware of symptoms, coping strategies, and available support. The fear of being labeled weak or unstable discourages open discussions, perpetuating the cycle of ignorance and misinformation. Poverty and economic challenges further restrict access to healthcare services, making mental health a low priority for many families (Aluh *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, digital and media platforms, which could be effective tools for awareness, are underutilized due to limited internet access and resources (Jumbe *et al.*, 2022). Overcoming these barriers requires culturally sensitive education, community involvement, policy changes, and investment in mental health services to improve awareness and support for young people.

Improving mental health literacy among young people in Africa faces several challenges, including cultural stigma, lack of resources, and inadequate educational programs (Kutcher *et al.*, 2015). The cultural stigma surrounding mental health remains a significant barrier to enhancing mental health literacy among young people in Africa. Stigma can result in discrimination, social exclusion, and reluctance to seek help for mental health issues (Kutcher *et al.*, 2015).

Insufficient resources, such as funding for mental health care and awareness programs, present a significant challenge in advancing mental health literacy among young people in Africa. Limited resources lead to inadequate support for mental health initiatives, resulting in gaps in mental health education and awareness campaigns (Kutcher *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, the absence of child and youth mental health policies and insufficient awareness among policymakers about the impact of mental disorders on young people contribute to the overall lack of resources allocated to mental health literacy endeavors (Kutcher *et al.*, 2015).

Inadequate educational programs also hinder efforts to enhance mental health literacy among young people in Africa. The lack of mental health literacy among educators,

health providers, and the general population underscores the necessity for comprehensive and targeted educational initiatives to address knowledge gaps and misconceptions about mental health (Kutcher *et al.*, 2015). Without effective educational programs, young individuals may continue to lack the essential skills and knowledge to recognize, understand, and address mental health issues.

4. Strategies for improving mental health literacy among young people in Africa

4.1. Educational initiatives

Educational initiatives can enhance mental health literacy among young people in Africa by integrating mental health education into school curricula, promoting awareness through community programs, and training teachers to recognize and support students' mental well-being (Whitley *et al.*, 2013). Campaigns using digital platforms and local languages can help break stigmas and encourage open conversations. Partnerships with healthcare professionals and non-governmental organizations can provide resources, counseling, and safe spaces for youth. Peer-led support groups can also foster a culture of understanding and resilience (Badrudin *et al.*, 2021). By making mental health education accessible and culturally relevant, these initiatives empower young people to seek help, reduce stigma, and improve overall well-being. Implementing mental health literacy programs in schools is an effective approach to reaching many young individuals. Training teachers and school staff on mental health literacy can empower them to identify early signs of mental health issues in students and provide appropriate support and referrals (Freeman, 2023; Imran *et al.*, 2018).

4.2. Community-based programs

Community-based programs can improve mental health literacy among young people in Africa by creating safe spaces for open discussions, awareness campaigns, and peer support networks (Syan *et al.*, 2022). These programs can integrate mental health education into youth centers, religious groups, and social clubs, using culturally relevant approaches to address stigma (Syan *et al.*, 2021). Training community leaders, parents, and educators to recognize mental health issues and provide support can enhance early intervention. Leveraging digital platforms, radio, and storytelling can make mental health information more accessible (Afreen *et al.*, 2024). These programs empower young people to seek help and promote well-being by fostering community engagement and collaboration with mental health professionals. In addition, involving communities in mental health literacy initiatives can help reduce stigma and enhance awareness.

4.3. Use of technology and social media

Leveraging digital platforms, such as online educational sessions, mobile applications, and social media campaigns, can reach a broader audience and offer accessible mental health resources to young people. Developing digital video interventions and interactive tools can enhance mental health literacy by engaging youth in learning about mental health topics interactively and engagingly. Establishing peer-delivery models for mental health interventions using technology can promote self-efficacy for help-seeking and empower young people to manage their mental well-being. By integrating these strategies and interventions, tailored to the specific needs and contexts of young people in Africa, it is feasible to significantly enhance mental health literacy among young people, reduce stigma, encourage early intervention, and ultimately improve overall mental well-being in Africa.

5. Conclusion

The promotion of mental health literacy among young people in Africa is crucial for addressing the mental health challenges they face. The limited knowledge and understanding of mental health issues, coupled with cultural stigma, lack of resources, and inadequate educational programs, present significant obstacles to improving mental health literacy in the region. However, by implementing targeted strategies and interventions, progress can be made toward enhancing mental health literacy among African youth. Educational initiatives, such as integrating mental health literacy programs into school curricula and providing training for teachers, are essential for reaching a large number of young individuals. Community-based programs that involve communities in mental health awareness campaigns and provide support groups can help reduce stigma and increase awareness. Leveraging technology and social media platforms to deliver mental health resources and interventions can also broaden access and engagement among young people. Stakeholders involved in youth and mental health in Africa are called upon to collaborate and prioritize mental health literacy initiatives. By translating research into action, leveraging cultural assets, and addressing barriers to help-seeking behaviors, stakeholders can work towards mitigating disparities and promoting mental well-being among African youth.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author contributions

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