

**ROLES OF FIRST LIFESTYLE FITNESS FOUNDATION IN
ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND SUICIDE
AMONG POOR RURAL POPULATION IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the critical role of the First Lifestyle Fitness Foundation (FLFF) in addressing mental health issues and preventing suicide among the poor rural population in Nigeria. FLFF, established to promote holistic health through innovative lifestyle adjustments, focuses on integrating physical activity, proper nutrition, and community engagement to enhance overall well-being. In Nigeria, mental health services are significantly under-resourced, especially in rural areas where poverty is prevalent and access to professional mental health care is limited. The foundation's initiatives include promoting fitness as an accessible and enjoyable activity, spreading awareness about the importance of good nutrition, and creating strong community support networks. FLFF also engages in educational campaigns to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and collaborates with local leaders to influence positive behavioural changes. By leveraging existing healthcare platforms and employing evidence-based techniques, FLFF works to provide comprehensive mental health support. This paper highlights the Foundation's impact and success stories, illustrating how its programs have transformed the lives of individuals in rural communities. This integrated and culturally sensitive approach is crucial for addressing the mental health crisis and reducing suicide rates in Nigeria's underserved rural areas.

Keywords: Mental Health, Suicide Prevention, Rural Population, First Lifestyle Fitness Foundation

INTRODUCTION

Mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety prevail significantly in low- and middle-income countries such as Nigeria (Audu, Idris, Olisah, & Sheikh, 2013; Aborode et al., 2022), with less than 15% of individuals experiencing mental illnesses having access to mental healthcare services in the country (Gureje, Lasebikan, Kola, & Makanjuola, 2006; Aborode et al., 2022). Access to mental health-related treatments is mainly limited to cities and specialized hospitals (Adesina, Olufadewa, Olufadewa, & Oladele, 2024), as there are fewer than 250 psychiatrists in Nigeria (Okechukwu, 2020). The rural populace in Nigeria is thus left without resources for psychiatric care. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS; 2022), approximately 70% of Nigeria's population lives in rural areas, with approximately 80% of them living in poverty. These poor rural populaces often resort to self-medication, self-diagnosis or outright denial of their mental health status when symptoms of mental illness occur. Most of these affected people who have no source of help are children and adolescents who may resort to suicide.

The major risk factors for suicide behaviour in Nigeria include sadness, anxiety, and hopelessness, along with social pressure, relationship issues, financial hardships, stigma around mental health conditions, and lack of access to quality medical care (Oderinde & Oderinde, 2023). The World Health Organization (WHO; 2023) identified a prior suicide attempt as the single most important risk factor for suicide in the general population. They further assert that suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15- to 29-year-olds, with 77% percent of global suicides occurring in low- and middle-income countries. Ingestion of pesticides, hanging and firearms are among the most common methods of committing suicide globally, with every 45 seconds witnessing someone die of suicide around the world (WHO,2023).

As a result, stakeholders in the health sector have increasingly tasked the government with improving mental healthcare services in Nigeria (Babalola, 2024), as this action could address suicide and mental health issues (Ibrahim, 2023), as there are only nine federal neuropsychiatric hospitals tasked with serving the mental health needs of Nigeria's vast population of more than 200 million people (Mba-Oduwusi et al., 2024). It is therefore imperative that the Nigerian government create an enabling environment for people to develop their capabilities (Ejike, 2022), as poverty is one of the predictors of mental health issues.

PREVENTING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND SUICIDE AMONG POOR RURAL POPULATION IN NIGERIA

Preventing mental health issues and suicide among the poor rural population in Nigeria requires a comprehensive approach that addresses various factors contributing to these challenges. One crucial aspect is raising awareness about mental health and encouraging individuals to monitor their mental well-being. Stigma and ignorance surrounding mental health often hinder individuals from seeking professional help, leading them to resort to self-medication, spiritual interventions, or denial instead of seeking appropriate assistance (Abiodun et al., 2014).

Efforts to combat these challenges must include education and community outreach programs to address the stigma associated with mental health issues. Studies have shown that movie-centered health education can effectively improve awareness, knowledge, and perceptions of health issues among rural populations in Nigeria (Abiodun et al., 2014). Additionally, addressing the gap between the demand and supply of mental health care services is crucial in bridging the barriers to accessing mental health support in rural areas (Fadele, 2024).

Furthermore, it is essential to consider the unique perspectives and understanding of mental health within rural communities. Research has highlighted the importance of exploring community stakeholders' perceptions of mental illness and its interpretations in rural Nigerian settings (Lawal, 2024). Understanding these perspectives can help tailor interventions to be more culturally sensitive and effective in addressing mental health challenges.

In Nigeria, low-income groups in both urban and rural areas face barriers to accessing mental health services, emphasizing the need to address these disparities to ensure equitable access to care (Jack-Ide & Uys, 2013). Sensible media reporting has also been identified as a critical suicide prevention strategy, highlighting the importance of responsible reporting on mental health issues in the media (Oyetunji et al., 2020).

Moreover, integrating mental health services into existing healthcare programs, such as HIV programs, can provide opportunities to address comorbid mental health disorders among vulnerable populations (Ezeanolue et al., 2020). This integrated approach can help individuals who may not seek mental health services independently but are engaged in other healthcare programs.

In rural areas where access to healthcare services may be limited, leveraging existing platforms such as antenatal and delivery services can help increase awareness and utilisation of mental health services (Eke et al., 2021). Efforts to increase delivery at primary health centres have shown potential for reducing maternal mortality in rural Nigeria, indicating the effectiveness of utilising existing healthcare infrastructure for mental health interventions (Eke et al., 2021).

In conclusion, preventing mental health issues and suicide among the poor rural population in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach that addresses stigma, improves access to mental health services, and integrates mental health into existing healthcare programs. By raising awareness, addressing cultural perceptions, and ensuring equitable access to care, it is possible to make significant strides in promoting mental well-being and preventing suicide in rural communities.

First Lifestyle Fitness Foundation

The first LFF was established with a vision to serve, engage, educate, and empower social and health organizations, community groups, and individuals across different lifespans. Its mission is to promote healthy lifestyles that include regular physical activity and good nutrition. The foundation's roots can be traced back to 1998 in the USA, where its founder began by training injured service members and providing vitamin and food supplements. In 2020, the foundation expanded its humanitarian services to Nigeria, where it was registered under the Corporate Affairs Commission as an incorporated trustee.

The core objective of FLFF is to provide and support innovative solutions in healthcare, utilizing fitness as the foundation for overall well-being. By implementing systematic fitness and nutritional programs, FLFF aims to address cardiovascular diseases, mental health issues, and overall wellness.

The Roles of the First Lifestyle Fitness Foundation in Promoting Mental Health and Preventing Suicide

One of the primary ways FLFF addresses mental health issues and prevents suicide is through its holistic fitness and lifestyle adjustment approach. This strategy involves a multifaceted plan that integrates physical activity, proper nutrition, and community engagement to foster a healthier and more resilient population.

Fitness and physical activity

Physical activity is a cornerstone of FLFF's strategy to improve mental health. Regular exercise has been proven to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, improve mood, and enhance overall mental well-being (Mayo Clinic, 2022). FLFF promotes fitness as an easy, fun, and affordable activity, making it accessible to all community members. By organizing sports

events, community fitness programs, and daily exercise routines, FLFF encourages people to incorporate physical activity into their daily lives. These activities not only improve physical health but also provide a sense of community and support, which are crucial for mental health.

Nutrition and Wellness

Proper nutrition is another critical component of the FLFF approach. Good nutrition has a direct impact on mental health, with deficiencies in certain nutrients linked to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (National Institute of Mental Health, 2021). FLFF conducts focused campaigns to spread awareness about the importance of a balanced diet and provides nutritional guidance to help individuals make healthier food choices. By educating communities about the benefits of good nutrition, FLFF helps to create a foundation for better mental health.

Community Engagement and Support

The FLFF recognizes that community support is essential for mental well-being. The foundation works to create strong community networks by partnering with local governments, private sectors, civil societies, and academic institutions. These partnerships enable FLFF to bring together financial and technical resources to provide innovative solutions to public healthcare challenges. Through these collaborations, FLFF has been able to establish community primary healthcare services targeted at vulnerable populations, ensuring that everyone has access to essential health services.

Addressing Stigma and Raising Awareness

The stigma surrounding mental health is a significant barrier to seeking help in many rural areas of Nigeria (Abiodun et al., 2014). FLFF is actively working to combat this stigma through education and public enlightenment campaigns. By normalizing discussions about mental health and emphasizing the importance of seeking help, FLFF helps to shift community attitudes and behaviours.

Educational campaigns

FLFF conducts extensive educational campaigns to spread awareness about mental health and the benefits of physical activity and proper nutrition. These campaigns are designed to be accessible and engaging, using local languages and culturally relevant materials to ensure broad reach and impact. By educating the public about mental health, FLFF aims to reduce stigma and encourage more people to seek the help they need.

Role of Community Leaders

In many rural communities, religious and community leaders have significant influence. FLFF engages these leaders in its awareness campaigns, educating them about mental health and enlisting their support in promoting healthy behaviours. These leaders can play a crucial role in changing community perceptions and encouraging individuals to adopt healthier lifestyles.

Holistic Approach to Healthcare

FLFF's holistic approach to healthcare involves integrating physical activity, nutrition, and mental health services to create a comprehensive wellness model. This model not only addresses immediate health concerns but also promotes long-term well-being.

Integrated Healthcare Services

FLFF integrates mental health services into its broader healthcare initiatives. By providing mental health screenings, counselling services, and support groups, the FLFF ensures that mental health is addressed alongside physical health. This integrated approach helps to identify and treat mental health issues early, preventing them from escalating to more severe conditions such as suicidal behaviour.

Evidence-Based Techniques

FLFF employs evidence-based techniques to improve mental health and overall wellness. These techniques include mindfulness practices, stress management strategies, and cognitive-behavioural interventions. By incorporating these methods into their programs, FLFF provides individuals with practical tools to manage their mental health effectively.

Impact and success stories

Since its inception, FLFF has made significant progress in improving mental health and preventing suicide in rural Nigerian communities. Through fitness programs, nutritional guidance, and mental health services, foundations positively impact the lives of many individuals. Testimonials from community members highlight the transformative effect of FLFF initiatives on their physical and mental well-being.

Conclusion

Addressing mental health issues and preventing suicide among the poor rural population in Nigeria is a complex and multifaceted challenge that requires a holistic approach. The First Lifestyle Fitness Foundation (FLFF) has demonstrated that integrating physical activity, proper nutrition, and community engagement into mental health initiatives can significantly improve overall well-being. By promoting fitness as an accessible and enjoyable activity, educating communities on the importance of nutrition, and fostering strong community support networks, FLFF is making substantial strides in reducing the stigma surrounding mental health and increasing access to mental health care in rural areas.

FLFF's educational campaigns and partnerships with local leaders have been instrumental in changing community perceptions about mental health. These efforts have encouraged individuals to seek help and adopt healthier lifestyles, thereby reducing the incidence of mental health issues and suicidal behaviour. Additionally, FLFF's integration of mental health services into existing healthcare programs has provided a comprehensive wellness model that addresses both immediate and long-term health concerns.

Despite these successes, significant barriers remain, including the shortage of mental health professionals and the pervasive stigma associated with mental illness. To further mitigate these challenges, it is imperative for the Nigerian government and stakeholders in the health sector to invest in mental health infrastructure, enhance training for healthcare workers, and continue public education efforts.

By building on the foundation laid by FLFF and similar organizations, it is possible to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for mental health care in Nigeria. This approach not only addresses the urgent needs of the rural population but also contributes to improving mental health outcomes across the country. With continued effort and collaboration, substantial progress can be made in promoting mental well-being and preventing suicide in Nigeria's rural communities.

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