Creating a Supportive Secondary School Environment for Mental Health Awareness for Sustainable wellbeing of Students

Joy-Telu Hamilton-Ekeke[1], Panebi Ugo[2]

[1] Department of Health Education and Human Kinetics, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State

[2]Department of Agricultural Education, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State

Corresponding author: Joy-Telu Hamilton-Ekeke; joytelu@yahoo.com

Abstract

Mental health refers to a person's emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders it also involves a person's ability to cope with life's stresses, to build and maintain relationships, and to live a fulfilling life. Mental health is a critical component of overall well-being, especially among adolescents who face numerous psychological, social, and academic pressures. Mental health awareness is essential for early identification and management of mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, psychosis, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. In recent years, there has been growing recognition worldwide of the importance of mental health education and awareness, particularly in school settings where adolescents spend a significant portion of their time. In Nigeria, mental health issues often go unnoticed due to limited awareness and stigma surrounding mental illness. This lack of awareness may contribute to poor academic performance, social withdrawal, and increased vulnerability to risky behaviours. Understanding the level of mental health awareness across all ages is vital to informing policies, intervention programs, and educational curricula aimed at improving mental health outcomes. This paper x-rayed how supportive school environment can inculcate mental health awareness for the sustenance of health and wellbeing.The paper concluded that, the sustainable wellbeing of students depends on a holistic and compassionate approach that values mental health as much as academic success. In conclusion a supportive school environment serves as a protective factor that enhances students' resilience and overall well-being. By promoting mental health awareness, ensuring access to support resources, and fostering a culture of empathy and inclusion, schools create conditions that enable students to achieve positive academic, social, and personal outcomes.

Keywords: mental health, supportive environment, sustainability, wellbeing, Nigeria

Introduction

Mental health is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins an individual and collective ability to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world people live in. Mental health is a basic human right, and it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development. According to the World Health Organization (2025), mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community. This definition is similar to the initial assertion ofAbalaka et al (2023) who conceptualizes mental health as a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities to cope with the normal

stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

Mental health conditions include mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities as well as other mental states associated with significant distress, impairment in functioning, or risk of self-harm. People with mental health conditions are more likely to experience lower levels of mental well-being. Individual psychological and biological factors such as emotional skills, substance use and genetics can make people more vulnerable to mental health problems. Exposure to unfavourable social, economic, geopolitical and environmental circumstances including poverty, violence, inequality and environmental deprivation also increases people's risk of experiencing mental health conditions (Bello & Owoaje, 2020). Risks can manifest themselves at all stages of life, but those that occur during developmentally sensitive periods, especially early childhood, are particularly detrimental. For example, harsh parenting and physical punishment is known to undermine child health and bullying is a leading risk factor for mental health conditions. Mental health risks and protective factors can be found in society at different scales. Local threats heighten risk for individuals, families and communities. Global threats heighten risk for whole populations and include economic downturns, disease outbreaks, humanitarian emergencies and forced displacement and the growing climate crisis.

Each single risk and protective factor has only limited predictive strength. Most people do not develop a mental health condition despite exposure to a risk factor and many people with no known risk factor still develop a mental health condition. Nonetheless, the interacting determinants of mental health serve to enhance or undermine mental health and wellbeing.

A study conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2016 estimated that 10-12% ofNigerian population suffered from mental health disorders, with depression being the most common (Ogunsemi et al., 2022). An earlier study conducted in 2014 estimated that approximately 11% of Nigerians suffer from mental health disorders, with depression and anxiety being the most common (Akande et al., 2014). Mental health is a vital component of the total health of an individual because the entire thought process takes place in the mind, ideas originate in the mind and all kinds of directions are issued from the mind which guide, shape and regulate communication, conduct and behaviour and determine personal and social functioning as well as adjustment (Bhargava & Raina, 2017). Findings from Kessler et al. reveal that 50% of all lifelong mental disorders start by age 14 and 75% by age 24. Evidence shows that mental health problems are common in adolescents with approximately one in five experiencing some form of emotional disorder (Ogunsemi et al., 2022)

Mental health issues among adolescents in senior secondary schools refer to psychological, emotional, and behavioural conditions that affect students' mental and psychosocial well-being. These issues often arise from the demands, expectations, and pressures associated with academic and school-related activities. Consequently, they may impair adolescents' behavioural patterns, biological functioning, sensory and perceptual processes, and overall cognitive performance, thereby hindering their ability to learn effectively and achieve their academic potential.

Data from the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) studies have shown that mental disorders contributes significantly to disability among children and adolescents and, in fact, these disorders are likely to rank high among children and adolescent of the twenty-first century (Baranne & Falissard, 2018). When Students are pressured by daily school related activities, it could become cumbersome for them to learn, cope and adjust in school which could be

detrimental to their mental well-being, and could result to different behavioural disorders. The heightened increase of mental health challenges among students has been attributed to a variety of factors from academic pressure to experienced psychobiological developmental milestones (Barrow & Thomas, 2022).

Psychobiological developmental milestones in adolescence refer to the major physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes that occur as individual's transition from childhood to adulthood. These include: firstly, physical growth and puberty - during adolescence, rapid physical growth occurs as a result of hormonal changes. Boys and girls experience growth spurts, changes in body shape, development of secondary sexual characteristics, and reproductive maturity. This milestone marks the transition from childhood to biological adulthood.

Secondly, sexual maturation - adolescents develop the capacity for reproduction. Girls begin menstruation (menarche), while boys experience sperm production and first ejaculation. Increased awareness of sexuality and sexual identity also emerges during this stage.

Thirdly, brain development and development of abstract thinking - significant development occurs in the brain, particularly in areas responsible for reasoning, planning, decision-making, and self-control. Although adolescents become better thinkers, emotional centres of the brain often mature faster than the areas responsible for judgment, which may lead to risk-taking behaviour. Adolescents move beyond concrete thinking and begin to think abstractly. They can understand complex concepts, consider hypothetical situations, solve problems logically, and think about moral, philosophical, and future-oriented issues.

Fourthly, identity formation and emotional maturity - major developmental task of adolescence is developing a sense of personal identity. Adolescents explore their values, beliefs, career interests, cultural background, and life goals to answer the question, 'Who am I?'Adolescents experience intense emotions due to hormonal and social changes. Over time, they learn to recognize, manage, and express emotions more effectively, leading to greater emotional stability and self-awareness.

Fifthly, increased independence, peer relationship development, and development of intimate relationships - young people gradually seek autonomy from parents and caregivers. They begin making more personal decisions, taking responsibility for their actions, and developing confidence in their own abilities. Friendships become increasingly important during adolescence. Peer groups provide emotional support, opportunities for social learning, and a sense of belonging. Adolescents often place greater value on peer opinions than they did during childhood. As adolescents mature, they begin to form deeper emotional and romantic relationships. They learn about trust, affection, commitment, and interpersonal communication.

Sixthly, moral and ethical reasoning - adolescents develop a stronger understanding of right and wrong. They begin to question rules, evaluate ethical issues, and form their own moral principles based on personal values and societal influences. Psychobiological developmental milestones in adolescence encompass significant changes in the body, brain, emotions, relationships, and identity. Together, these milestones prepare adolescents for the responsibilities and challenges of adulthood (Amawulu & Prosper, 2018). Secondary school Adolescents undergo rigorous school related activities which involve daily studies and extracurricular activities that take a toll on their physical and mental health hence, they become stressed up and disorganised. Students who experience such academic stressful life events often have worse health outcomes and reduced quality of life (Ebenezer & kurokeyi,

2018). Mental Health in educational institutions is an important public health concern as about 20 - 27% of mental disorders frequently occurs early in life from adolescence, which if recognized early, appropriate interventions can be instituted and a better health outcome achieved (Khombo et al., 2023).

In today's fast-paced and competitive world, students face an increasing number of challenges that affect not only their academic performance but also their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Academic pressure, social expectations, digital overload, and personal struggles can lead to stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. Therefore, creating a supportive school environment that prioritizes mental health awareness is essential for ensuring the sustainable wellbeing of students. A school is more than just a place for academic learning it is a community where young individuals develop socially, emotionally, and morally (Nneka & Uju, 2021). A positive and supportive school environment helps students feel safe, valued, and understood. When schools acknowledge mental health as a critical aspect of a student's overall development, they foster a culture of care and inclusion, laying the foundation for healthy lifelong habits.

Mental Health Conditions Common among Adolescents

Depression is a common and serious mental health condition that negatively affects how adolescents feel, think, and act. It is characterized by persistent sadness, loss of interest in activities, and difficulty concentrating (Chinawa et al., 2015). In adolescents, depression may also manifest as irritability, academic decline, and withdrawal from social activities. Another condition is anxiety disorder and this condition is among the most prevalent mental health condition in adolescents. This disorder involves excessive fear or worry that interferes with daily activities and includes symptoms like restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, and sleep disturbances (Nepal et al., 2020). When left untreated, anxiety can significantly impair academic performance and social development. Psychosis is another mental health condition that is gaining foothold in adolescent population especially as a result of drug misuse that is prevalent in the society today. It refers to a set of symptoms that affect the mind, causing a loss of touch with reality (Rugai & Hamilton-Ekeke, 2017). It can include hallucinations, delusions, and disorganized thinking, early-onset of psychosis is a serious condition that requires early recognition and treatment (Abalaka et al., 2023).

A not too common recognizable mental health issue especially in this part of the world i.e. Nigeria is - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This mental health condition is very common in child and adolescent .ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder marked by patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that are more severe than typically observed in peers. Adolescents with ADHD may struggle with schoolwork, relationships, and behaviour control (Amawulu & Prosper, 2018). Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, also called ADHD, is a long-term condition that affects millions of children. It often continues into adulthood. ADHD includes a mix of on-going problems. These can include having a hard time paying attention, being hyperactive and being impulsive. Children with ADHD also may have low self-esteem and troubled relationships and do poorly in school. Symptoms sometimes lessen with age. Some people never completely outgrow their ADHD symptoms but they can learn strategies to be successful. While treatment won't cure ADHD, it can help a great deal with symptoms. Besides giving education about ADHD, treatment can involve medicines and behaviour therapies. Early diagnosis and treatment can make a big difference in results. The main features of ADHD include not paying attention and being hyperactive and impulsive. ADHD symptoms usually start before age 12. In some children, they can be seen as early as 3 years of age. ADHD symptoms can be mild, moderate or severe. Symptoms

need to be seen in two or more settings, such as at home and at school (Amawulu & Prosper, 2018). The symptoms cause problems with development and daily life and may continue into adulthood. ADHD occurs more often in boys than in girls. Behaviours can be different in boys and girls. For example, boys may be more hyperactive and girls may tend to quietly not pay attention.

Factors Influencing Mental Health Awareness

Mental health awareness which is the extent to which individuals recognize mental health issues, understand their symptoms, and are knowledgeable about mental health services ,needs to gain more and better recognition. Mental health involves being able to identify specific mental health conditions and understanding when and where to seek help. Among adolescents, awareness is critical for early intervention, prevention of severe outcomes, and reduction of stigma. Mental health literacy which is a component of awareness involves knowledge of prevention, recognition, and management of mental health disorders (Baranne & Falissard, 2018). Lack of awareness often leads to delayed treatment or misinterpretation of symptoms. Gender has been shown to influence how adolescents perceive and respond to mental health issues. Studies (Ogunsemi et al., 2022) suggest that female students are more likely to recognize and report emotional problems, whereas male students may underreport symptoms due to social norms around masculinity (Nneka & Uju, 2021) .The level of education or class may also affect mental health awareness. Older students (Senior Secondary Three – SS3) might have more exposure to topics related to mental health through school programs, media, or peer discussions compared to those in Senior Secondary One(SS1).Sources of mental health information include parents, teachers, peers, mass media and online platforms. The availability and accuracy of these sources influence adolescents' understanding of mental health, where reliable information is lacking, misconceptions may arise (Gidado et al., 2023).

The Importance of mental Health Awareness among Secondary School Students

Mental health is an important part of the overall health of children as well as the adults. It has been stated that case of many adults who have mental disorders, symptoms were present in childhood and adolescence, but often were not recognised or addressed (Keyes et al., 2019). In reality, for a young person with presenting symptoms of a mental disorder, the earlier treatment is started, the more effective it can be as it can help prevent more severe and lasting problems. Therefore it is important to introduce the concept of mental health at a young age, when these developing minds can grasp and understand such conversations without any preconceived notions. A plethora of factors determine the mental health of a child and adolescent at any given point and time, these include desire for autonomy, media influence, peer pressure, quality of family life, academic or career-related pressures, chronic illnesses, poor living conditions and lack of access to quality services and support. 10-19 years of age is a crucial period for developing and maintaining social and emotional habits which are important for mental well-being (Abalaka et al., 2023). These include developing healthy sleep patterns, regular exercise, developing problem-solving and interpersonal skills, and learning to understand and manage emotions. In addition to this development at the individual level, supportive environments in the family, at school, and in the wider community can play a significant role in the overall healthy development of a child. Children and adolescents with mental health conditions are also particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, discrimination and stigma, which may affect their readiness to seek help.

In an increasingly complex and demanding world, schools are not just centres for academic learning but they are also crucial environments for shaping the emotional and psychological

wellbeing of students. As mental health issues among children and adolescents continue to rise globally, the need for sustainable approaches to support student mental health has never been more urgent (El Ansari et al., 2021). A sustainable school environment for mental health awareness is one that not only addresses immediate needs but also builds long-term systems and cultures that promote emotional wellbeing across generations. Mental health is foundational to a student's ability to learn, build relationships, and succeed both academically and socially, this cannot be over emphasized. By raising mental health awareness in schools, students learn that it is okay to talk about their feelings and ask for help. This reduces stigma and creates an environment where mental wellbeing is considered as important as physical health. Mental health awareness is not a one-time lesson but it must be woven into the school's culture, policies, and everyday practices to be truly sustainable.

Creating Supportive Environment for Positive Mental Health

Several studies have made various analyses and recommendations on how positive mental health can be achieved through an environment that promotes mental health awareness. Researchers have consistently found that supportive environments, particularly in schools, families, and communities, play a significant role in enhancing psychological well-being and preventing mental health problems among adolescents (Margaretha, et al., 2023).Studies carried out by Hertz et al. (2024) and the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2024a) have indicated that when individuals are educated about mental health issues, they are better able to recognize symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression, and other emotional difficulties. This awareness reduces stigma and encourages help-seeking behaviour. As a result, individuals are more willing to access counselling services and discuss mental health concerns openly.

Researchers in United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2023) as well as Centre for Disease Control (CDC, 2024b, 2024c) also found that supportive relationships within the environment contribute significantly to positive mental health. Positive interactions with teachers, parents, peers, and other community members provide emotional support, improve self-esteem, and strengthen resilience. Such relationships help individuals cope more effectively with challenges and life stressors.

Furthermore, studies from World Health Organization (WHO, n.d.) and Pan American Health Organization (2023) emphasize the importance of creating safe and inclusive environments where individuals feel respected, valued, and accepted. Environments that discourage bullying, discrimination, and social exclusion promote feelings of belonging and emotional security, which are important factors in maintaining good mental health.

Several recommendations have emerged from these studies. First, mental health education should be integrated into schools and community programs to increase awareness and reduce misconceptions about mental illness. Second, counselling and psychological support services should be made easily accessible to those in need. Third, teachers, parents, and community leaders should be trained to recognize early signs of mental health difficulties and provide appropriate support. Finally, policies that promote inclusion, respect, and emotional well-being should be implemented to create environments that nurture positive mental health.

In conclusion, positive mental health can be achieved when individuals live, learn, and interact in environments that actively promote mental health awareness. Through education, social support, access to professional services, and the creation of safe and inclusive settings, individuals can develop resilience, emotional well-being, and a healthier outlook on life.

Mental health education should not only be a concept in some specific disciplines as it helps students learn to identify emotions, manage stress, build resilience, and seek help without shame. Some Universities are beginning to domicile mental health as a general studies course in their university e.g. Niger Delta University, University of Delta, to mention but few (Hamilton-Ekeke et al., 2024). Awareness campaigns of mental health days, open discussions, and peer-led programs can all contribute to breaking the stigma surrounding mental illness and encourage students to speak up about their challenges (Gidado, et al., 2023; Hamilton-Ekeke et al.,, 2024).

Another crucial element in creating supportive environment for mental health to strive is the availability of accessible mental health resources. Schools should employ trained counsellors or psychologists who can provide professional guidance to students in need. In addition, peer mentoring programs, safe spaces for open conversations, and anonymous helplines can offer students support when they feel overwhelmed. These services ensure that mental health care is not a privilege but a right for every student (El Ansari et al., 2021). Teachers and school staff play a pivotal role in creating supportive environment, therefore their training to recognize signs of emotional distress, such as sudden changes in behaviour, withdrawal, or decline in academic performance is germane (Kirsti et al., 2019). Keyes et al (2019) asserted that with proper training, educators can respond with empathy and connect students with the appropriate support systems. (Ogorchukwu et al., 2016) further reiterated that educators' positive attitudes toward mental health issues can shape the entire school culture and promote acceptance and understanding.

Equally important is the involvement of parents and the wider community. Parents' level of mental health awareness is crucial in their support and empathy in what and how their wards are copying with life stresses. This has necessitated their involvement and education on the importance of mental wellbeing and encouraged them to maintain open communication with their children. Schools can organize workshops and seminars to bridge the gap between home and school, ensuring consistent support across all learning environments (Rugai & Hamilton-Ekeke, 2017). For wellbeing to be truly sustainable, mental health practices must be on-going and deeply embedded in school life. This includes promoting healthy lifestyle choices, such as regular physical activity, balanced nutrition, and adequate sleep (Onukwufor & Izuchi, 2017). Mindfulness exercises such as yoga, stress management workshops, and creative outlets like music, art, or journaling can also enhance emotional resilience.

Creating a sustainable school environment for mental health involves more than offering occasional counselling or organizing a mental health week. It requires a long-term, whole-school approach that includes the following key elements: mental health education, supportive staff and trained educators, accessible support systems, inclusive and safe school culture, parent and community involvement, and sustainability through policy and leadership to mention but a few. Schools should integrate mental health education into their curriculum to teach students about emotions, coping strategies, self-care, and how to support others (Bello & Owoaje, 2020). Lessons on resilience, empathy, and stress management empower students with lifelong skills for wellbeing. Teachers and school staff are often the first to notice when a student is struggling. Providing them with training on mental health awareness helps them respond appropriately and sensitively. They can then become strong advocates for mental wellness within the school. Sustainable mental health support means having systems in place that students can turn to consistently. This includes on-site counsellors, mental health professionals, peer mentoring programs, and confidential support services. These resources should be easily accessible and promoted regularly (Barrow & Thomas, 2022). A sustainable environment is one where every student feels safe, respected, and included. Anti-bullying

policies, inclusive practices, and open communication between students and staff help create a positive and supportive school climate that prioritizes wellbeing. Mental health support doesn't end at the school gates. Schools should engage parents and the wider community in their mental health strategies. Workshops, information sessions, and family-based programs can help reinforce positive practices at home and ensure continuity of care. Odual et al. (2022) stated that for mental health awareness to be sustainable it must be embedded in the school's policies and championed by leadership, school leaders should create long-term mental health strategies with clear goals, allocate budgets for mental health programs, and regularly assess the effectiveness of their initiatives. When mental health is treated as a core part of the school's mission, it is bound to receive the attention and resources it deserves.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Creating a sustainable school environment for mental health awareness is not just a response to a crisis it is an investment in the future. When students feel mentally supported, they are more likely to succeed academically, build healthy relationships, and become resilient, compassionate adults. Schools must take the lead in normalizing mental health conversations, providing consistent support, and fostering a culture of care and inclusion. Only then can school ensure the long-term wellbeing of every student, and create schools that are not just centres of learning, but true communities of support and growth. However, building supportive environment comes with challenges such as stigma, lack of resources, and resistance to change can hinder progress. To overcome these barriers, schools must work in collaboration with mental health organizations, government bodies, and local communities. Even small steps like normalizing conversations about emotions or including mental health in morning assemblies can make a significant difference over time.

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