

Lifestyle

What's with depression among youth?

Face the elephant in the room. As we start the New Year, here are tips on helping youth and parents confront a silent mental health crisis. **Pg 15**



Depression among youth is a silent killer. PHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK

What's with depression among our youth lately?

Mental health. Behind the music and politeness, a young man fought a loneliness that eventually claimed his life.

BY MICHAEL AGABA

Jonah, 19, was quiet, thoughtful, and easy to miss in a crowd. To most people, he looked like any other young man finding his way through life: neatly dressed, polite, a guitar slung across his back like an extension of himself. Music was his refuge. When he played, his fingers spoke the words he struggled to say.

He had just begun university, pursuing a degree in Music, the one thing that had loved him back since childhood. But beneath his calm exterior lived a storm no one saw. Jonah had been battling depression since his early teens, ever since he lost his mother—his only living parent at the time. The grief crept in quietly, disguising itself as tiredness, as a sense of being “different.” As the years passed, that heaviness grew into something deeper: a persistent emptiness, a crushing belief that he was a burden to everyone around him.

He learnt how to hide it well. When asked how he was, Jonah smiled softly and replied, “I am fine.” He laughed when others laughed. He attended lectures but at night, alone in the darkness, his mind refused to rest.

Assignments piled up, but his concentration slipped through his fingers. He skipped classes. His appetite vanished. Slowly, painfully, he stopped playing his guitar, the one thing that had always steadied him. His roommate, Mafabi, noticed.

“Hey man, you alright?” Mafabi asked one evening.

Jonah nodded. “Just tired.” When he attended class, he sat quietly at the

back, head lowered, as if trying not to take up space.

One night, Jonah wrote a long letter. He apologised to his classmates and friends, insisting it was not their fault. He thanked his lecturers for their patience. And to Mafabi, he wrote words that would later haunt him: “You were a good friend, even when I couldn’t say it.”

That was the last night Jonah was seen alive. His body was found on a nearby football pitch. The boy with the guitar had chosen silence forever.

Jonah’s story is not an isolated tragedy. It is a reflection of a growing mental health crisis among young people in Uganda and across the world. Today’s youth are navigating academic pressure, social media scrutiny, family instability, and unspoken grief often without adequate support.

Why youth are struggling

Academic pressure weighs heavily on many students. The constant push to excel, to meet expectations, and to avoid failure can become unbearable. For some, poor performance feels like a public verdict of worthlessness—sometimes with fatal consequences.

Social media, while offering connection, also fuels comparison, cyberbullying, and impossible standards. Many young people measure their value in likes and followers, quietly internalising anxiety and low self-esteem.

Family challenges such as loss of parents, neglect, conflict, or lack of emotional support leave deep scars. Like William, youth who grow up carrying unresolved grief often struggle to process emotions, especially when they

WHY YOUTH STRUGGLE

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feel they must stay strong.

The hidden cost of depression

Depression drains joy from life. Emotionally, it brings sadness, numbness, and self-loathing. Physically, it disrupts sleep, appetite, and energy. Academically, it steals focus, motivation, and hope.

Left untreated, depression can spiral into self-harm, substance abuse, and suicide. Long-term, it can shape adulthood—damaging relationships, careers, and overall well-being. The loss is not just personal; it is societal.

What must be done

We cannot keep losing young people in silence. Breaking stigma is the first step. Mental health conversations must move from whispers to open dialogue—in homes, schools, and communities.

Schools need stronger counseling systems, peer support groups, and teachers trained to spot early warning signs.

Parents and guardians must create safe spaces for honesty, empathy, and emotional expression and seek professional help when needed.

Healthy digital habits should be encouraged, helping youth navigate social media without losing their sense of self.

Accessible mental health care—affordable counselling, therapy, and crisis support—must be a priority, backed by government and community investment.

Healthy lifestyles, including exercise, sleep, nutrition, and creative outlets like music, can offer powerful protection against mental distress. Jonah played music because words failed him. When his pain grew louder than his songs, no one heard in time.

If we listen closely, ask twice, take quiet suffering seriously, perhaps fewer guitars will be left untouched, and fewer young lives will end before time.