

Students and suicide: what should be done?

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Suicide note

In Summary

- Almost every year, one or two cases of suicide are registered at some of the higher institutions of learning. In as much as this is worrying, it is even scarier that students are yet to embrace some of the interventions institutions have put in place to help them. But why are students committing suicide?

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By Dorcus Murungi

On March 21, 2019 Ugandans woke up to news that Arthur Basalirwa, a student of Makerere University Business School (MUBS), had committed suicide. A few hours before his death, Basalirwa had posted on one of his social media accounts saying, “I am sorry but it’s too late, I’m sorry too much weighing on me, I do not want to live to see another day.”

Basalirwa had posted several other statements on social media earlier in the month which friends were later to realise were revelations that he was going through tough times but did not think

deeply about them until they learnt about his death.

In September 2018, Joshua Ajuna was found dead in his room in Nsibirwa Hall at Makerere University. Next to his body was a bottle of suspected poison and two suicides notes. According to the notes, personal reasons had driven Ajuna to kill himself.

Earlier in April 2011, Francis Kigenyi, 23, had jumped to his death from the fifth floor of Baskon hostel on Sir Apollo Kaggwa Road in Kampala. Before his death, Kigenyi had told guests at his birthday party that his life was worthless and referred to himself as a ghost.

Yet Joshua Nuwasasira, 22, a second-year student of Makerere University Business School, Mbarara study centre had in 2012, also committed suicide after he apparently spent every penny of his tuition fees on drinking and partying. He was found hanging in his rented room in Nkokonjeru, Mbarara.

These are some of the suicide cases that have been reported at universities over the years, making the situation worrying. What could drive a student who is largely dependent on their parents to take their own life?

Depression

According to Margaret Kyosaba Biribonwa, a counsellor at Kyambogo University, the main reason for suicides among university students is depression. She says this depression in most cases arises from maladjusted relationships, financial challenges, stress, academic anxiety, low self-esteem, drug abuse, poor performance, career indecision, uncertainty about post-school life and other informational needs.

“I have had chance to interact with some students who are contemplating suicide; most of them feel as though there is no way out of their situation. They are bombarded with feelings of hopelessness, fear, isolation, hatred toward themselves and so much more. The pain they feel is often immeasurable, to a point where they see no other option but to end their lives,” she explains.

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How can you tell?

Jean Nuwagaba, the head of counselling department Kyambogo University, says when a student is depressed, they may show signs of being overly sensitive to how they are perceived by others, their failures, and their relationships.

They will also show signs of hopelessness, helplessness, unexplained fear of people, places, events, or objects (phobias), escapism, and general unusual or unacceptable behaviour such as drug abuse and unwarranted sexual escapades. She says sometimes some of these people overuse defense mechanisms such as denial, blame, and projection which are also indicative of mental health issues.

Nevertheless, Nuwagaba says a student in such a state can get assistance through psychological interventions such as counselling, guidance, and other forms of psychosocial support. “Extreme cases should be taken to clinical psychologists or psychiatrists for further treatment,” she says.



Sometimes students get depressed but fail to get anybody to talk to yet counsellors say talking can go a long way in helping one overcome painful circumstances.

University intervention

Ritah Namisango, the spokesperson Makerere University, says Makerere University (Mak) has a functional Counselling and Guidance Centre.

The Mak Counselling and Guidance Centre is headed by a manager who is supported by professional counsellors.

The managers and counsellors are fulltime members of staff at the university. The centre provides professional counselling services to both students and staff and the services are available to help students deal with and solve challenges of living that would otherwise affect their academic achievement and their wholesome being in general.

She explains that the centre handles issues such as academics; for instance failure to understand or conceptualise what is taught and failure to make the required grades.

It also handles psychological problems such as sexual dysfunctions, family problems, low self-esteem, poor self-concept, bereavement, and love relationships such as being dumped by a lover, failure to relate with a lover or other people, failure to quit an oppressive relationship, as well as psychiatric problems such as depression, anxiety, drug addiction, sexual harassment, HIV/Aids counselling.

Apart from providing students with career guidance, the guidance and counselling unit provides first year students with a fresher's orientation where they explain to new entrants the dos and don'ts of university life.

“During this fresher's orientation week, we give every new student at Makerere University an instruction booklet, which is meant to guide them on their life at university,” she says. This, she explains, is to minimise cases of transitional challenges.

But Namisango is quick to note that the attendance of these guidance and counselling services is voluntary.

At Kyambogo University, Dr Mildred Tibananuka, the dean of students, says in 2018, the university revamped the counselling unit to offer guidance and mentorship to students. She explains that this unit has student mentors who are trained to mentor their peers or to look out for those who are facing challenges and encourage them to come for counselling services.

Luckily, she adds that the unit has handled quite a number of depression cases among students so far.

“Ever since the inception of this facility, we have tried to popularise our services among students, by distributing flyers to students, notices on noticeboards around the university and making outreaches in student hostels,” she explains.

Why are students adamant?

Unfortunately, some students are not embracing counselling and guidance services yet.

According to Biribonwa, a counsellor at Kyambogo University, though universities have created counselling departments, some students are still skeptical to go in for these services. She says some are afraid of being seen by their peers obtaining such services.

“It is unfortunate that though counselling is very vital for university students, some find it uncalled for and shaming,” she says, adding that for this reason at Kyambogo, they have started online counselling services to help students who would prefer online to physical meetings.

Namisango also admits that though the counselling services are free, some students opt out since they are not compulsory.

Way forward?

Biribonwa says it is high time university students accepted that everyone gets depressed at some point in their lives. However, how long it lasts is one of the key factors to determine the severity. “If depression has lasted for more than two weeks and it is affecting your day-to-day life, it is time to get treatment,” she advises.

Biribonwa insists that there is absolutely no shame in getting help adding that it is important for any student who is depressed to talk to friends and open up honestly about their feelings.

“If you are feeling down, tell them that. If you need someone to talk to, tell them that, too. You might be surprised by how willing they are to help you get through it,” she advises.

Interventions

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