

The Mental Health Burden among Sub-Saharan Africa's Ageing Population

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The past year has been tumultuous as the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted normal day-to-day activities around the world, with low-to-middle income countries (LMICs) bearing the brunt of the adverse physical, mental, environmental, and social effects of the pandemic. These adverse effects are due to the burden of illness as well as the secondary impacts of the mandated public health restrictions as the burden of illness is greater in LMICs due to decreased health infrastructure. Specifically, seniors residing in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have been disproportionately affected by the sanctions imposed to limit the spread of the virus including social distancing measures and frequent hand washing, which have subsequently led to rising mental health concerns among SSA's healthcare system. Experts agree that SSA's senior population is likely to increase to 161 million by 2050, compounding the urgency of these issues (Gyasi, 2020).



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In unexpected emergencies, such as the pandemic, immediate needs such as clean water and proper food are often compromised, leading to an increased burden of managing the health and safety of citizens, especially, seniors as clean water is a fundamental need for optimal health and well-being. Moreover, water safety has also been a prime public health issue across SSA and with the onset of the pandemic, this issue has severely contributed to the rise in mental health concerns as well as poorer physical and social health (Slekiene & Mosler, 2019). For instance, seniors are at risk of developing neuropsychiatric disorders as the unstable economic, environmental, and social climate has disrupted their day-to-day lives (Gyasi, 2020; Semo & Frissa, 2020). Thus, the need for culturally competent mental health

care services as well as government policies concerning the need for adequate water sanitation is of utmost priority, and it is vital to ensure that seniors in SSA are able to access the necessary social, mental, and physical help. The practice of community-based mental health care services aims to integrate mental health services in primary care settings, such as providing a means for Western medicine and traditional healing to collaborate and treat the needs of the local community simultaneously (Alem et al., 2008). These services can begin to address the underlying factors that may exacerbate the onset of adverse mental and physical health outcomes.

Beyond the current pandemic, the social determinants of health – socioeconomic factors such as housing, employment, income, education, and food security, among many others – greatly impact an individual’s ability to live a healthy and fruitful life. Accordingly, these factors considerably influence how an individual is able to seek equitable and accessible healthcare services, and exacerbate existing barriers. Therefore, the surge in mental health concerns for SSA’s senior population can also be mitigated by addressing some of these socioeconomic factors, such as providing adequate and safe drinking water, offsetting the cost of basic amenities such as electricity and gas, and providing accessible healthcare services for vulnerable populations.

Furthermore, seniors in SSA may also face additional barriers, such as access to transportation, travel and treatment costs, and stigma from their community and family, when trying to access mental healthcare services. Accordingly, incorporating community elders as spokespersons for breaking down the stigma surrounding mental health, integrating community health workers who are able to understand and propose treatment methods that adhere to the local cultural beliefs and values surrounding mental health, and providing the means to practice community-based mental health care services can significantly reduce these burdens. These recommendations aim to mobilize and capitalize on capacity building within the local healthcare sector, thereby beginning to dismantle the stigma surrounding mental health and empowering the community in the same breath.

The need for curating a holistic and culturally competent approach to treating the mental healthcare needs of SSA’s seniors is apparent, and made more urgent by the ongoing pandemic. By addressing these socioeconomic concerns and ensuring that the impact of the social determinants of health such as housing, income, and social status are limited, seniors residing in SSA can be prioritized and given the chance to live a mentally and physically healthy lifestyle whilst recovering from the impacts of the pandemic. Social protection policies can also

significantly aid in protecting the health and well-being of this population (Gyasi, 2020). Therefore, SSA's various health systems must be in a position to prioritize geriatric care and psychosocial support to combat and treat the adverse mental, physical, and social effects of the pandemic.

Additional Resources

SSA's ageing population:

- https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/popfacts/PopFacts_2016-1.pdf
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK20296/>

Impact of mental health on SSA's seniors:

- <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/epidemiology-and-psychiatric-sciences/article/latelife-depression-in-subsaharan-africa-lessons-from-the-ibadan-study-of-ageing/431FF91970FBB42B7A2B8F70B749940A>

Importance of community-based mental health care:

- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2327237/>

Importance of culturally competent mental health services:

- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6018386/>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4948168/>
- <http://tucollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Cultural-Competence-in-Mental-Health.pdf>

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