

STORIES OF HEALING & HOPE FROM HEART TO HEART SPACES



This is the first of many newsletters coming your way from Heart to Heart Spaces and we are so grateful to begin this journey with you.

Each month, we will use this space to share reflections, stories, resources, community updates and honest conversations around mental health, healing and hope. Our desire is that this newsletter becomes more than just something you read, but a gentle place you return to; a reminder that you are not alone, that healing is possible and that your story matters.

This month, we share about Men's Mental Health Month. We also explore the healing power of African storytelling in mental health and how our stories can become places of connection, memory, meaning and recovery.

EDITOR'S NOTE

We reflect on what empathy and compassion really look like through a tribute to Sydney. We also share highlights from our mental health outreach and the continued work of taking conversations on mental health into the communities that need them.

This edition is an invitation to pause, learn, reflect and start conversations that matter. Whether you are reading for yourself for someone you love or for the community you serve, we hope you find something here that speaks to you.

**With warmth,
Heart to Heart Spaces.**

JUNE IS MEN'S MENTAL HEALTH MONTH

June is Men's Mental Health Month. A topic that, thankfully, we are slowly growing to recognize, name and make room for.

I am not sure if it is because of the growing suicide numbers among men, with global data showing that men die by suicide at more than twice the rate of women. I am not sure if it is the strong concern that by the time many men get to the point of complete hopelessness, they have often struggled silently for years. I am not sure if it is because we are finally beginning to understand that many men are not okay, even when they look strong, capable and put together.

Maybe it is cultural.

Maybe it is because many boys are raised hearing things like, "boys don't cry," "be a man," "provide," "stay strong," "don't be weak," "handle it," "real men don't talk too much," and "your family is depending on you."

Maybe it is because society has taught men to carry pain quietly, to convert sadness into anger, fear into silence, grief into alcohol, depression into isolation, and anxiety into work. Maybe it is because from a young age, many men are taught that vulnerability is dangerous, tenderness is weakness, and asking for help is failure.

Maybe it is because social expectations have dictated how men should react to pain. Do not cry. Do not break. Do not complain. Do not need too much. Do not ask for support. Do not admit that life is heavy. Do not say that your mind is tired.

But one thing I am certain of is this: mental illness is a beast.

It takes with no resolve. It steals joy, energy, connection, identity, sleep, hope and sometimes life itself. It does not respect status, gender, education, strength, title, faith, age or profession. It affects everyone.

And so, if you are a man, this change does not just begin from recognizing the month. It begins with you.

It begins with learning about mental health. It begins with paying attention to your own mind and body.

It begins with noticing when you are withdrawing, constantly angry, exhausted, numb, hopeless, drinking more, sleeping less, pretending more, or silently falling apart.

It begins with being brave enough to stop the cycle of silence.

It begins with asking for help before things become unbearable.

It begins with telling another man, "You do not have to carry this alone."

It begins with sharing your story so that someone else can find language for theirs.

It begins with pushing kindness forward.

We need men who are willing to unlearn the idea that silence is strength. We need men who are willing to model emotional honesty. We need men who are willing to go for therapy, take medication if needed, rest without guilt, speak without shame, and allow themselves to be cared for.

We need fathers who can tell their sons that crying is human.

We need brothers who can check on each other beyond jokes.

We need friends who can ask, "How are you really?" and stay long enough to hear the truth.

We need workplaces that do not glorify burnout.

We need families that do not shame men for struggling.

We need communities that understand that mental health is health, even for men.

Change requires a voice.

It requires a face.

It requires hands willing to put in the work. And I believe that voice can be yours.

So start today.

**BY AUMA RITA
FOUNDER HEART TO HEART SPACES.**

STORY CIRCLES AND THE HEALING POWER OF AFRICAN STORY TELLING IN MENTAL HEALTH

“Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

In the far traces of core African tradition lays the art of Story Telling. A creative window of expression that bestows voice, gesture and often music to breathe life into myths, legends and folktales. A magical door into the intricacies of African Philosophy...cool,right?

You see the stories were not merely for entertainment; they beared a vital role in education, preserving cultural values, shaping individual, collective identities. Story telling was a comfort in difficult times, a hope in the dark, a pillar of gratitude when times were great.

It was selectively passed down generation to generation because those stories had the power to make it or break it.



(Pamela Bugembe facilitating a healing circle about story telling with Round About Uganda)

In the Spirit of Africanising Mental Health, explore with me how the power of story telling can help shape mental wellness.

But first, definitions.

A story is the vessel through which individuals and communities carry identity, wisdom, healing and hope from one generation to the next.

A story circle is a safe, inclusive space where people share personal stories and listen deeply to one another, fostering connection, understanding and healing.

Mental health is the state of our emotional, psychological, and social well-being, shaping how we think, feel, relate to others, cope with challenges and find meaning in life.

The science of it.

The intentional use of Storytelling can promote emotional healing, reshape self-defeating beliefs and process experiences that resist direct conversation. It works because the brain responds to a vividly told story almost the same way it responds to a lived event, activating the same neural circuits, generating the same emotional responses and creating genuine opportunities for change. The Neuroscience of Story Telling shows that brain cannot reliably distinguish between a vividly imagined narrative and a lived experience at the level of neural activation.

When someone hears a story, a real one, told with detail and emotional texture, their brain doesn't just activate the language regions. It recruits the same sensory and motor areas that would fire if they were actually experiencing the events described. Smell a freshly baked cake in a story, and your olfactory cortex lights up. Watch a character run through a crowd, and your motor cortex follows. This is sometimes called neural coupling. That is why fiction functions as a kind of simulation of social experience rather than mere entertainment.”

Fascinating!

African storytelling traditions have long recognized what neuroscience is now exploring: stories are not only entertainment, they are tools for connection, identity, memory and healing. In a story circle, the act of speaking and being listened to creates a shared emotional experience where individuals can feel witnessed, valued and connected.

IMPORTANCE OF STORY CIRCLES TO MENTAL HEALTH

1. THEY CREATE A SAFE SPACE FOR EXPRESSION

Story circles remind people that they are not alone. Sharing experiences in a supportive group helps reduce loneliness, isolation, and the feeling of carrying struggles silently.



2. THEY SUPPORT EMOTIONAL HEALING

Telling a story helps people process emotions, organize difficult experiences, and make meaning from pain, loss, or trauma.

4. THEY STRENGTHEN IDENTITY AND SELF-WORTH

Stories shape how people see themselves. Story circles help individuals move beyond labels and rediscover their strengths, resilience, and personal power.

7. THEY ENCOURAGE HOPE AND RESILIENCE

Hearing stories of survival, growth, and transformation can inspire people to believe that change and healing are possible.

3. THEY BUILD EMPATHY AND UNDERSTANDING

It helps communities replace judgment with curiosity, care, and connection.

5. THEY PRESERVE CULTURAL WISDOM AND CONNECTION

In African traditions, storytelling carries history, values, and collective knowledge. Story circles reconnect people with culture, ancestry, and community support.

6. THEY REDUCE MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

When people openly share experiences, mental health struggles become human experiences rather than sources of shame or silence.

8. THEY CAN BE USED IN THERAPY.

For instance, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Narrative Therapy and healing traumas like PTSD

The power of African storytelling for mental health is huge. It helps us connect with people with similar experiences and conditions, it inspires us to stand up and speak up and it enables us to empathize with others even on a language and cultural level. It brings home the vital essence that mental health matters to all, that it isn't a foreign concept. It makes room for culture and collective healing, because if I am because we are...then my well-being is connected to yours and healing is something we can build together.



BY PAMELA BUGEMBE
COO HEART TO HEART SPACES

EMPATHY AND COMPASSION: A TRIBUTE TO SYDNEY



Empathy is the ability to understand and share in another person's feelings.

Compassion is what happens when that understanding moves you to care enough to help.

These two words have been on my mind a lot lately empathy and compassion. I think they are some of the things we have missed as a society for a very long time. And maybe, just maybe, they are part of what could save the future of men.

As we mark Men's Mental Health Awareness Month, my hope is that men find a balance between these two words. Not just for others, but also for themselves. Because many men are walking around with pain they have never been allowed to name, grief they have never been taught to process, and anger that has become the easiest emotion to express.

For so long, men have been allowed to be angry. Sometimes even encouraged to be angry. Anger has been accepted as normal. As masculine. As strength. But sadness, fear, disappointment, shame, and grief have often been pushed aside. So, what happens when a man has never been given language for his pain? Sometimes, that pain comes out as violence.

Recently, we witnessed a very painful incident. A life was lost. A man was attacked by fellow men, and even more painfully, there were voices cheering it on.

It has been one of the saddest and most brutal stories to watch on the internet, especially in a month that is supposed to remind us to care about the mental health and wellbeing of men.

It made me pause.

Because in that moment, what was needed was not more anger. It was not more violence. It was empathy. It was compassion. It was someone looking at Sydney, not as a target, not as someone to punish, but as a human being whose life still mattered.

That moment needed someone to step in and say, "Enough."

Obed would have shown much greater strength if he had chosen compassion in that moment. Real strength would have been carrying Sydney away from the mob. Real strength would have been taking him to Victoria Hospital. Real strength would have been choosing to protect life, even when anger felt justified.

But instead, violence won.

And that is the thing about violence. It does not only take away the life of the person who is harmed. It also damages the person who causes the harm. It damages families. It damages teams. It damages communities. It leaves behind questions that may never be answered and pain that may never fully go away.

Sydney was not just a man in a video. He was a son, a friend, a teammate, and a sportsman. He carried the badge, the flag, and the ball beyond the tryline. He brought people together through rugby. Every weekend, he was part of something that gave many men joy, friendship, and belonging.

And now, the rugby family is grieving.

To the Pirates team, the Uganda rugby team, and everyone who loved Sydney, I hope this moment is met with gentleness. Grief is not always loud.

Sometimes it looks like failing to sleep. Sometimes it looks like losing interest in the things you once loved. Sometimes it shows up as anger, withdrawal, silence, irritability, or even unnecessary aggression on the pitch.

So please, turn towards each other.

Check on each other.

Be patient with each other.



Let men grieve without shame. Let men cry if they need to. Let men speak if they can. Let men sit quietly if words are too heavy. This is the time to become safe spaces for one another.

Maybe this is the moment to carry each other to the tryline, the way Sydney loved carrying the ball there.

Anger is human. Anger is not always wrong. Sometimes anger shows us that something hurts. But violence is not healing. Violence against men by men has no place in the world we are trying to build. It is not strength. It is not justice. It is not brotherhood.

As men continue to suppress what they truly feel, we will keep losing more than we can afford to lose. We will lose friendships. We will lose families. We will lose futures. And sometimes, painfully, we will lose lives.

Men's Mental Health Awareness Month should not just be about encouraging men to speak. It should also be about teaching society how to listen when they do. It should be about creating spaces where men do not have to wait until anger is the only emotion left.

May we learn to pause before we react.

May we learn to see the human being in front of us.

May we learn that compassion is not weakness.

May we learn that empathy does not make men less strong; it makes them more human.

Because maybe the next generation of men will not be saved by silence, pride, or violence.

Maybe they will be saved by something much softer, but much stronger.

BY WILSON KAZOوبا
CO FOUNDER HEART TO HEART SPACES.



OUTREACH TO ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY IN UGANDA

Zoe Kemanzi facilitating a session at IUIU Girls

We were recently graced with the opportunity to engage with students at the Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU Girls) for a mental health session with the students.

Together, we explored topics surrounding mental health; stress and coping, self-worth, emotional regulation, relationships, identity, and the importance of support systems and community.

It is always a privilege to hold space for honest and in-depth conversations with students. Experiences like these continue to remind us that mental health literacy at all stages is a powerful tool.

Understanding oneself, one's emotions and inner experiences is often the first step toward healing, growth and resilience.

**BY KEMANZI ZOE ZARAMBA.C
HEAD OF OUTREACHES.**