

L.I.V.E CONFERENCE 2026 CONFERENCE REPORT

Beyond Awareness: Building Uganda's Mental Health and Youth Wellbeing Ecosystem

10 September 2026 | World Suicide Prevention Day
Mestil Hotel, Kampala, Uganda

LISTEN. INCLUDE. VALIDATE. EMPOWER.

Because Every Life Matters

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FOREWORD

From Awareness to Action

In September 2025, L.I.V.E Uganda convened its inaugural national Conference around an urgent concern: too many Ugandans were experiencing mental health challenges in silence, and too many families were encountering suicide when it was already too late.

More than 400 people came together to listen, speak openly and confront the stigma surrounding suicide and mental illness.

One year later, on World Suicide Prevention Day 2026, we reconvened with a different question:

What happens after awareness?

If a young person says, *"I am not okay,"* who notices? Who listens? What happens next?

Conference 2026 brought together young people, people with lived experience, mental health professionals, government, educators, employers, researchers, faith communities, civil society, media and development partners.

A clear message emerged.

Uganda must continue strengthening professional mental health services. But we must also become better at recognising distress before it becomes crisis — in our homes, schools, workplaces, communities and places of worship.

We need to listen earlier, strengthen resilience, replace judgement with compassion and ensure that when somebody asks for help, there is somewhere to turn.

And we need to connect the many organisations and institutions already doing important work.

That is the role L.I.V.E seeks to play: not to duplicate existing efforts, but to convene, connect and catalyse a stronger national response.

Our four principles remain our guide:

Listen. Include. Validate. Empower.

Conference 2026 demonstrated that Uganda is ready to move beyond awareness.

The responsibility now is to turn that awareness into action.

Andrew Rugasira
Founder & Convenor
L.I.V.E Uganda

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 10 September 2026, World Suicide Prevention Day, L.I.V.E Uganda convened its second national Conference on youth mental health and wellbeing at Mestil Hotel in Kampala.

More than 500 delegates registered, bringing together young people and people with lived experience alongside representatives from government, healthcare, education, workplaces, civil society, faith communities, academia, media and development organisations.

Building on the inaugural 2025 Conference, Conference 2026 sought to move Uganda's mental health conversation from awareness towards prevention, resilience, early intervention and coordinated action.

The Conference combined lived experience, youth voices, research evidence and professional expertise around one central question:

How can Uganda recognise and respond to distress before it becomes crisis?

One of the Conference's defining insights came from Professor Eugene Kinyanda:

"The moment we recognise a mental health crisis is often not the moment the problem began."

Young people may experience bullying, family conflict, trauma, academic pressure, economic uncertainty, relationship difficulties, substance use, stigma and social exclusion long before a crisis becomes visible.

Between adversity and crisis lies an important opportunity to strengthen resilience, recognise distress and provide appropriate support.

This insight broadened the mental health conversation beyond healthcare alone.

Families, schools, peers, workplaces, faith communities and community institutions are often the first places where distress becomes visible. Their role is not to replace professionals, but to become better able to recognise, listen, support and connect.

Seven principal findings emerged:

1. Intervene earlier.

Prevention and early intervention must complement crisis response and treatment.

2. Turn awareness into capability.

People and institutions need practical knowledge of how to respond when somebody is struggling.

3. Strengthen relationships and belonging.

Trusted relationships can encourage disclosure, strengthen resilience and protect wellbeing.

4. Start where young people are.

Schools provide a critical platform for prevention, counselling, peer support and referral.

5. Make young people partners.

Youth participation should extend beyond consultation towards leadership, advocacy and programme design.

6. Make help easier to find.

Disclosure must connect to credible information, referral pathways and appropriate professional support.

7. Connect the ecosystem.

Uganda already has significant mental health expertise and activity; stronger coordination can increase collective impact.

Conference 2026 also generated a practical proposal to test strengthened student wellbeing arrangements in a small cohort of schools, deepen youth participation, improve access to credible support and maintain multi-sector engagement.

For L.I.V.E Uganda, the Conference reinforced its role as an independent national platform for convening, connection, youth voice and sustained action.

The test now is implementation.

Conference 2027 should therefore begin with one question:

What changed because we came together?

1. FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION

The inaugural L.I.V.E Conference in September 2025 brought together more than 400 participants around suicide prevention and youth mental health.

It helped break the silence surrounding mental illness and suicide and identified priority areas including suicide prevention policy, decriminalisation of attempted suicide, improved access to mental health support, a national helpline and a youth mental health resource platform.

Conference 2026 built on that foundation.

The question was no longer simply:

Does mental health matter?

It was:

What should Uganda do differently?

The Conference recognised that while professional treatment remains indispensable, mental wellbeing is also shaped by family relationships, education, economic circumstances, trauma, social inclusion, workplaces, communities and technology.

The conversation therefore shifted:

Awareness → Capability

Crisis Response → Prevention

Isolation → Connection

Youth Beneficiaries → Youth Partners

The objective was not to produce another conversation about the problem.

It was to better understand what an effective response should look like.

2. CONFERENCE 2026 AT A GLANCE

10 SEPTEMBER 2026, World Suicide Prevention Day

MESTIL HOTEL Kampala, Uganda

500+ Registered delegates

SECOND ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Building on the inaugural L.I.V.E Conference in 2025.

MULTI-SECTOR PARTICIPATION

Young people and people with lived experience; government and public institutions; healthcare professionals; educators; employers and business; civil society; academia and research; faith communities; media; development partners; and community organisations.

The programme reflected L.I.V.E's four principles:

LISTEN

Youth and lived-experience voices placed human experience at the centre of the Conference.

INCLUDE

Young people participated through testimony, performance, questions and dialogue.

VALIDATE

The National Plenary created space for open discussion of the realities confronting individuals, families and institutions.

EMPOWER

The solutions conversation focused on moving from understanding towards practical action.

Conference 2026 deliberately brought evidence and experience into the same room.

3. THE CONFERENCE CONVERSATION

Language, Dignity and Stigma

The Conference began by confronting the language surrounding mental illness.

Robert Kabushenga challenged participants:

"Please do not refer to somebody with mental health struggles as mad. The word 'mad' is derogatory."

The point was larger than terminology.

Language can reinforce stigma and exclusion, or communicate dignity and compassion.

Kabushenga also spoke from the experience of supporting a loved one through mental illness, highlighting the impact on families and caregivers:

"It's very painful, you as the person who is okay, to see your loved one suffer mental health."

Mental health affects not only individuals, but the relationships and families around them.

What Happens After a Young Person Speaks?

Youth advocate Kimberly Jael Aremo posed one of the defining questions of the Conference:

"What happens when a young person says that I'm not okay? And what happens after that conversation ends?"

Her testimony about bullying and exclusion illustrated the importance of trusted adults noticing behavioural and emotional change.

A teacher noticed her distress and intervened.

The intervention mattered.

But what she needed was sustained support.

"I wasn't looking for someone to rescue me. I was looking for someone to walk a journey of discovery with."

The message was clear:

Disclosure is not the end of the process. It is the beginning of responsibility.

Looking Beneath Behaviour

Rebecca Makyeli's testimony on addiction and recovery challenged participants to look beyond visible behaviour.

"A person who develops an addiction is still a person who needs to be understood and needs to be supported."

Her contribution produced one of the Conference's most practical frameworks:

NOTICE → ASK → LISTEN → CONNECT → STAY

Notice meaningful changes.

Ask compassionate questions.

Listen without immediate judgement.

Connect the person to appropriate support.

Stay engaged.

"Do we have the staying power for sustainable wellbeing?"

Referral should not become abandonment.

Professional care and human connection are complementary.

The Opportunity Before Crisis

Professor Eugene Kinyanda provided the central research framing.

Mental health crises often emerge through a progression from adversity to distress, deteriorating functioning and, for some individuals, serious mental illness or suicidal behaviour.

“The moment we recognise a mental health crisis is often not the moment the problem began.”

The implication is significant.

Between adversity and crisis lies a window for prevention, resilience-building and early intervention.

The national question therefore becomes larger than how Uganda treats mental illness.

It also becomes:

How do we help more people remain well and respond earlier when they begin to struggle?

Seeking Help

Dr Sabrina Kitaka reinforced the importance of professional care when it is needed:

“It is okay not to be okay. But seek help, because the help is available.”

The Conference consistently distinguished between community support and professional treatment.

Parents, teachers, peers and community actors can recognise, listen and connect.

Clinical assessment and treatment must remain the responsibility of appropriately qualified professionals.

Turning Pain into Purpose

Collin Babirukamu reflected on suicide loss within his family and how personal tragedy had led him towards mental health advocacy.

His message captured an important feature of the Conference:

“We need to make sure we don’t waste the pain.”

Lived experience was not presented simply as testimony.

It was recognised as a source of knowledge, advocacy and change.

4. SEVEN KEY FINDINGS

1. INTERVENE EARLIER

The strongest substantive consensus of Conference 2026 was that prevention often begins before crisis.

The pathway can be understood as:

ADVERSITY → DISTRESS → FUNCTIONAL IMPACT → CRISIS

Bullying, trauma, family conflict, academic pressure, poverty, violence and isolation may lead to anxiety, sadness, withdrawal or behavioural change.

These may eventually affect school, work, relationships and daily functioning.

The opportunity is to intervene earlier.

Treatment remains essential.

But treatment must be complemented by prevention.

2. TURN AWARENESS INTO CAPABILITY

Awareness alone does not tell a parent what to do when a child withdraws.

It does not tell a teacher how to distinguish misconduct from distress.

It does not tell a peer how to respond when a friend speaks about suicide.

The next phase of mental health awareness must therefore build practical capability:

Recognise. Listen. Support. Connect.

This does not turn communities into clinicians.

It helps them respond appropriately.

3. STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS AND BELONGING

Young people repeatedly emphasised the importance of trusted relationships.

Parents, teachers, peers, mentors, coaches and faith leaders can influence whether somebody speaks early or remains silent.

Supportive relationships strengthen belonging and resilience.

Judgement and stigma discourage disclosure.

Relationships are therefore part of preventive mental health infrastructure.

4. START WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE ARE

Schools emerged as one of Uganda's clearest opportunities for practical intervention.

They already bring together students, teachers, counsellors, peers and families.

Dr Hafsa Lukwata emphasised the importance of school counsellors and peer counsellors in strengthening support for young people.

The opportunity is often not to create a parallel system, but to strengthen what already exists.

A practical proposition emerged:

10 SCHOOLS → 90 DAYS → LEARN → EVALUATE → SCALE WHAT WORKS

The objective is to test strengthened student wellbeing support before wider replication.

5. MAKE YOUNG PEOPLE PARTNERS

Young people did not simply describe problems.

They questioned institutions and proposed solutions.

Their message was clear:

Include us.

Youth participation should extend beyond attendance at events towards programme design, peer engagement, advocacy and accountability.

Young people should be recognised as contributors to the mental health response, with appropriate safeguarding and professional boundaries.

6. MAKE HELP EASIER TO FIND

Encouraging people to speak creates responsibility.

Disclosure must connect to somewhere credible to turn.

Uganda needs clearer pathways between:

Individual → Trusted Support → Referral → Professional Care

This includes better information about available services and credible digital resources that can help young people and families navigate support.

7. CONNECT THE ECOSYSTEM

Uganda already has significant mental health expertise and activity.

Government institutions, healthcare professionals, schools, civil society, researchers, faith communities, businesses, development partners and youth organisations are all contributing.

The challenge is that these efforts do not always connect.

Greater coordination can increase collective impact without duplicating existing institutions.

5. VOICES FROM L.I.V.E 2026

What Participants Told Us

"Please do not refer to somebody with mental health struggles as mad."

Robert Kabushenga

"What happens when a young person says that I'm not okay? And what happens after that conversation ends?"

Kimberly Jael Aremo

"A person who develops an addiction is still a person who needs to be understood and needs to be supported."

Rebecca Makyeli

"The moment we recognise a mental health crisis is often not the moment the problem began."

Professor Eugene Kinyanda

"It is okay not to be okay. But seek help, because the help is available."

Dr Sabrina Kitaka

"We need to make sure we don't waste the pain."

Collin Babirukamu

"Asking for help is not a sign of weakness; it's one of the highest acts of courage and self-awareness a person can display."

Dr Andrew Bakainaga

Different experiences produced a remarkably consistent message:

Recognise earlier. Listen better. Reduce stigma. Connect support. Stay engaged.

6. PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION

Conference 2026 identified six areas requiring sustained attention.

1. PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

Complement treatment with greater emphasis on resilience, mental health literacy and recognition of distress before crisis.

2. SCHOOL-BASED WELLBEING

Strengthen counselling, teacher awareness, peer support, safe disclosure and referral within existing school structures.

3. YOUTH PARTNERSHIP

Create meaningful roles for young people in advocacy, programme design, peer engagement and national dialogue.

4. ACCESS TO SUPPORT

Connect awareness and disclosure to credible information, referral pathways and professional services.

5. EVIDENCE

Strengthen evidence on youth mental health and wellbeing to guide policy, programmes and investment.

6. COORDINATION

Improve collaboration and knowledge exchange among the many institutions already working on mental health and wellbeing.

7. CONFERENCE OUTCOMES AND RESULTS

500+ REGISTERED DELEGATES

Building on more than 400 participants at the inaugural Conference in 2025 and demonstrating growing engagement around mental health and youth wellbeing.

A SECOND CONSECUTIVE NATIONAL CONVENING

Conference 2026 established continuity around World Suicide Prevention Day and strengthened L.I.V.E's position as an annual national platform.

YOUTH AND LIVED EXPERIENCE AT THE CENTRE

Young people and people with lived experience contributed through testimony, performance, questions and dialogue, helping shape the substantive findings of the Conference.

A SHIFT BEYOND AWARENESS

The national conversation progressed towards prevention, resilience, early intervention, referral and institutional capability.

EARLY INTERVENTION EMERGED AS A CENTRAL PRIORITY

Research, professional expertise and lived experience converged around the importance of acting before distress becomes crisis.

SCHOOLS IDENTIFIED AS AN IMMEDIATE ACTION PLATFORM

A practical 10-school, 90-day demonstration was proposed to test strengthened student wellbeing support and generate evidence for possible scale-up.

MULTI-SECTOR ENGAGEMENT STRENGTHENED

Government, health, education, private sector, civil society, faith communities, academia, media, development partners and young people participated in a shared national conversation.

L.I.V.E'S CONVENING ROLE REINFORCED

Conference 2026 demonstrated the value of an independent platform capable of bringing together evidence, institutions, youth voice and lived experience.

CONVENE. CONNECT. CATALYSE. AMPLIFY.

8. L.I.V.E UGANDA: CONVENING FOR IMPACT

Mental health affects every part of society, but responses frequently remain separated by sector, institution or profession.

L.I.V.E Uganda does not seek to replace organisations delivering mental health services or duplicate government, civil society, academic or community programmes.

Its role is catalytic.

CONVENE

Bring diverse stakeholders into a shared national conversation.

CONNECT

Build relationships between institutions, expertise and opportunities.

CATALYSE

Help move dialogue towards practical responses.

AMPLIFY

Ensure that youth and lived-experience voices influence national thinking.

SUSTAIN MOMENTUM

Maintain attention, partnership and accountability between annual Conferences.

The Annual L.I.V.E Conference is the most visible expression of this role.

Its value, however, will increasingly be measured by what happens between Conferences.

L.I.V.E's ambition is not to own Uganda's mental health ecosystem.

It is to help connect it.

9. FROM CONFERENCE TO ACTION

The value of Conference 2026 will ultimately depend on what follows it.

Five immediate directions emerged.

SCHOOLS

Develop the proposed school demonstration with appropriate education, mental health and evaluation partners and establish what can be strengthened and scaled.

YOUTH

Create continuing opportunities for young people to participate in advocacy, peer engagement and programme development.

ACCESS

Improve pathways to credible mental health information, referral and professional support, including through appropriate digital tools.

EVIDENCE

Strengthen national evidence on youth mental health and wellbeing to inform policy, programme design and investment.

COORDINATION

Maintain structured engagement among government, health, education, civil society, academia, private sector, faith communities, development partners, media and young people.

L.I.V.E will continue to contribute primarily as a convener and catalyst, connecting stakeholders and using the annual Conference as a platform for dialogue and accountability.

The annual cycle should increasingly become:

CONVENE → LISTEN → ACT → REVIEW → REPORT BACK

Conference 2027 should therefore begin with one question:

What changed because we came together?

10. CONCLUSION

Conference 2025 helped break the silence.

Conference 2026 asked what should come after awareness.

The answer was clear:

Intervene earlier. Strengthen relationships. Build capability. Connect support.

Uganda will continue to require stronger professional mental health services.

But the national response cannot begin only when somebody reaches crisis.

It must also operate where distress first becomes visible:

At home. At school. At work. Among friends. In communities. In places of worship. And increasingly online.

A young person experiencing distress needs someone able to notice.

That person needs to know how to listen.

They need to recognise when additional help is required.

And there must be somewhere credible to turn.

No single institution can build that system.

Government, healthcare, education, families, employers, faith communities, researchers, civil society, development partners, media and young people all have different roles.

The task is to make those roles connect.

Dr Andrew Bakainaga captured an important principle in his closing remarks:

“Our mental health is just as real, vital, and deserving of care as our physical health.”

And:

“Asking for help is not a sign of weakness; it’s one of the highest acts of courage and self-awareness a person can display.”

The responsibility of the wider ecosystem is to ensure that when somebody finds the courage to ask for help, there is an appropriate response.

The measure of Conference 2026 will therefore not be the success of the gathering alone.

It will be whether the conversation contributes to earlier support, stronger institutions, better coordination and more people receiving help before distress becomes crisis.

As the Convenor challenged participants:

“What are you going to do differently today?”

That question now extends beyond the Conference room.

2025 broke the silence.

2026 moved beyond awareness.

Now the work is to turn awareness into action.

LISTEN. INCLUDE. VALIDATE. EMPOWER.

Because Every Life Matters.

APPENDIX I

CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

L.I.V.E Conference 2026

10 September 2026 | Mestil Hotel, Kampala

Time	Session
08:00–09:00	Registration & Partner Organisations Expo
09:00–09:15	Welcome Remarks & Opening Prayer
09:15–09:25	LISTEN: Youth Advocacy — Every Voice Counts — <i>Kimberly Jael Aremo</i>
09:25–09:35	LISTEN: Addiction, Vulnerability and Recovery — <i>Rebecca Makyeli</i>
09:35–10:15	When Distress Becomes Crisis: What Are We Missing?
10:15–10:25	Convenor’s Address: From Awareness to Action — <i>Andrew Rugasira</i>
10:25–10:50	Keynote: Mental Health as a National Development Priority — <i>Prof. Eugene Kinyanda</i>
10:50–11:10	Wellbeing & Refreshment Break
11:10–11:35	INCLUDE: Youth Performance
11:35–11:45	Youth Skit Presentations
11:45–12:00	Physical Health & Wellbeing
12:00–12:15	Because Every Life Matters
12:15–12:30	Partnership for Impact
12:30–14:00	Lunch, Networking & Partner Expo
14:00–15:00	VALIDATE: National Plenary — What Must Uganda Do Differently?
15:05–16:15	EMPOWER: From Awareness to Practical Action
16:15–16:25	Closing Remarks — <i>Dr Andrew Bakainaga, WHO</i>
16:25–17:00	Call to Action & L.I.V.E Signature Walls

APPENDIX II

SPEAKERS AND FACILITATORS

Andrew Rugasira — Founder & Convenor, L.I.V.E Uganda
Robert Kabushenga — Co-Host & Conference MC
Professor Eugene Kinyanda — Mental Health Researcher
Kimberly Jael Aremo — Youth Advocate
Rebecca Makyeli — Addiction Prevention Advocate & Lived-Experience Speaker
Dr Hafsa Lukwata — Mental Health Specialist
Albert Elwa — Clinical Psychologist, Addiction Professional & Recovery Coach
Brian Ahimbisibwe — Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Specialist
Bill Bekunda — Substance Use Prevention and Treatment Professional
Dr Sabrina Kitaka — Adolescent Health Specialist
Collin Babirukamu — Mental Health & Wellness Advocate
Belinda Katumba — Founder & CEO, Can We Talk
Christine Mawadri — Media and Technology Entrepreneur
Daudi Ochieng — Conference Panelist
Dr Douglas Opio — Conference Panelist
Canary Mugume — Journalist and Broadcaster
Wonder Jr Derrick Muhanguzi — Mental Wellness Advocate & Plenary Moderator
Julius Kizito — Youth Session Facilitator
Coach Abdul Rahman Kasule — Physical Health & Wellbeing
Dr Andrew Bakainaga — World Health Organization
Alice Rugasira — Conference Facilitator
Alice Nakato — Events & Partner Coordination

APPENDIX III

PARTNERS AND SUPPORTERS

L.I.V.E Uganda acknowledges with gratitude the institutions, organisations and individuals whose financial, technical, logistical and in-kind contributions helped make Conference 2026 possible.

Institutional and Corporate Support

VIVO Energy
Uganda Communications Commission
TotalEnergies
World Health Organization
Pepsi

Venue Partner

Mestil Hotel

Event and Creative Support

Alice Nakato Events
ZEUS

Technology Support

Invitte

Individual Contributors

We also acknowledge the many individuals whose personal financial and in-kind contributions supported Conference 2026 and helped enable participation to remain free and accessible.

Their support reflects one of the central messages of L.I.V.E:

Mental wellbeing is a shared responsibility.