

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL SUPPORT COPING MECHANISMS AND MENTAL HEALTH AMONG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: A CASE STUDY OF NAMUNGALWE SUBCOUNTY, IGANGA DISTRICT, EASTERN UGANDA.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between social support coping mechanisms and mental health among people with disabilities using a case study of Namungalwe sub-county, Iganga district, Eastern Uganda. The study was guided by one research objective namely, to find out the impact of social support coping mechanisms on mental health among people with disabilities in Namungalwe sub-county in Iganga district. The study employed a cross-sectional descriptive research design that involved both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. The sample totalled 100 individuals, including guardians of individuals with disabilities, community development officers, and town management committees. These were purposely and randomly selected. Data was gathered via questionnaires and interview guides. According to study findings, there was several challenges faced by people with disabilities in Namungalwe sub county in Iganga district include PWDs facing discrimination and social exclusion, inaccessibility to healthcare services, employment opportunities and financial assistance plus collateral to secure financial loan services; also, PWDs faced a challenge of inadequate social support assistance. Further, the study revealed that there was a significant positive impact of social support coping mechanisms on mental health among people with disabilities including social support assisting PWDs in providing positive living sessions hence reviving hope and that social support mechanisms improved one's self esteem and felt a positive attitude toward self. The study findings revealed that there was a number of recommendations on mental health among people with disabilities in Namungalwe sub county in Iganga district including implementing community-based programs to foster social inclusion and support networks positively to enhance mental health outcomes; to incorporate mental health education into disability support services helps PWDs better understand the importance of mental health and available resources. In the end, it was recommended that there is a need to include people

with disabilities in leadership committees, which will help raise their voices because they are in the category of the most marginalized individuals in the society.

Keywords: Mental Health, Social Support as a coping Mechanism, People living with disabilities (PWDs).

INTRODUCTION

Social support coping mechanisms refers to the interactions with other people that help them to face, deal with and survive or manage adversity and stress. These mechanisms comprise of different aspects of supportive relationships such as emotional, instrumental, and informational and esteem support (Morris, et al., 2021). Social support is considered an important part of coping because it helps provide a sense of connection, encouragement and resilience which enables individuals to navigate through difficult times (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2024). The coping strategies employed by individuals with disabilities are pivotal in determining their mental health status. According to Jones & Brown (2019), adaptive coping mechanisms such as seeking social support and engaging in problem-solving brings about better mental health outcomes compared to maladaptive strategies like avoidance or denial. The role of social support in facilitating these coping strategies cannot be overstated as it provides emotional, informational and tangible resources that empower individuals to navigate their challenges more effectively (Taylor et al., 2022).

The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes that mental health is not merely the absence of mental disorders but a state of well-being that enables individuals to cope with the normal stresses of life (WHO, 2018). This perspective is relevant for people with disabilities who often experience compounded stressors affecting their mental health. According to WHO (2021), persons with disabilities are individuals who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. Persons with disabilities (PWDs) face unique challenges and barriers that hinder their full participation in society. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2018), approximately 12.5% of the people in Uganda or about 4.5 million people live with some form of disability. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately 15% of the global population lives with some form of disability (WHO, 2021).

In Uganda, the prevalence of disability among the population is estimated to be around 12.5% (UBOS, 2019). These individuals face various challenges including access to education, employment, healthcare and social integration. People with disabilities face unique challenges that often times worsen mental health issues including social isolation, discrimination and barriers to accessing healthcare services (Hernandez & O'Connell, 2020). The importance of social

support as a buffer against psychological distress, suggests that strong social networks significantly enhance coping strategies and improve overall mental health outcomes. Jones & Brown (2019) highlights the implication of mental health and social support mechanisms which has gained increasing recognition globally especially amongst people with disabilities (PWDs). Social support is an important factor that mitigates mental health challenges faced by PWDs.

According to Sullivan et al. (2019), effective coping strategies facilitated by strong social networks enhance resilience and improve overall mental health outcomes. In Africa, the situation is compounded by socio-economic challenges that worsen vulnerabilities of PWDs. The African Union (2021) highlights that many countries on the continent lack adequate infrastructure and resources to support the mental health needs of PWDs. Stigmatization and discrimination further hinder access to social support and mental health services. A study by Manda et al. (2022) indicates that cultural perceptions of disability often lead to social isolation which limits opportunities for PWDs to engage in supportive relationships. Hence, the need for effective coping mechanisms becomes critical as these individuals navigate both their disabilities and the societal barriers they face.

The East African region exhibits unique challenges and opportunities regarding social support and mental health among PWDs. The East African Community (2022) reports that while there have been strides in policy formulation to support PWDs, implementation remains inconsistent. Factors such as poverty, lack of education, lack of intended awareness and limited access to healthcare services contribute to the mental health struggles of PWDs in this region. According to Mwanga et al. (2023), social support structures in East Africa are often informal and community-based, which can be beneficial but also inconsistent. In Uganda, the situation reflects broader regional trends but is also influenced by specific national dynamics. The Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2023) indicates that approximately 12% of the population lives with a disability which emphasizes the need for targeted mental health interventions. Nansubuga et al. (2023) emphasizes that social support is often derived from family and community networks which play a pivotal role in the coping strategies employed by persons with disabilities. However, systemic issues including inadequate mental health services and societal stigma continue to pose significant barriers.

Iganga District has a predominantly rural population with significant socio-economic challenges. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2023), the district has a high prevalence of disabilities which is exacerbated by limited access to healthcare and social welfare services. The socio-cultural context in Iganga where traditional beliefs often influence perceptions of disability further complicate mental health landscape for persons living with disabilities. This demographic reality necessitates an examination of the specific coping mechanisms and social support systems available to PWD in the district. According to Nansubuga et al. (2023), social support primarily stems from familial and community networks. These informal support systems play a crucial role

in mental health of PWDs and that families often serve as the first line of defense against mental health challenges to provide emotional and financial support. However, Jones & Brown (2019) states that the effectiveness of these support systems vary significantly. Cultural stigmas associated with disability lead to social isolation and limits the engagement of PWDs within their communities. Infact, Kiyingi et al. (2022) found that many individuals rely on community gatherings and religious institutions for emotional support and coping strategies. This is the same case with the community of Namungalwe sub county. These gatherings often serve as platforms for sharing experiences and fostering resilience among PWDs. However, access to such gatherings is hindered by factors such as transportation challenges and socio-economic constraints. As a result, many PWDs do not receive the necessary social support coping mechanisms leading to a deterioration of their mental health which has triggered this study to be researched on and addressing these barriers is vital for improving the mental health landscape in Namungalwe Sub.

County in Iganga district. Mental health is an important aspect of persons' well-being especially for people with disabilities who often face unique challenges that exacerbate mental health issues. World Health Organisation (2018) asserts that PWDs are at a higher risk for developing mental health disorders including anxiety and depression due to various factors such as social stigma, discrimination and barriers to accessing healthcare. The interplay between physical and mental health creates a cycle where mental health challenges hinder the ability to manage physical disabilities effectively leading to a decline in both areas.

Social support plays a vital role in influencing the mental health of PWDs. Positive relationships and community engagement can mitigate the adverse effects of disability-related stressors. Cohen & Wills (2020) state that persons with strong social networks experience better mental health outcomes as they are more likely to receive emotional and practical support during difficult times. However, isolation and lack of support can lead to feelings of helplessness and worsen mental health issue which highlights the importance of fostering inclusive communities that promote social connections for persons with disabilities

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need for tailored mental health services for PWDs. These services have considered specific challenges faced by this population such as accessibility issues and the need for disability-competent care (Harpur, 2021). Integrating mental health support into existing rehabilitation programs and ensuring that mental health professionals are trained to work with PWD which enhance the effectiveness of interventions. By addressing both mental and physical health needs, we can improve the quality of life for PWD and prevent them from mental health issues upfront (Nansubuga, et al.,2023).

The intersection of social support and mental health among people with disabilities (PWD) in Uganda remains critically underexplored, despite increasing recognition of its importance in enhancing well-being. People with disabilities often experience heightened levels of social

isolation which worsens their mental health challenges (Mwanga et al., 2023). This isolation is compounded by cultural stigmas surrounding disability, religious misconceptions and lack of awareness which leads to diminished access to both informal and formal support systems (Nansubuga et al., 2023). In Uganda, where community-based support structures are often inadequate, individuals with disabilities face significant barriers in accessing mental health services (Sullivan et al., 2019). The lack of comprehensive mental health policies and trained personnel complicates the situation which leaves many PWDs without the necessary psychological support (World Health Organization, 2020). As such, there is an urgent need to investigate the specific coping mechanisms employed by PWD in Uganda and to assess the effectiveness of existing social support networks in mitigating mental health challenges.

The Government of Uganda and local authorities have enacted different legal frameworks ordinances, bylaws and policies to protect the rights of persons with disabilities such as the Uganda Persons with Disabilities Act as amended (2020) and the National Policy on Disability in Uganda (2019). These are aimed to promote social inclusion, inclusive learning and participation, empathy and friendship and these frameworks have advocated for equal participation and inclusion of youth with disabilities in all aspects of society (Uganda Police Force, 2021). However, there is lack of comprehensive mental health policies and trained personnel complicate a situation which leaves many PWDs without the necessary psychological support (World Health Organization, 2020). As such, there is an urgent need to investigate the specific coping mechanisms employed by PWD in Uganda and to assess the effectiveness of existing social support networks in mitigating mental health challenges. Hence, this study aimed to address the issue of social support coping mechanisms on mental health outcomes of persons with disabilities in Uganda with a focus on Namungalwe sub county, Iganga district in Eastern Uganda.

Methodology

The research design of the study was a cross-sectional descriptive research design. A cross-sectional research design is the one in which a researcher measures two variables, understands and assesses the statistical relationship between them with less or no influence from any extraneous variable (Sekaran, 2023). Cross-sectional design assisted the study to gather data from a sample of population at a particular point in time. The study utilized a research design that facilitated examination of relationship between variables. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were incorporated to ensure a comprehensive analysis (Stephen, 2022). This approach was chosen to help the researcher evaluate people's perspectives on the connection between social support coping strategies and mental well-being among individuals with disabilities, using Namungalwe Sub-County in Iganga District as a case study.

Targeted population and sample size

Namungalwe sub county is one of the sub counties in Iganga district located along the Iganga–Kaliro Road. This area characterised by presence of high population density compared to other rural sub counties of the district has a high number of people with disabilities that subscribe to mental health concerns. This area was chosen because there is high prevalence of people with disabilities hence easy access to data regarding the study.

According to Uganda Census (2024), Namungalwe Sub County has a population of about 47,500 Persons. The population in a study refers to a group of individuals who share specific characteristics relevant to the research (Agyedu et al., 2020). Essentially, it represents the entire set of people from which a researcher draws conclusions based on a selected sample. This study focuses on guardians of individuals with disabilities, community development officers, and town management committees. The total target population consists of 132 respondents, from which a sample size was determined using Slovene's formula.

Sampling Technique and Procedure

The study utilized purposive sampling, a method in which participants are intentionally chosen based on their relevant knowledge of the study variables (Marshal & Bossman, 2021). This approach ensured the selection of individuals with direct involvement in the research topic.

Specifically, the study focused on Community Development Officers and Committee members of Namungalwe Sub- County, as they were expected to have valuable insights into the relationship between social support coping mechanisms and mental health among people with disabilities in the area. The study also utilized a simple random sampling method, ensuring that every individual within the selected respondent category had an equal opportunity to be chosen for participation (Marshal & Bossman, 2021). This approach was applied to select caregivers, guardians and community members of Namungalwe Sub-county, giving each person an equal chance of inclusion. Participants were randomly selected based on their availability and willingness to take part in the study.

Sample is a subset of individuals drawn from the target population to participate in the study. Out of a total population of 132 respondents, a sample of 100 was chosen to represent the entire group. The selection process involved both purposive and simple random sampling methods. This study utilized a sample of 100 participants including 65 caregivers/guardians, 3 Community Development Officers (CDOs), 50 community members, and 14 committee members as outlined in the table below:

Table 1.1: Showing sample size

Categories of Respondents	Population	Sample size	Sampling method
Caregivers/Guardians	65	43	Simple Random sampling
CDOs	3	3	Purposive sampling
Community members	50	40	Simple Random sampling
Committee members	14	14	Purposive sampling
Total	132	100	

Source: Primary data (2025); sampled using Slovene's formula, (1957)

Open-ended questionnaires were used as the instrument for gathering data. A questionnaire is a set of well-defined questions designed following a thorough evaluation (Agyedu et al., 2020). The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather detailed responses from participants that contributed to achieving the research objectives. The questionnaires contained open-ended questions to enable respondents to give comprehensive responses for an in-depth analysis. They were structured based on the study objectives as stated in chapter one of this research study. A total of 100 questionnaires were issued to the study respondents targeting mainly community members, committee members and caregivers.

This study also involved in-person interviews conducted between researcher and participants. Structured interview guides were used to explore complex and sensitive topics as highlighted by Kakooza (2022).

Additional explanations were provided to help the interviewees share their perspectives, as noted by Marshal & Bossman (2019). This approach helped gather direct information from the selected participants, specifically Community Development Officers who underwent this method of data collection. The data was processed using Microsoft Excel, which assisted in analyzing and displaying the information in frequency distribution tables. Tables served as a primary method for presenting analyzed data, as they effectively condensed large volumes of detailed information into a compact format. In this context, frequency distribution tables were used to summarize response values.

Results

Table 1.2: shows responses on the impact of social support coping mechanisms on mental health among people with disabilities

Social support coping mechanisms on Mental health among people with disabilities	Frequency	Percentage
Social support reduces levels of psychological stress	21	21
Social support assists PWDs in providing positive living sessions hence reviving hope	12	12
Social support mechanisms improves one's self esteem and feel a positive attitude toward self	42	42
Social support creates a purpose in one's life and helps them get engaged in social activities	11	11
Social support helps PWDs to have a positive motive in a difficult situation	14	14
Total	100	100%

Source: Primary data, 2025

The researcher sought to find out the impact of Social support coping mechanisms on Mental health among people with disabilities in Namungalwe sub county, Iganga district and majority of the respondents 41(41%) reported that social support mechanisms improves one's self esteem and feel a positive attitude toward self; followed by 21(21%) of the respondents who argued that social support reduces levels of psychological stress; 14(14%) of the respondents believed at social support helped PWDs to have a positive motive in a difficult situation; 12(12%) of the respondents argued that social support assisted PWDs in providing positive living sessions hence reviving hope whereas the least 11(11%) reported that social support creates a purpose in one's life and helps them get engaged in social activities. This implies that there are varying views on how social support coping mechanisms influences mental health among people with disabilities in Namungalwe sub county, Iganga district.

Upon interview with a women affair's council member, she stated that;

"The good thing with the people with disabilities, they are discriminative themselves. Because they spend most of their time at home, people with disabilities are desirous to interact with most of community members from those at business places to schools and interact well with leaders especially when they know they are responsible persons. By talking with these categories of people, they receive social support and feel engaged which reduces that stigma that would have resulted from social exclusion."

According to Holt-Lunstad et al. (2020), people with disabilities who engage in supportive social networks are more likely to utilize adaptive coping mechanisms such as problem-solving and seeking help rather than resorting to negative coping strategies. Affirming relationships foster a sense of belonging and validation which are essential for maintaining mental health whereby the quality of social interactions plays an important role in determining the effectiveness of social support as a coping mechanism. They assert that social support serves as a protective factor against mental health issues and provide individuals with resources necessary to cope with stressors associated with their disabilities. People with disabilities who actively engage with their social networks report higher levels of life satisfaction and lower levels of depression and anxiety.

Discussions

Findings on the impact of social support coping mechanisms on mental health among People with disabilities.

The objective of this study was to find out the impact of social support coping mechanisms on mental health among people with disabilities in Namungalwe sub county, Iganga district and the study found out responses on how social support coping mechanisms impacted mental health among people with disabilities as discussed below;

Findings in Table 1.2 reveal that social support coping mechanisms had a significant positive impact on mental health among people with disabilities in Namungalwe sub county in Iganga district whereby social support reduced levels of psychological stress; social support assisted people with disabilities in providing positive living sessions hence reviving hope amongst them; social support mechanisms improved one's self esteem and felt a positive attitude toward self; social support created a purpose in one's life and helped them get engaged in social activities, whereas, social support helped PWDs to have a positive motive in a difficult situation.

This study finding is in connection to a study conducted by Taylor et al. (2019) who assert that individuals who perceive higher levels of social support tend to experience lower rates of anxiety and depression, as these supportive relationships provide a buffer against stressors. For people with disabilities, the presence of a robust support network enhances resilience enabling them to navigate the complexities of their situations more effectively. Resilience is important as PWDs often face unique challenges related to their disabilities including societal stigma, discrimination and barriers to access. Rimmer and Rowland (2019) highlight that integration of social support into therapeutic interventions enhances mental health outcomes for PWDs. Programs designed to strengthen social networks and improve coping skills lead to significant improvements in mental

Health indicators. Community-based interventions that encourage peer support and social engagement have been shown to reduce feelings of loneliness and depression among people with disabilities. These findings indicated that there are varying views concerning the impact of

social support coping mechanisms on mental health among people with disabilities. This was manifested in social support assisting PWDs in providing positive living sessions hence reviving hope and that social support mechanisms improved one's self esteem and felt a positive attitude toward self.

Conclusions

Basing on the study findings on the challenges faced by people with disabilities, the study discovered that study participants had fair knowledge on the study variables and reported that there are different challenges faced by people with disabilities in Namung'alwe sub county in Iganga district. These challenges encountered by people with disabilities hindered their social interactions, access to healthcare facilities and deteriorated their hopes of getting employment opportunities and financial assistance.

The impact of social support coping mechanisms on mental health among people with disabilities, the study recommends that mental health education needs to be incorporated into disability support services to help PWDs better understand the importance of mental health and available resources.

Recommendations

The study findings indicated that there are a number of recommendations on mental health among people with disabilities in Namung'alwe sub county in Iganga district including implementation of community-based programs to foster social inclusion and support networks positively enhances mental health outcomes; incorporating mental health education into disability support services helps PWDs better understand the importance of mental health and available resources as well as promotion of awareness and education about mental health to foster understanding and empathy hence reducing stigma associated with mental health challenges among the people with disabilities. In regards to the challenges faced by people with disabilities, the study recommends that community-based programs need to be instated to foster social inclusion and support networks positively enhances mental health outcomes.

Regarding the impact of social support coping mechanisms on mental health among people with disabilities, the study recommends that mental health education needs to be incorporated into disability support services helps PWDs better understand the importance of mental health and available resources.

Finally, in as regards to suggest recommendations on the mental health among people with disabilities in Namung'alwe Sub County in Iganga district, the study recommends that the inclusion of people with disabilities in leadership committees will help raise their voices because they are in the category of the most marginalized individuals in society.

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