

Breaking Mental Health Silence: Men from Different Cultures and Generations Inspire and Support Each Other

Yvette Underdue Murph, DPA

Director of Enrollment Management, Student Success Marketing and Communications
Carnegie Mellon University Africa
Email: yummsterr@gmail.com

Ayebilla Avoka, Graduate Student, MSEAI

Carnegie Mellon University Africa
Email: aavoka@andrew.cmu.edu

Ibrahim Olaide Jimoh, Graduate Student, MSEAI

Carnegie Mellon University Africa
Email: ioj@andrew.cmu.edu

Fidele Rurangwa, Graduate Student, MSIT

Carnegie Mellon University Africa
Email: frurangw@andrew.cmu.edu

Tags

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Setting

In a vibrant neighborhood located in Nairobi, Kenya, men from different generations and diverse backgrounds gather weekly at a popular community gym to engage in group physical fitness activities for good health and

well-being. While enjoying their boot camp drills, this group of men from various countries with unique cultures inadvertently confront their embedded denial to openly discuss mental health challenges that are largely influenced by their societal and cultural norms.

Case

The weekly gym group is made up of six men from different cultures and generations:

Men's Workout Group	Country	Generation	Status
Liam	Kenya	Generation Z	College Student
Carlos	Nigeria	Generation Z	Corporate Professional
Ethan	Uganda	Millennial	Father
Ahmed	Kenya	Millennial	Former Student Athlete
Frank	Kenya	Baby Boomer	Retired Police Officer
George	Kenya	Baby Boomer	Vietnam War Veteran

Liam is a Kenyan college student, who is vocal about mental health and is never shy about sharing his perspective on this topic. For him, the gym nourishes his mental wellness as physical fitness. Carlos is a young Nigerian professional who recently moved to Kenya and joined the workforce in Nairobi. He sees the gym as an escape from his stressful corporate life. Like Liam, Carlos has a progressive viewpoint about freely discussing mental health but struggles with anxiety, which he often hides behind jokes and bravado.

Ethan, a dedicated father who recently relocated from Uganda to Kenya, outwardly exhibits strength but has bouts of stress and high anxiety. He manages his stress through regular workouts but has become aware that physical exertion is not enough. Ahmed takes pride in his discipline and physical endurance. He is skeptical about openly discussing mental health despite his occasional insomnia and mood swings. He believes personal issues are solved through willpower and hard work.

Frank, a retired police officer, espouses the belief that men should be self-reliant, stoic, and never share their emotions. To him, the gym is a place to maintain his physical strength, a symbol of his resilience. George, like Frank, upholds a conservative Kenyan traditional viewpoint on masculinity that men should never expose their weaknesses. He views the gym as a sanctuary to escape family obligations. Frank and George serve as the de facto leaders of the group.

After their rigorous workouts, the men gather at the Sweat and Tears Coffee Shop and often engage in lively conversations about manhood and routinely deflect discussions about mental health challenges.

For two months, Ethan struggled to commit to their bootcamp regiment and frequently failed to show up for weekly workout sessions. One day, the men gathered at the coffee shop after a workout and Ethan awkwardly apologized to them for missing their weekly boot camp. As the sole provider for his family, Ethan was overwhelmed with fulfilling greater financial obligations in Kenya. Ethan's stress was visibly noticeable to the men who accepted his apology. They expressed genuine concern and offered their support to Ethan. Ahmed and Liam shared how they had educated themselves on managing mental health issues and asked Ethan, "Is everything okay?" Ethan was reluctant to respond and deflected by saying "Man, I am just trying to keep up with

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the drills.” Carlos expressed to Ethan that “workouts are not only about the body, but it helps to keep one’s mind in shape. We are here to support you and each other through life’s peaks and valleys and there is no shame in asking for our help.”

George and Frank kindly criticized Carlos for suggesting that rigorous workouts do not solve all problems. To them, Ethan just needed to “toughen up, workout more and he will be fine.” The varying perspectives confused Ethan and escalated his stress and anxiety.

Later, as he thought it over, Ethan was encouraged by the progressive viewpoints of Ahmed, Liam, and Carlos. He made the difficult decision to pivot from denial to seeking mental health therapy from a professional counselor. Soon after his therapy sessions, Ethan had an epiphany that talking about his mental health struggles did not make him weaker but stronger. He shared a few techniques he learned from his counselor with his brethren on how to manage his mild depression. His willingness to share his positive experiences with mental health counseling inspired Ahmed to seek help for his insomnia and mood swings.

Ethan joined Liam and Carlos in their advocacy to champion mental health awareness with males from different countries, diverse cultures, and backgrounds who work out at the gym. Purposeful discussions emerged among the men on the importance of embracing mental health challenges and confronting them as opportunities to become physically, mentally, and spiritually healthy.

After a couple of months, Frank and George began to openly contribute their viewpoints to the discussion of how to enhance mental health awareness. During a bootcamp milestone celebration, Frank and George expressed their admiration for Ethan and sheepishly confessed that it is beneficial to openly discuss mental health and seek help from a trained professional. Within a year, the men from the Millennial and Baby Boomer generations transformed their conservative fixed mindset on mental health to a growth mindset and joined the progressive Gen Zs to raise awareness and promote healthy living for men. This diverse group of men all came to agree that taking care of one’s physical *and* mental fitness is an excellent recipe for health and well-being.

Discussion Questions

- Envision the diverse backgrounds of these six men before this case ensued, what societal and cultural norms may have influenced their beliefs about mental health?
- How did these men from the different generations influence each other’s perspective on mental health counseling? What does this suggest about the role of peer support in addressing mental health?
- How does this case study challenge traditional views of masculinity? What can individuals or groups do to challenge traditional views of masculinity?
- Carol Dweck’s Growth and Fixed Mindset Theory suggests that some people view innate ability and personalities as constant through life (fixed) and others emphasize that with effort, people can change (growth). How does this theory help to interpret this case?
- Two of these men had moved to a new country. What added stressors does that bring to their lives? What additional challenges and/or opportunities exist when seeking mental health support in a new country?
- What lessons can international educators learn from this case?