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## Every Child Can Learn Podcast

### Episode 15: Benjamin on mental health & learning

**Intro:** You are listening to the Every Child Can Learn podcast. The podcast is offered to you by Backup Uganda and Brainstud. You can listen to our podcasts online on our website, [www.backupuganda.com](http://www.backupuganda.com). And if you are in Gulu, you can pick up the audios offline from Mega FM, Radio Rupiny, Divine Video and Music Library. Head teachers from the district's schools can pick this podcast from the District Education Office. And head teachers from city schools can pick theirs from the City Education Office. You can as well pick up the podcast episodes from the following schools Highland Primary School, Gulu Prison Primary School, Gulu Town Primary School, Mary Immaculate Primary School, St. Joseph Primary School, or Christ the King Demonstration Primary School. Do you like our podcast? Feel free to share it with your family, friends, or neighbors. The more people learn about learning difficulties, the better we can help our children.

**Glades:** Welcome to our 15th episode of the Every Child Can Learn podcast. My name is Lanyero Gladys. Today we are very happy and delighted to meet our very special guest, who is going to tell us where is from, and what else he wants listeners to know about him. Thank you so much.

**Benjamin:** Hello, everyone. My name is Benjamin Komagum, or you can call me Benjamin Spartos. I'm an artist who believes in the power of music in mental health advocacy. I'm currently based in Gulu, Uganda, and I run a company called Benjamin Spartos SMC limited.

**Glades:** Thank you so much, Benjamin, for giving us that information about you. Could you also tell us more about what you do, and also let people know where Spartos came from?

**Benjamin:** Thank you very much. If I would, if I will talk about what I do in the music side of it. I'm looking at talent development, not just for myself, but for the people in my community, that have a talent and don't know how to nurture it. So I use my music and some of the skills that I have to train, especially youth and other people how to sing, how to manage

their talent, and how to improve their digital marketing skills. But also, I use my music and my knowledge in the mental health field to create awareness on some of the challenges that we are battling in relation to mental health matters.

**Glades:** Thank you very much, Benjamin for still sharing that. About music and mental health, what do you think listeners need to understand about mental health? Could you also tell us more since you are an advocate for music and mental health?

**Benjamin:** So mental health, in simple terms, is how we deal with our emotional, psychological, and social well being. It has to deal with how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices in our different stages of life. Then, music and mental health has a lot in common and they work hand in hand. Research shows that there's a part of the brain that never forgets musical notes. So it's a very reason as to why I have been very passionate about how to use my music to create messages that can help create awareness and spread information, the right information about mental health matters.

**Glades:** Thank you so very much. I believe the listeners out there are picking the message that Benjamin is sharing in relation to music and mental health. And now what do you think is the biggest myth people say about mental health? I know this is something that a lot of people, having children with mental health or struggling with mental health have had a lot of myths. could you also share with the listeners?

**Benjamin:** According to me, I feel that the biggest myth around mental health matters is that is the fact that people think that mental health challenges are not killing a lot of people. People are not aware of the magnitude of how many people are actually losing their lives, or actually getting their lives messed up, not just losing but getting their lives messed up because of mental health challenges.

**Glades:** Okay, thank you so much. Now, this tells us that we need to take it so serious if we have a child or a learner or any other person with mental health. Mr. Benjamin, could you also

share with us some of the signs someone can see to for him or her to start suspecting that there is a mental issue with my child or with my relative?

**Benjamin:** So some of the signs to look out for can be eating or sleeping habits. If you're eating or sleeping too much or too little. If you're isolating yourself if you're a kind of person who loves being alone or decides to you know, stay away from people. If you have low or no energy. So before I continue these signs should be something that, say happens out of your usual daily activities. Say for instance, out of the blue for the past four weeks, or for the past, maybe three or six weeks, there is a change in habits, there's a change in character. And literally, that would be an early warning sign for you to know whether you are you actually having a mental health challenge. While some of the other signs are feeling numb, or like nothing, feeling like nothing matters. You know, having, you know, unexplained pains know, you wake up in the morning, and somehow your body pains every day, or you just have these headaches that you just can't explain where they came from. Feeling helpless or hopeless, that you feel like, life doesn't really matter anymore. Or like this, there's nothing worth living for or worth, you know, trying in life. Your use of drugs more than usual, and drugs would be alcohol or cigarettes, and this doesn't mean that taking drugs is a sign for mental health challenge. But then, if you're using them more than the usual, say, if you used to take maybe alcohol once a week or twice a week, and then somehow you're taking it four times a day, that is something for you to look out for. Then feeling confused, feeling forgetful, feeling angry and stressed out for no reason, or for no reason that you can understand, feeling scared about things that you never felt scared about. Just generally, having fear about certain things in life around you, or things you see, or things that people tell you, or talk to you about. Yelling and fighting with family and friends is also a sign, severe mood swings. You know, if you're, if you're having thoughts, that you're seeing something that or someone that is not there, that is that is also an early warning sign. Thinking of harming yourself, being suicidal, if if you know if if somehow you just feel like you want to take your life. Because it might be because of anything could be because of poverty or whichever reason may be a health concern. But if you feel like you're ready to actually take your life, then that is a sign for you probably get getting a mental health challenge.

**Glades:** Thank you so very much, Benjamin, you're really explained so well, and I believe our listeners will understand so well. I know listeners are going to ask this question of where do we put the mad people, people who undress themselves and all that? Are they also going to be categorized under the signs that you've mentioned? And and do you treat them? What do you do in relation to your work?

**Benjamin:** Okay, so me as a person, I don't call them mad. Different people who have been tagged as mad battling a particular mental health condition, and they vary. Some of them might just be bipolar, but then there are particular treatments for these mental health conditions. And that's why it's important for people to seek the right right support, the right specialists, the psychologists, psychosocial workers that can help these people. First of all, administer the right medication but also counsel them, to help them come out of the condition that they have.

**Glades:** Okay, thank you so much. I mentioned the word mad because this is a common thing that people in the communities, keep saying, and it's not a great word to really use for this people who are struggling with mental issues. Mad is not the right word to be used. Thank you so much. Once again, Benjamin. I also wanted you to help explain to the listeners how does mental health affect learning?

**Benjamin:** So mental health and learning have a very close relationship, because earlier I described mental health as you know, how we deal with emotional, psychological and social wellbeing. In order to learn, you need to be mentally stable. You need to be in the right emotional state if if you if you're stressed out, if you're if, if if by any chance you're battling a mental health challenge, there will be a difficulty in achieving high grades at school, or making friendship within school or just making the right positive choices in school. And I think if I'm to group some of the things that connect learning and mental health, I would look at academic performances. A person or child or student who has a mental health challenge will have an effect to their academic performance. In this way, they will have a difficulty in concentrating in class, they will lack the optimism, optimism is just you know, thinking positively, you know, having a more positive mindset towards the things that you're taught,

towards the things that you see, towards your friends around you, and then difficulty sleeping. All these kinds of symptoms or signs will affect someone's performance in school. And when it comes to behavior, people battling mental challenges usually, they get irritated easily, they have emotional outbursts, and sometimes they have aggressive behaviors. But also they feel bored, you know, some kind of boredom that is you know outside than the usual common habits that they've been presenting. So mental health challenges affects your behavior, and then if if you fail to relate with your students, or fail to relate with your teachers, it is going to affect how you learn, or how you receive the things that you learn within school. And also, I feel like because of, say, certain incidences that happen in school like bullying. People who are battling mental challenges are going to find themselves absenting themselves in school, because of the fear that if they go back to school, this, the bullies in school are going to, you know, call them all these kinds of names, or they're going to just put them in that corner, maybe beat them up or just emotionally torture them. So you find that either they're presenting themselves or just lie that they have headache, or certain kinds of problems that they don't have.

**Glades:** Thank you so much for sharing that, Benjamin. And maybe just to add on what Benjamin has explained, a lot of times children with mental issues or mental health challenges, miss out schools, because of the reasons that Benjamin has said. And then sometimes they also feel out of place, because the community is also stigmatizing them. Some of these children understand the situations they're in. But if you keep stigmatizing them, calling them names, mad child, trust me, they would not want to fit in the class, for example. I know Benjamin has mentioned a lot of reasons, signs and symptoms, let's also not start concluding right away seeing a child sitting to himself, and then you said this could be mental issues. You see a child talking alone, this one is mental mental issues. Sometimes there are things that could be running in our heads, that makes us talk alone. And that may not necessarily mean we are we have mental issues. So let's be very, very careful giving conclusions. Let's try to do assessment, just like he said. Let's try to look for psychiatrist to test out, if and this is something that might have happened several times over and over again. Thank you so much, Benjamin, for sharing that. Lastly, I want you to also help listeners out

there. I'm looking at a parent and teachers who are listening to this program. What advice do you think you can give a parent or a teacher? Or Maybe how do you think they can support their child or children if they find them in their classrooms, if they find them, maybe at home at a neighbor's place?

**Benjamin:** I think one of the biggest ways that parents and teachers can support children are people who are battling mental health challenges is by first of all willing, being willing, you know, to support them, being willing to understand them what they're going through and not not starting by judging them based on how they behave, or how they speak, or how they look like. But also one of the most important things is spotting the signs. Are you in school? Are you a teacher? Are you a parent at home? Are you a neighbor? You know, are you in the community, you know, doing whatever you're doing? How are you supporting these children who are battling mental challenges? How are you? Are you actually trying to help spot the signs without, you know, criticizing or without drawing to conclusions. But if by any chance, you see a child who has just started to develop, you know, tiredness out of the blue, not not just in one day, but then you as a teacher, you've been with these children for, you know, months or years, but then it's, it may happen to you that you notice that the child for the past two months, so the past month, the child gets tired quite too easily, you know, that they have a difficulty concentrating in class, or even at home, when you're talking to them as a parent, you know. They're lacking the confidence they used to have before, they have reduced socialization, you know, maybe there's a change in weight, rather than increasing weight, or they're losing weight. They're losing interest in the things that they used to, you know, enjoy. Like, maybe the child used to play with toys, but then they no longer do that, you know, that's a reason for you to probably find out why. If the child is absent in class, for teachers that know your children, instead of probably punishing them or, you know, calling them all those kinds of names, how about you first find out from them what's going on? You know, if children start complaining about physical pains, it might start from a mental perspective. Starting by spotting the signs is really important. After you spot the signs, then I think it's important for you to reduce the stigma if it's at school, or it's at home, or it's in the communities. For schools, school supervisors, or the leaders in the schools can create policies or practices that can help children who are battling mental health challenges. First of all, not

to get bullied, but also to feel comfortable to open up whenever they feel like they're facing a difficulty, because most times, many of them in schools, they don't feel the self esteem to stand up and say, dear teacher, I am feeling like this, you know, the teacher, I feel tired, the teacher, my head hurts the teacher, not understanding something's going on with me. So trying to encourage a culture in school, and even at home, where children can speak up about how they feel their emotions, but also like generally everything that's going on with them that they're struggling with, and devising means and policies that can reduce on the bullying. I feel like it's important to train teachers in schools, on mental on best mental health practices. I feel like many times in schools, most of the focus is just education, or the basic education that is given. But I think on top of that, it's important to also not just educate the teachers on how to deal with students and children in with respect to mental health values, but also to educate children on what mental health is, and some of the challenges Sometimes the children bully each other because they don't understand what their fellow colleague is going through. But if they know that there is a mental health challenge called depression, called anxiety, called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, you know, like I mentioned, many of them, may be it will change their mindset towards how they speak to these people. And it might actually increase the support network for children who are battling mental health challenges.

**Glades:** Thank you so very much, Benjamin, you've explained so clearly, and I just want to emphasize on one point that you mentioned something to do with willingness. Now, this is something that is very, very important to the parents out there. Now the one thing you need to do as a parent is to be willing to help your child first of all, acceptance, accepting your child with the condition he or she has is the key and then the rest will come in. That is where you will also go to the schools tell the teachers tell the administrators my child has this condition, do this and that to the child. At the same time look for them Medical kind of area to help your child or the testing and the assessment done. Thank you so very much, Mr. Benjamin. It has really been so nice to have you and share your experience about mental health in relation to music. As Backup Uganda we always say Every Child Can Learn. Thank you.



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