

Mental Health First Aid Guide (Uganda Context): The **ALGEE 5-Step Protocol Explained**

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Introduction: Why Uganda Needs Mental Health First Aid

Mental health issues are rapidly becoming a silent emergency in Uganda. According to the 2025 Uganda Population Status Report, mental health cases reported in health facilities increased by over 70% between 2021 and 2024 - rising from 494,326 to 843,295 cases. An estimated 24% of adults and 23% of children are affected by mental health conditions. Even more alarming, suicidal ideation affects 10.6% of the population, nearly three times the global average.

However, Uganda's mental health services are severely under-resourced. The country has only 20 psychiatrists serving over 46 million people, and the government allocates less than 1% of its health budget to mental health, far below the WHO-recommended 5%. Stigma, cultural beliefs, financial hardships, and geographical barriers prevent countless people from accessing the care they need.

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) was developed precisely to address this gap. Just as traditional first aid provides initial care to someone with a physical injury until professional help arrives, MHFA offers initial support to a person experiencing a mental health crisis until they can access appropriate professional care. It does not require you to be a therapist, it requires you to be a knowledgeable, compassionate supporter.

The internationally recognized ALGEE 5-step framework is designed for ordinary people to provide this support. The following guide adapts the ALGEE protocol specifically to Uganda's context, empowering you to confidently support someone in need.

What is ALGEE?

ALGEE is the acronym for the five-step Mental Health First Aid action plan

Step	Meaning
A	Approach, assess and assist with any crisis
L	Listen non-judgementally
G	Give reassurance and information
E	Encourage appropriate professional help
E	Encourage self-help and other support strategies

Step 1: Approach, Assess and Assist with Any Crisis

How to Approach Someone

When you notice someone showing signs of psychological distress, the first step is to find a suitable time and private space to approach them. Let them know you have observed they seem to be going through a difficult time and that you are willing to offer support. Remain calm, open, and non-threatening.

In Uganda's cultural context, the way you approach is particularly important. Direct questioning can be perceived as intrusive, especially across different genders, ages, or social statuses. Recommendations:

Use gentle, indirect openers such as, "I've noticed you haven't seemed like yourself lately, are you okay?"

If they are unwilling to talk immediately, respect their choice, but let them know your concern is genuine and you are available whenever they are ready.

Consider involving a trusted family member, friend, or community elder if appropriate and with the person's consent.

Assessing for Crisis Signals

As part of this first step, you must assess whether there are signs of an immediate crisis. These include:

- Expressing suicidal thoughts or a wish to die
- Self-harming behaviors
- Extreme agitation, confusion, or disorientation
- Psychotic symptoms (e.g., hallucinations or delusions)
- Confusion due to heavy alcohol or drug use.

Crisis Actions

If the person is in immediate danger (e.g., currently harming themselves or others), contact emergency services immediately:

General emergencies: Call 112 (Uganda's national emergency hotline) or take them to the nearest health facility.

Suicidal crisis: Never leave the person alone. Ask them directly, with compassion, whether they are thinking of suicide. Research shows that asking directly does not "plant" the idea and can actually open the door to help.

If professional help is not immediately available in your area:

Call Mental Health Uganda's free helpline: 0800212121 (Monday–Friday, 8:30 AM – 5:00 PM).

Take them to the nearest Health Centre or hospital.
Contact a school or workplace counselor if available.

For non-acute situations, proceed with the remaining ALGEE steps.

Step 2: Listen Non-Judgementally

Non-judgemental, active listening is one of the most powerful forms of support a mental health first aider can provide. It conveys respect, acceptance, and genuine care for the person and their wellbeing.

Why This Matters

One of the biggest barriers to seeking help for mental health is the fear of being judged. When someone opens up to you about psychological distress, they are often taking a significant risk. If they feel judged, dismissed, or misunderstood, they are highly unlikely to seek further help. By listening without judgement, you create a safe space where they feel heard, valued, and understood.

Non-judgemental listening does not mean agreeing with everything they say. It means acknowledging their feelings and experiences without criticism, even when those feelings seem unfamiliar or irrational to you.

Listening within Ugandan Culture

In Uganda, listening is deeply rooted in many communities' traditions. However, mental health topics can still carry stigma. Here is how to practice non-judgemental listening in the Ugandan context:

Give the person your full attention and minimize distractions.

Use open-ended questions like, "Can you tell me more about how you've been feeling lately?"

Reflect back what you hear – "It sounds like you have been feeling overwhelmed" – to show you are following.

Avoid rushing to give advice, making comparisons, or saying "Look on the bright side."

Respect cultural sensitivities: In many Ugandan communities, expressing certain emotions may be seen as weakness. Let the person know that acknowledging difficulty is a sign of strength, not failure.

Be mindful of generational and ethnic differences: older individuals may be less willing to open up to younger people; different ethnic groups may express psychological distress in varied ways.

Remember: the goal at this stage is simply to let the person know they are not alone and that what they are experiencing is real.

Step 3: Give Reassurance and Information

After the person feels heard, the mental health first aider can provide support and information to help them better understand their experience, reducing fear and distress.

How to Offer Reassurance

In this phase, shift from listening to gently offering reassurance and information. This may include:

- Letting them know that what they are experiencing is recognizable and known.
- Mental health conditions are common, they are not the "only one" going through this.
- They are not to blame, mental health problems are not personal failings.
- Effective treatments exist, hope is realistic.

Use plain, compassionate language, avoid clinical jargon, and be careful not to minimize or exaggerate their experience.

Providing Accurate Information in Uganda

Providing accurate information about mental health conditions helps break down harmful myths. In Uganda, it is essential to address the following common misconceptions:

Myth	Fact
"Mental problems are caused by witchcraft or curses."	Mental health conditions have biological, psychological, and social causes. Like physical illnesses, they require proper treatment.
"Going to Butabika means you are 'mad'."	Butabika is the national referral hospital, offering specialized care for a wide range of mental health conditions.
"Talking about suicide will make someone do it."	Asking directly and compassionately can reduce isolation and open the door to getting help.
"Prayer alone is enough, treatment is unnecessary."	Faith can be a powerful support, but professional treatment is essential for many mental health conditions.

Responding to Specific Situations

Panic attack: Calmly guide them through slow, controlled breathing; reassure them the feeling will pass.

Suicidal thoughts: Acknowledge their pain, ask directly if they are thinking about suicide, and reassure them that support is available.

Psychotic symptoms: Stay calm, do not directly challenge their beliefs, focus on keeping them safe, and seek professional help immediately.

Substance abuse: Assess whether immediate medical intervention is needed.

In all cases, the key is to provide support that respects the person's dignity and autonomy.

Step 4: Encourage Appropriate Professional Help

Mental health first aiders are not therapists or clinicians. Their role is to provide initial support and then guide the person toward qualified professionals for proper treatment.

Mental Health Service Resources in Uganda

Despite limited resources, several support pathways exist across the country:

National-Level Specialist Services:

Butabika National Referral Hospital: Uganda's only national psychiatric facility, offering inpatient and outpatient services.

Regional Referral Hospitals: 4 of the 14 regional referral hospitals have psychiatrists; others are served by psychiatric nurses (821 government-employed) and psychiatric clinical officers (135).

Community and Primary Care:

The Ministry of Health has shifted toward a Community Treatment Order (CTO) model, referring patients back to local health centers or communities for follow-up care.

Village Health Teams (VHTs) and Community Health Workers are increasingly involved in providing mental health support at the community level.

University and Academic Institutions:

The Early Intervention in Psychosis Service (EIPS) Clinic at Mulago Hospital / Makerere University (launched June 2024): provides community-based early intervention for first-episode psychosis and general mental health services for Makerere University students. The team includes three psychiatrists, two nurses, and one psychologist.

Free Helplines:

Mental Health Uganda (MHU) Helpline: 0800 21 21 21 - Free, confidential mental health support, Monday-Friday, 8:30 AM - 5:00 PM.

FIDA Uganda - Free, compassionate, and confidential support for women, youth, and children via phone, SMS, and online chat.

Sauti 116 - Uganda's national call and case management center, providing 24/7 support for children and adults.

How to Encourage Seeking Help

Provide clear information about the services listed above.

If they are willing, actively help them make contact, accompany them to a health center or help them dial a helpline.

Acknowledge that seeking help can be frightening, but it is a brave and positive step.

If they are worried about cost, inform them about free helplines and public hospital services.

If they hesitate due to stigma or cultural beliefs, patiently explain how treatment can help, while respecting their pace.

Special Consideration

In Uganda, many people first turn to religious leaders or traditional healers. While this may not be the most clinically effective pathway, do not dismiss their beliefs. Instead:

Acknowledge the importance of faith in their life.

Gently suggest that professional treatment can work alongside faith-based support.

Emphasize that many religious leaders themselves recognize the value of mental health treatment.

Step 5: Encourage Self-Help and Other Support Strategies

Professional help is essential, but recovery and wellbeing also depend on a broader support network. The mental health first aider encourages the person to explore self-help strategies and other support networks as part of their overall wellness plan.

Self-Help Strategies in the Ugandan Context

Lifestyle Adjustments:

Regular sleep: Sleep deprivation worsens most mental health conditions.

Nutritious diet: Encourage locally available fresh fruits, vegetables, and protein sources.

Moderate exercise: Walking, cycling, or even household chores. Evidence shows physical activity reduces depression and anxiety symptoms.

Limit alcohol and substance use: Substance use worsens and can trigger mental health conditions. This is a significant concern in many Ugandan communities where alcohol use is common.

Social Connections:

Social isolation is a major risk factor for mental health problems.

Encourage maintaining contact with family and friends.

Participating in community activities, religious gatherings, or support groups.

In Uganda, community and extended family networks are often vital sources of support, leverage these existing connections.

Peer Support:

Peer mental health support models already exist in Uganda, for example; students in Gulu City have received MHFA training to establish mental health clubs in schools.

Encourage the person to find or build similar support networks.

Mindfulness and Relaxation:

Deep breathing exercises, prayer, meditation, particularly effective for anxiety and stress.

In Uganda, many traditional community practices (e.g., group singing, storytelling) can serve as ways to relax and build connection.

Community Health Initiatives:

Organizations like StrongMinds offer community-based group interpersonal therapy for people living with depression.

The Ministry of Health promotes a holistic approach combining healthy lifestyle choices, strong social connections, and coping skill development.

Important Reminder

Self-help strategies are a complement to professional treatment, not a substitute. When encouraging self-help, take care not to minimize the need for professional care. In Uganda, where resources are limited, self-help and community support are often the most accessible options, but always encourage seeking professional pathways whenever possible.

Conclusion: Becoming a Mental Health First Aider in Uganda

The ALGEE 5-step framework provides you with a structured approach to support someone experiencing mental health challenges with confidence and compassion. In Uganda, mental health first aid is particularly vital. In a country where professional resources are scarce, stigma is widespread, but the strength and resilience of communities are immense.

Key Takeaways:

You are not acting alone, utilize available helplines, community health workers, and health facilities.

Your role is not to treat, it is to provide initial support, reassurance, and a bridge to professional help.



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Cultural sensitivity is paramount. Respect Uganda's diverse cultural backgrounds, belief systems, and community structures.

Early intervention is critical. Research shows early intervention significantly improves outcomes. As Professor Akena, Head of Psychiatry at Makerere University, stated: "The longer a person goes with untreated mental illness, the poorer the prognosis."

Take care of yourself, supporting others can be emotionally taxing. Ensure you also have your own support network and coping strategies.