

## **THE KISORO ELDERS DEPRESSION PROJECT**

The Kisoro Elders Project elected to address the issue of depression in older adults, knowing how prevalent it is in older Africans (see Depression in Older Adults). In 2019, six pilot villages were chosen for a depression intervention, based on a perception that the VHWs in those villages had potential to become successful peer counselors. VHWs screened older adults in their villages who demonstrated depressive moods using the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), a commonly used depression screening instrument which has been validated for use in East Africa. It was adapted to be appropriate for the rural Kisoro older population: translated into Rufumbira and certain questions modified. For instance, “Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television, or listening to the radio” became “Trouble concentrating on things such as listening to the radio or conversations”. Moses Iraguha (MI), the Kisoro Elders Project Director, and Immaculate Owembabazi (IO), the Kisoro District Hospital mental health specialist, taught the selected VHWs to administer the PHQ-9, using didactic presentations and role playing.

Older adults responding to the PHQ-9 who scored in the range of severe depression or were suicidal were referred immediately for mental health outreach follow-up by Immaculate, or were sent to the hospital. Those with mild to moderate depression were offered participation in small depression support groups. The groups were conducted using the IPT methodology, adapted to be culturally appropriate and translated into Rufumbira, by MI and IO. IPT is a depression intervention developed at Columbia Teachers College of Columbia University in New York City for low-resourced low- and middle- income countries (LMICs). It is based on peer counseling, group support, and problem solving. It has been field tested and successfully implemented in other Ugandan settings, such as with refugee groups and women, and in the United States with older adults, but never with Ugandan older adults. Two innovations incorporated into the IPT methodology by the depression trainers (MI and IO), based on their experience leading Kisoroan groups, are opening prayer and closing dancing, singing, and clapping, which usually sends group members home with smiles and a feeling of being uplifted.

Five depression groups were conducted in 2019-2020. Participating adults almost uniformly reported great subjective improvement in their moods, some likening the effect to a miracle or stating that their lives had been saved. They begged to continue to meet, but the Covid lockdown prevented that. After Covid pandemic restrictions were lifted, monthly follow-up groups were instituted, again with great

reported benefit. Three new groups, led by VHWs who had been trained by MI and IO to conduct the meetings with supervision, completed IPT training in 2023 and are also enjoying monthly follow-up meetings.

In late 2024 the Depression Team was expanded to include Venance Nkurunziz, Immaculate Nyirasenga, and Moses Dushime, all university graduates with degrees in the social sciences. 10 new groups will begin in early 2025. The 2025 cohort of groups will be documenting objective outcomes as well as subjective success stories, hoping to add to the literature about depression interventions both in older adults and in LMICs. The goal is to eventually have support groups, including new members as deemed appropriate, in all VHW villages.