

Lesson 2 Health Matters!

Talk It Out, Help Is Here

Host On today's show, we are going to learn about special park benches in Zimbabwe called Friendship Benches. We have two special guests. First, please welcome the founder of the Friendship Bench program, Dr. Dixon Chibanda. Can you tell us what inspired you to come up with the program?

Dr. Chibanda Sure. The idea came from an experience I had as a psychiatrist. One of my patients had become severely depressed. However, she couldn't get help because she was unable to afford the bus ride to the hospital. This shocked me, as I had never considered such a problem before. In fact, it is difficult for many people in Zimbabwe to pay for transportation and receive medical treatment. Furthermore, there has been a lack of psychiatrists in the country for many years. When the Friendship Bench program started in 2006, there were only eleven psychiatrists serving Zimbabwe's population of over twelve million people. I needed to find a way to bring psychiatry into the community.

Host Oh, so that was the beginning of it. Could you explain to us how the Friendship Bench program works?

Dr. Chibanda Certainly. The program was created as a way to provide accessible mental health services. It offers talk therapy sessions to people dealing with issues such as depression or anxiety. The sessions are free and are provided by respected elderly women from the community. These women, called "grandmothers," volunteer to sit with patients at the benches, listen to their stories, and provide them with emotional support.

Host What a wonderful idea! How did these amazing grandmothers become a part of your program?

Dr. Chibanda Grandmothers were chosen for our program because they are deeply connected to the community. Moreover, they have all the qualities of a counselor, such as excellent listening skills, empathy, and the ability to engage in meaningful discussions. They are also very reliable, which is important for our efforts to support mental health. At the beginning, we started with only fourteen volunteer grandmothers. But today, there are thousands of grandmothers who have been trained to provide Friendship Bench therapy in Zimbabwe.

Host That's interesting! What happens after patients complete their sessions with the grandmothers?

Dr. Chibanda When the sessions with the grandmothers are over, patients are encouraged to join a community support group made up of former patients of the program. The members of these groups can easily relate to and support one another. This is because most of them come from the same community and have experienced similar struggles.

Host That sounds like a great way to continue the support and build a sense of community. And the program has been incredibly successful, right?

Dr. Chibanda That's correct. In 2022, we provided face-to-face counseling to about 90,000 patients in Zimbabwe. Now, Friendship Benches are available in more than twenty different regions around the country. Our vision is for everyone to have a Friendship Bench within walking distance, and we are working hard to make it happen. We've also started expanding the program, and we now offer online counseling through an app. This has helped us reach even more people.

Host That's really amazing! Thank you for your time, Dr. Chibanda. Now let's hear from one of the grandmothers who volunteers for the program. Can you introduce yourself and tell us how you got involved with the Friendship Bench program?

Grandma Moyo Hello, my name is Judith Moyo, but people call me Grandma Moyo. I'm 76 years old, and I have been volunteering for the Friendship Bench program for about eight years. I joined the program because many people in my community struggle with mental health problems, and I wanted to do something about it. I knew that I could help heal their wounded hearts by supporting them.

Host That's very kind of you. Can you tell us about your experience as a grandmother for the Friendship Bench program?

Grandma Moyo It's been wonderful. Seeking help for mental health problems is nothing to be ashamed of. I've seen how it can make a difference in people's lives. One patient of mine, a nineteen-year-old girl, was going through a difficult time after her mom passed away. I counseled her and helped her begin her recovery journey. Now her life is back on track, and she has even started her own business! Cases like this make me so proud to be part of the program. It is such a rewarding experience to help people make positive changes in their lives.

Host Thanks for sharing your experiences with us today, Grandma Moyo. It's truly inspiring to see the influence that the Friendship Bench program has had. And it's all thanks to the hard work of people like you and Dr. Chibanda.