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PRESS RELEASE

SEPTEMBER 10, 2023 WORLD SUICIDE PREVENTION DAY BY THE ASSOCIATION FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION GHANA (GASP)

The 10th of September each year has been set aside by the World Health Organization (WHO) in conjunction with the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) to be observed as World Suicide Prevention Day (WSPD). First observed in Stockholm, Sweden on September 10, 2003, WSPD has been a significant day for advocacy programmes and communication-based events aimed at creating awareness on suicide – a significant global public health problem. More specifically, WSPD is devoted to reaching out to national organisations, governments, and the general public, giving a singular message that suicide can be prevented. WSPD has grown since 2003 and is now observed in more than 60 countries with hundreds of events ranging from educational and commemorative events to press briefings and public conferences. These events are usually organised around yearly themes that highlight issues of great concern to suicide prevention activities worldwide. The WHO estimates that more than 700 000 people die by suicide annually, meaning that 1 out of every 100 deaths recorded globally results from suicide. For each suicide, about 20 suicide attempts are recorded. As a complex, multifaceted problem, suicide occurs at the juncture of multiple factors that can be psychiatric, psychological, biological, social, cultural, economic, and existential in nature. Considering this complexity, suicide prevention requires multi-sectoral and multidisciplinary stakeholder collaborations. The WHO also enjoins member countries to adopt prevention approaches that are relevant to local contexts. For meaningful progress, member states are also encouraged to formulate National Suicide Prevention Plan towards the harmonisation and consolidation of stakeholder efforts towards suicide prevention. Negative societal attitudes towards suicide and suicidal persons and the criminalisation of suicide attempts in many countries have been identified as key drawbacks to effective suicide prevention, as they hinder individuals going through suicidal crises from seeking help due to fear of stigma and possible prosecution.

Guided by the evidence of extreme mental anguish that people experiencing suicidal crises face, which constrict their thinking and induce hopelessness, WHO and IASP came up with a triennial theme for the World Suicide Prevention Day from 2021-2023, i.e., “*Creating hope through action*”. This theme serves as a powerful call to action and reminder that there is an alternative to suicide and that, through our actions, we can encourage hope and strengthen prevention. By *creating hope through action*, we can signal to people experiencing suicidal thoughts that there is hope and that we care and want to support them. The theme also suggests that our actions, no matter how big or small, may provide hope to those struggling. The emphasis on hope is premised on the limited or seeing lack of options that people perceive when they experience suicidal crises. The psychological pain or the mental anguish underlying people's desire to die is connected to the frustration of some of their unmet vital needs. A state of *hopelessness* (i.e., the thought that those needs won't ever be fulfilled), and *helplessness* (i.e., the thought that one does not have the capacity to have those needs fulfilled) conspire to limit available options. Thus, people feel immobilised to act, are tunnel-visioned, and when triggered by extreme adverse circumstances, opt for suicide as a solution.

Ghana does not have a national registry for recording suicide cases. However, crude statistics usually obtained from the police and newspapers show an increasing trend. The WHO (2020) reports that approximately 1993 suicides occur in Ghana annually. A 4-year suicide attempt trends report in Ghana released by the Ministry of Health (MOH) revealed that 707 suicide attempts occurred in the year 2018, 880 attempts in 2019, and 777 attempts in 2020 with 417 attempts recorded as of June 2021. These statistics from Ghana may be a gross underestimation of actual numbers of suicidal behaviour in Ghana, since stigma continues to militate against disclosure and reporting.

A major line of suicide prevention advocacy in Ghana in recent years has been awareness campaigns towards improving public attitudes and encouraging people to open up for help. It is gratifying to note that through sustained research-fed awareness creation and social advocacy efforts by various stakeholders in suicide prevention in Ghana, the Parliament of Ghana, on March 28, 2023, amended the Criminal Offences Act of 1960, which previously made attempted suicide a criminal offence in the country. The new amendment now seeks to make attempted suicide a mental health issue requiring assistance by law, but not criminal prosecution.

The Association for Suicide Prevention Ghana (GASP) commends the efforts of Ghana's Legislature, especially the Honourable Members of Parliament who sponsored the Private Member's Bill that led to the amendment. While lauding this great effort, GASP also calls attention to the fact that decriminalisation alone does not necessarily lead to drastic reductions in suicide, unless there is political will to equip health facilities and help centres with the needed logistics and personnel to be able to receive and support the increasing numbers of people who might want to go there to seek help. While we await Presidential Assent to the amended code, we call for the formulation of a National Suicide Prevention Plan to provide a common framework for addressing suicidal behaviours in Ghana. A National Suicide Prevention Plan can, among other benefits, help produce locally relevant recommendations and guidelines in the areas of suicide research, surveillance, reportage and content in the media, support for persons in suicidal crises, help for loved ones left behind and family members bereaved by suicides, and operations of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the area of suicide prevention. We also encourage individuals to desist from maltreating persons who may verbalise a wish to die or may have attempted suicide. People in suicidal crises require empathy and practical assistance and not condemnation. We at GASP are trained experts from multidisciplinary backgrounds committed to helping anyone undergoing suicidal crises. GASP is working closely with the Mental Health Authority to come up with a dedicated toll-free helpline that persons experiencing suicidal crises can call and receive prompt professional support. In the meantime, if you are experiencing any mental health crisis please call the toll-free number of the Mental Health Authority, 0800678678, for psychosocial support.

Suicide prevention is everyone's business!

Let us all be part of creating hope through action!

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