



Center for Thriving
Communities

A YEAR OF— ACTION

The Friendship Bench is a proven intervention that offers communities a method to address mental health needs in a way that honors their culture. Originally developed over a twenty-year period from community research in Zimbabwe, it was officially launched in 2006. The Friendship Bench uses a Western therapy-based approach to address 'kufungisisa' – the Zimbabwe word closest to depression (literally, “thinking too much” in Shona).

The Friendship Bench was designed to meet the mental health needs of the community when there were not enough counselors in Zimbabwe. It offers a way to enhance mental well-being and improve quality of life through problem-solving techniques provided by local community members that are trained to support others.

In Zimbabwe, ‘grandmothers’ were trained to provide therapeutic support as they are well respected and have the availability. The grandmothers are community volunteers without prior medical or mental health experience, who are trained to counsel patients for six structured 45-minute sessions. Support services are offered on wooden benches within the grounds of clinics in a discrete area in the community.

» Impact

The successful results from a Friendship Bench randomized controlled trial were published in 2016 in the journal JAMA. The results showed that the group that received support from the Friendship Bench had a significant decrease in depressive symptoms when compared to the group that did not receive mental health support.

Since 2006, Dr. Chibanda and his team have trained over 600 of the grandmothers in evidence-based talk therapy. They deliver the services for free in more than 70 communities in Zimbabwe, and in 2017 alone 30,000 were seen on a Friendship Bench. The Friendship Bench has now expanded beyond Zimbabwe and is being used in Malawi and Zanzibar, and has recently been adapted for New York City. This tells us that interventions created in low-and middle-income countries can be adapted for high-income countries. Currently there are several Friendship Bench studies underway including; The Youth Friendship Bench (YouFB), OptFB, FB Plus and Zvandiri.



To learn more about the
Friendship Bench visit:



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