

Message:

A Call for cross-generational action on the Mental Health of Youth

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Background

Mental Health is a state of mental well-being and emotional stability that enables people to cope with life's stresses, realize their abilities, strengths and resilience, learn from and work with others cooperatively and to contribute to their families and communities. Mental Health issues affect more than 25% of all people at some point during their lives. The impacts on the youth are profoundly significant. Depression, anxiety and behavioural disorders are among the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents, with 14% of the world's adolescents (aged 10–19 years) living with a mental disorder. Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death in individuals aged 15-29 years.

The issues regarding mental health in youth are expressed in various forms of behaviour such as panic attacks, addictions, eating disorders, disruption to education and learning, and the lack of coping skills. Amongst today's youth there is a great deal of lack of trust, a breakdown in inter-personal relationships leading to loneliness, isolation, low self-esteem and emptiness, loss of meaning, purpose and direction. This makes the search for one's identity as a person more complicated and perplexed.

The consequences of failing to address young people's mental health extend to adulthood, impairing both physical and mental wellness and limiting opportunities to lead fulfilling lives as adults. The mental illness affects one's thoughts, mood, and behaviour and can impact the way one perceives the world around oneself. Symptoms can vary depending on the disorder from mild mood disfunction to severe thought disorders and pathologies that need special treatment and even hospitalization

Situations that make youth vulnerable to mental ill health:

Violence and conflicts

Violent conflict, displacement and instability in the national and regional contexts precipitate tremendous stress and disruption. Even in regions free of open conflicts and wars, children and youth who face a micro-climate of normalized violence and experience

physical, emotional, and sexual abuse are also highly vulnerable. Children confronted by the fragility of their complex environment – an unstable parental relationship which ends in separation, restructuring of the nuclear family, and the lack of quality family time and communication may result in a family crisis and can impact their mental well-being. Extremes in relationships with parents and elders, ranging from neglect and lack of support to unrealistically high parental expectations with stifling and overbearing relationships, can add to the vulnerability.

Challenges related to education and livelihood

Academic, workplace and professional pressures to succeed contribute to a lot of stress. While there is a lack of educational and job opportunities in many contexts, when available, they can present significant pressure to achieve in an intensely competitive environment. Overscheduling studies and work without time for rest, recreation and social interaction contributes to the vulnerabilities.

Systemic challenges in society

Inequities in societies with regard to access to services, facilities, opportunities for education, technology and work are contributing to a paucity of hope and the dimming of perceived future prospects. Living in multicultural societies which form a type of global community, offers a great variety of identification models which may contribute to either an enrichment of individuality or to the disorientation of the person. Global issues and the insecurities of the future add to the uncertainty and apprehensions. Young people see that others are making decisions that will affect them without hearing them and consulting them, at all levels – churches, universities and countries. This results in the breakdown in communication (koinonia) between generations.

The impact of connectivity and technology

The impact of technology on youth's mental health is multifaceted, encompassing both positive and negative aspects. Technology helps maintain connections, communication, relationships and helps find support networks that may not exist locally. It also provides access to information, resources, and educational opportunities. It can also assist in leisure, creativity, and self-expression. However, there are also negative factors related to technology that add to vulnerabilities. Technology can increase social isolation and reduce face-to-face interaction and can lead to addictions and dependency that can disrupt family solidarity, daily routines, sleep patterns, and physical activity. It can also promote comparison and competition, leading to negative self-esteem and body image. Exposure to harmful or inappropriate content online, cyberbullying, abuse related to deep fake images, infringement of data privacy and the potential misuse of personal information are also significant issues that negatively impact mental health and development.

Ignorance, stigma and exclusion

The lack of awareness of mental health in many societies, the reluctance to discuss issues openly and the stigma associated with mental health conditions make youth who are already vulnerable even more vulnerable. The fear of the stigma and the lack of sound

information and safe spaces talk and find proper care leads to neglect and prevents individuals and families from seeking help, early diagnosis and effective interventions.

Anxiety and trauma-related to Climate Change

Young people often feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of climate change's impacts, leading to anxiety, stress, and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Increasing climate change-induced hurricanes, wildfires, floods, droughts, resulting displacements, and long-term changes like rising sea levels, loss of biodiversity, and changing weather patterns affecting job security and economic stability and disrupting lives and livelihoods are serious preoccupations of younger people.

Declining influence of religion and faith on youth

From the perspective of the youth, there is a decline in participation in established religious institutions and the trust placed in them, and there is an increasing lack of interest in faith and the cultivation of spirituality within the community. There is also a paucity of fellowship, mentorship, support, and trust in interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, there is also a tendency for some youth to identify themselves with groups that have extreme religious or non-religious views. Both of these extremes raise equal concerns.

Call to action

Given the limited access to Mental Health Care and professionals, it is vital that Faith Communities, which are present all over the world and have networks and support systems in place, be mobilised to promote Mental Health of youth in an informed, safe, supportive, sustainable manner, in close collaboration with Mental health professionals.

We call on faith communities and churches to:

- Strive to transform attitudes and establish enabling environments that nurture and promote mental and physical well-being and health in societies.
- Create and maintain an environment that inspires and promotes respectful relationships that encourage caring for oneself and each other.
- Invest in and provide equitable access positive faith experiences, to education, information, leisure, adequate nourishment and safety for young people, and opportunities for work to enable them to lead a healthy lifestyle and equip young people to grow and develop to lead fulfilling lives in dignity.
- Sustain Safe spaces that encourage open and non-judgemental conversations about mental health with young people. Spaces where one can be vulnerable, share one's vulnerability, and witness in a trusting, non-threatening, acknowledging environment that maintains confidentiality.
- Value and provide functioning Safe spaces for peer and cross-generational support, facilitating deep listening and learning with mutual accountability.
- Ensure youth participation, contribution and co-ownership of decision-making processes and policy transformation.
- Promote dialogue between Mental Health Professionals and Faith communities leading to informed, safe, sustainable support and follow-up actions.
- Strive to end conflicts, and to promote and nurture, dialogue, peace, and reconciliation.
- Promote and sustain healing processes, including trauma healing.
- Recognise the impact of climate change on youth by strengthening advocacy efforts, addressing the psychological effects of climate change, and providing adequate support systems.
- Ensure that youth have access to mental health services at the level of the faith communities, educational institutions and health facilities with qualified caretakers.
- Strengthen or initiate community-based programmes to promote mental health, helping with early detection of dysfunctional mental conditions, providing psychological and social support as well as pastoral accompaniment, and referral
- Engage in discussions about the use of technology to create supportive environments for youth to navigate these challenges.
- Strengthen cross generational communication and to accompany youth to deepen faith in God and to strengthen the engagement with faith communities.

May we commit to overcoming all stigma and exclusion related to mental health and to building a resilient and supportive community of Hope—a community that is aware,

accountable, responsive, and deeply supportive of young people. A community where young people in need can seek and get help and where they can flourish to lead fulfilling lives.

May faith communities work to realize the extension of God's reign in our societies, where young people experience the assurance of God's protection as given in Psalm 91.

"He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday. Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honour them."

Psalm 91- 4-6, 14, 15