YOUTH AND MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS

RESEARCH ON A CONVENIENT SAMPLE CONDUCTED DURING THE REALIZATION OF THE PROJECT "UNMASKING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH"

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INTRODUCTION

Grupa "Hajde da…" (Serbia), Javni zavod *Mladi zmaji* (Slovenia), *Udruga Ludruga* (Croatia), *Giosef Torino - Marti Gianello Guida A.P.S.* (Italy) and *Association for Educational Development EKVALIS* (North Macedonia) implemented the project **"Unmasking youth mental health".**

The main objective of the project was to support youth workers to respond to challenges in the context of youth mental health and to contribute to the development of quality youth work through non-formal learning.

Six days training was held for youth workers from 20 to 40 years old who directly work (or planning to work) with a group of young people that are at risk in the frame of mental health.

Photo 1 – the training

After the training, participants had the task of conducting a (online or offline) workshop with a group of young people from their communities. The topic concerned the broadly defined field of mental health, and especially challenges that aroused in the situation of the Covid-19 virus pandemic.

This document[1] is supposed to summarize the experiences of the young people with whom the training participants worked. It should give us some kind of picture of how young people understand the field of mental health and do they currently have any challenges in that segment of life. We also tried to point out

[1] The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

how young people deal with the consequences of a situation such as lockdown, and generally the uncertainty that the threat of the virus brought to their lives and the lives of their communities.

This document provides an additional answer to the question whether youth work is a way to respond to these challenges, whether and how workshops with youth can respond to these needs, and can be the way of prevention of difficulties in mental health.

INSTRUMENTS FOR GATHERING DATA

The data in this report was gathered from two different groups. As a first group, the training participants, who implemented local follow-up workshops in their respective communities, filled out a self-assessment survey. This survey was designed so that they can reflect on their experience of the implementation of the workshops, share their observations on the group dynamics and the openness to discuss mental health topics, how young people reacted to this topic and what they talked about. The survey consisted of 12 questions (rating scale questions and open-ended questions) that were meant to grade the workshop leaders' experiences and open-ended questions that opened space for reflection. Twenty three workshop leaders have filled out this survey.

Another tool to gather data was the workshop evaluation. The participants on the workshops were given a survey of both - rating scale questions and open-ended questions. Through this survey it was investigated how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the young people, had they had any support system and what kind. Workshop participants also reflected on how this workshop had helped them to open dialogue around these topics.

Here it should be noted that not all young people wanted to be involved in the evaluation of the workshops. Only a small part of them answered the questions, and in order to protect their data, we did not insist that they be part of this "sample". So we can speak from a very small sample of only 25 participants and we cannot generalize these data too much, but they can be understood as a stimulus for thinking about some very important topics that were opened during these workshops with young people.

DATA ANALYSIS

Through the analysis of the data (by both the workshop leaders and workshop participants) there could be some valuable insights that need to be taken in consideration when it comes to mental health and youth (here we present the overall view, and below more detailed data and analysis):

- The majority of youth who participated as participants in the follow-up workshops on the project have experienced some type of mental health challenges caused by the lockdowns such as: increased or prolonged anxiety, feelings of constant tension, low mood, lethargy, anxiety or panic attacks.
- Young people managed their mental health differently during the lockdowns. Some have decided to "shut down" and withdraw, while others have taken steps toward addressing those mental experiences through visits of psychotherapists or doing a hobby.
- The main actors that appear within the youth support systems are family and friends. There is lack of support systems through services of city or state institutions.
- Participants felt comfortable to share their mental health experiences with the project workshop leaders during the project follow-up workshops, as a direct result of creating a safe space for sharing, dialogue and reflection.
- The workshop leaders felt that the workshops helped them apply the knowledge and skills acquired through the training.
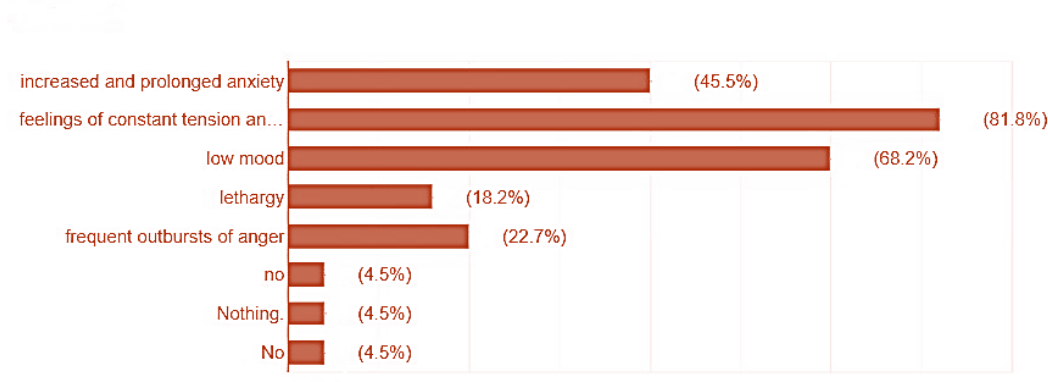
EXPOSURE TO MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS

Most of the **young people** (workshop participants) stated in the evaluative questionnaires that they have felt some kind of psychological consequences to their mental health and majority of them (80%) have claimed that is because of COVID-19 crisis and lockdowns.

- Feelings[2] of constant tension and increased stress have experienced 81.8% of the respondents,
- 68% prolonged low mood,
- 45,5 % experienced increased and prolonged anxiety,

Here you can find more data (fig. 2):

Have you previously experienced any difficulties such as:

Difficulty	Percentage
increased and prolonged anxiety	(45.5%)
feelings of constant tension an...	(81.8%)
low mood	(68.2%)
lethargy	(18.2%)
frequent outbursts of anger	(22.7%)
no	(4.5%)
Nothing.	(4.5%)
No	(4.5%)

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[2] Participants were able to list more than one emotional state.

The **workshops leaders** also report the findings they have come across while implementing the workshops. For many of the young participants, there is a high prevalence of negative emotions and state such as isolation, loneliness or some kind of inability to establish connections. The workshop leaders have noticed that participants have felt a loss of social connection mostly in their close circles of friends. They have mostly stayed with their family locked, but still feeling anxious about their health or the health of their loved ones.

For some young people the closing in their homes or more specifically in their rooms felt comfortable and they enjoyed this sense of freedom to completely shut down and be alone. It could be time for them to reflect on themselves or practice new skills.

The workshop leaders have initiated conversations and dialogue around boundaries with their participants so they can better understand the perception of young people on the effect of the pandemic in terms of boundaries.

In essence the lockdown period was marked by boundaries that included both physical borders (home isolation, or not being allowed to go out), time limitations (at what time of the day people were allowed to move due to curfews) and performing boundaries (how people behave in public spaces - with masks, being distant, being around with no more than 5 people). This has imposed a new reality for many young people who would ordinarily be in touch with large groups at school or could have some sense of freedom when it comes to movement in their communities. This situation aroused young people to think about how they normally determine their limits in social relations and in the psychological sense - how close and when they let someone "enter their psychological space".

For young people in that force, lock down was a disturbing experience (for some of them it also had a "sobering" effect), because it forced them to question what kind of closeness they want to continue living. But it was precisely this that brought additional anxiety to some of them.

DEALING WITH MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

The workshop participants shared different approaches of how they dealt with stress, anxiety and lethargy during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

- Many of them used **talking and communication** as a proactive approach whether it was with family, friends or partners. We should also keep in mind that not everyone feels safe within their family circles, homes or friends. This might be especially true for certain marginalized communities such as LGBTIQ+ youth, women who are exposed to gender-based violence inside their homes or youth coming from social and economically vulnerable backgrounds. The COVID-19 lockdowns and the pandemic have even further marginalized these communities - and without the systematic approach to address or provide support systems for those communities, there is no inclusive response to youth mental health.

- Some of the respondents stated that going out, doing **recreational activities**, sport or meditation is what helped. The term "being outdoors "was mentioned several times. By being constrained and locked inside their own homes - some of the most everyday activities like walking or being out is what could be helpful.
- Some young people have said that they had highly **drunk or ate** during the lockdown. Some of the workshop leaders have shared that at their workshop some participants shared that eating excessively was one of the coping mechanisms. There is however no relation if this is tied to a certain mental health condition or is just a way to spend time while at isolation with cooking and being preoccupied with activities you can do within the home.
- As a way to cope with the lockdown mental health challenges, young people have also chosen to **shut down these emotional states** (anxiety, lethargy…) or in their own words they have tried to "push it down and occupy my mind ".
- On the other hand - some participants have shared that they had chosen conscious **avoidance of daily news of COVID cases and deaths** as a way to protect their mental health. That news was often overwhelming for many people and has increased the fear or has prevented them from creating any kind of vision for the future.
- The workshop participants have also expressed that they had been very careful about the real danger of the virus and had therefore **distanced themselves from people who completely negated the existence of the virus.** This mechanism can be a good balance in terms of being aware about all the effects that COVID can have on the health of the youth and their close contacts, but also to not overwhelm their own mental space with the media and to recognize that mental health is an integral part of their overall health.
- Young people have also **consulted psychologists, psychotherapists or psychiatrists** which was part of their mechanism to approach the mental health challenges they had.
- It might be interesting to again observe or comment that there was **no one that stated that their school/university or learning environment served as a support system** which can be reflected on how much the school during the pandemic was perceived as only a space for exchange of knowledge - without acknowledging the psychological state of the learners. The school in the lockdown seasons perceived only as a space for knowledge exchange (in terms of factual knowledge), but not as a space where youth socialize or they receive psycho-social support was greatly affecting young people. There was also a discrepancy in how youth have even accessed their school at all. Some youth, who were more economically vulnerable or had low access to technology or internet (such as youth from rural areas), had even faced no access to education at all for several months and up to a year. This might bring additional mental health challenges in future to those youth who in the aftermath of such marginalization will realize that they are underprivileged because of the inability to equally access education at the time of lockdowns.
- **The state bodies´ and institutions´ help in various forms that could be offered to young people was completely missing** which can be perceived as a worrying trend how these states have treated the well-being of their youth. Support systems for youth during the lockdowns and even post-lockdowns are key to provide an environment for healthy development and processing for how these individuals will develop.

- For some of the workshop attendees the best way to cope with the lockdowns was the reduction in strict measures and **slowly getting back to functioning as usual**. This was the case for a group of ESC volunteers who started their ESC journey as a way to recover from the previous years spent in lockdown. The mobility programs and their return after the lockdowns have finished have been positioned on the support system map. The programs such as ESC can be a powerful support system that can improve the mental health of young people especially after a longer period of time of travel restrictions.

REFLECTIONS ON THE WORKSHOPS PARTICIPATION

Almost all participants felt that they had the open space to discuss their mental health challenges, ways to overcome them and support systems during the follow-up workshops. The youth have experienced versatile ways of talking about these topics and some of them have expressed that learning about boundaries, validity of emotions or mood scales have been very useful - on a content part of the workshops. While others have commented that the whole setting and interaction with people was most useful for them and more specifically, the fact of being together with people, sharing spaces and opinions.

Through the workshops, the young people have learned and acquired new skills that can help them navigate their mental health better in future which relate to: personal space, limits, boundaries, feelings, emotions, standing up for themselves etc.

Photo 3 – workshop participants

The participants shared that they have acquired this feeling of experiencing that they were not alone when they have felt certain emotion or experienced certain mental conditions. The space on the workshops have enabled them to potentially see others who coped with similar or same issues which can be a platform for networking and building common resilience mechanisms. Through learning how the others at the workshops handled their problems, the participants felt inspired that this is something that they might also try in their environment.

The workshops have opened new dimensions of improvement that the participants want to work on. For instance, some participants deemed that they need to work more on their self-awareness, while others want to improve their way to express boundaries. This means that the participants had a lot to take away from these workshops and that they were aware of what they need to work on after these workshops. For some

that might mean that they would seek or require professional help, they might readdress this in their social circles or choose not to address it. However, the position of awareness and understanding on what needs to be improved as a direct result of the workshop can be very important for the process of understanding and mainstreaming mental health among youth.

For the participants of the workshops, this was a space to reflect on a very challenging period for them, they needed more time and space to elaborate even more, they shared that this was an opportunity for them to find commonalities with other people's experiences and that they are not alone. For some even, it was too tough to be back again into this space of talking about Corona as they did feel that this is something in the past for them.

Another important aspect that the youth have stated they gained from the workshop is that they had felt empowered to approach someone who might need help in terms of mental health. That does not mean that they would evaluate a person's mental health situation or position themselves as experts, but just establish basic connections and ask what kind of support the person might need.

When it comes to the methodology of the workshops, the participants especially enjoyed gamification in the learning process and exercises that included any type of simulation or observance of certain topics which would then be opened for general discussion with the group. This was noticeable as they had shared that they had enjoyed having fun while learning and experiencing creativity and interactivity during the learning process. Even with such hard topics like mental health, the participants still had enjoyed their learning and had reached a point where they could more freely speak about themselves, their mental health and relations to external factors because the methodology was centered on the learner and that the workshop leaders had made the learning process interactive.

CONCLUSION

This report reflects on a small sample group and illustrates that young people have experienced severe mental health consequences due to the COVID-19 lockdowns. It opens new possibilities to further examine the inexistence of institutional systems of support when it comes to youth mental health – as most youth from the surveyed groups have not identified such institutions as part of their support systems.

The report showcases the process of learning and youth work support when it comes to opening dialogue around youth mental health and identifies that trained youth workers through the project can facilitate meaningful discussions in their local communities. The report offered insights on how youth relate with their peers and feel honest in expressing their emotional states, mental health challenges, but also visions for improvement and what they want to take as a step forward after the follow-up workshop.

The workshops showed that young people have a challenge in mental health (which is sometimes a development issue), that they had increased during the period of the Covid-16 crisis and that youth work and workshops can be an adequate response to the need for support.