

Mental health

At Salama Minds, youth get free mental help



Young people are increasingly experiencing mental health problems, but they do not speak up or know how to get help

BY GERALD BWISA

A student has set up an organisation that seeks to address mental health problems among young Kenyans by providing affordable and accessible therapy sessions.

Khushbu Kotak, a Diploma Programme 2 student at Aga Khan Academy in Mombasa said the organisation targets those aged between 11 and 22

years. Salama Minds, she explained, was started with her parents' assistance with the aim of dismantling the stigma around mental health in the country having gone through a similar experience at the age of 15.

"It's very important for young people to be nurtured in a safe environment in which they are not afraid to reach out and express themselves freely.

"The youth also need to be taught that supporting one another is critical in growing an ethically responsible community," said Khushbu.

She had always thought of coming up with a solution in the mental health sector, until her father challenged her to bring him a billion-dollar idea that he could help bring to fruition.

"I created a video that I posted on my Instagram with regard to mental health. It got about 8,000 views. And I was blown away because, that just showed the urgency with which people really need to go for therapy. That is how the organisation was born," she explained.

Khushbu said she realised that there is an increasing number of young Kenyans who miss counselling therapy due to beliefs that only adults are affected by mental health problems arising from their responsibilities.

"The organisation has been holding meetings with parents to sensitise and encourage them to be on the look out for signs of mental health issues in their children and subsequently seek counselling services for them," she said.

"Despite a growing awareness of the significance of counselling for young people, negative perceptions still make some people hesitant to reaching out for help," she observed.

Those who seek to benefit from the organisation's services fill a google form where they include their bio data and get consent from their parents if they are below 18 years.

"What Salama Minds does is to provide a platform where therapists offer Kenya's youths free therapy, which we cater for. And if the doctor says that our client needs medication, that's also something that we cater for," said Khushbu.

Salama Minds works with some of the best local psychiatrists and psychologists to provide the young people with mental and emotional health solutions.

They include Dr Nelly Kitazi and Dr Linda Nyamute. The organisation pays for the

therapy sessions and medication through donations from sponsors and fundraising events such as car washes.

So far, 11 people, two of whom are minors, have benefited from the programme.

"The burden of mental health issues among young people cannot be ignored, especially since this is the period many psychiatric disorders begin to manifest," said Dr Linda Nyamute, a psychiatrist.

Khushbu's long-term vision is to expand Salama Minds beyond Kenya as she feels more young people could use the help.

Khushbu is a fellow of the Global Citizens Initiative (GCI) Fellowship programme, which empowers global citizens from all sectors of society to be life-long leaders of positive change.

To kick off her plans to expand Salama Minds reach, she intends to pitch the organisation at the GCI Leadership, Ethics, Advocacy, Design Thinking (LEAD) Challenge where she has received a scholarship of \$950.

At present, Khushbu's mother, Nisha Kotak – the Chief Operating Officer – and Aga Khan Academy alumni Zaena Mbugua – Chief Marketing Officer – are helping her run the organisation and achieve the goal of making a difference in the lives of young people around the world.

"I plan on making the organisation international because therapy is expensive and we would like to reach out to those who cannot afford it but need it. We also plan to continue educating parents on the importance of seeking help for their children when they need it," she said.

She said that with every obstacle she overcomes, she learns more and more about the way communities work and how to improve her organisation in a way that is beneficial to the community.

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Writer



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Beneficiaries of the project said they are grateful that such a forum was put up by the young girl to help them address their mental health challenges, which would ordinarily be swept under the carpet.

"I reached out to Salama Minds and got their services. They verified my details and offered me a therapist and we had sessions via zoom where I was offered help with my anxiety," said Afuna Ashra.

Khushbu's parents are very proud that their daughter has decided to embark on a journey has a positive impact on the society by offering a solution to the socio-economic challenges faced by children who face mental health problems.

"We take a lot of pride in our daughter who has taken up such a noble project to help the youth in Kenya. So far, we have got 18 clients who are going through therapy, which is very good," said her mother.

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