



Building Power to Build a Mentally Healthy World: Supporting and Advancing Youth Leadership

Mental Health America Young Mental Health Leaders Council
2022 Annual Report

Acknowledgments

Founded in 1909, Mental Health America (MHA) is the nation's leading community-based nonprofit dedicated to helping all achieve wellness by living mentally healthier lives. Our work is driven by our commitment to promote mental health as a critical part of overall wellness, including prevention services for all, early identification and intervention for those at risk, integrated care and treatment for those who need it, with recovery as the goal.

MHA dedicates this report to the youth leaders across the country and globe who are working to improve the well-being of their peers and communities. Their leadership and creativity will continue to shape and transform the way we engage and support youth and young adults by creating and improving services and supports to meet the wants and needs of their peers in a changing world.

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Background

Change does not come easy. For centuries, powerful institutions have influenced how communities perceive, discuss, and tackle our world's most pertinent issues, especially mental health. As we work to address the current youth mental health crisis, responses are complicated by established institutions designed to devalue youth mental health and leadership. To combat this challenge, young leaders across the nation leverage their creativity and lived experience to organize their communities and expose gaps in our systems. And yet, **there is still more to be done.**

Even when youth are consulted, young people continue to lack control over much of their lives and the systems and policies that impact them. Failures to understand youth perspectives are why mental health resources and supports lack impact and communicate that there is no room for youth to contribute to important conversations about their lives. These barriers are especially true for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and LGBTQ2+ youth who face intersections of oppression that impact mental health and can result in inaccessible, harmful, irrelevant, or less appealing leadership positions, programs, and services.



Shifting Power in Youth Mental Health

Power imbalances in youth leadership and mental health advocacy must be understood and shifted to build long-lasting, sustainable, and systemic change. Currently, power concentrates in the hands of those who have *power over* the lives of young people.¹ Instead, power over youth must be transferred towards ensuring young people are strengthened with resources for their own mental health and confidence, have access to supportive mentorship and adult allies, and are provided inclusive and empowering spaces to organize on the local, state, and national levels.

Throughout participating in MHA's Young Mental Health Leaders Council (YMHL), members' discussions centered on the importance of moving away from prioritizing *power over* young people's lives and toward the importance of providing resources for youth to build *power within* themselves, building relationships that focus on sharing *power with* young people, and creating spaces where young people have more *power to* make a change. To do this, it is critical to consider and address the following questions aimed at each of these levels of power when creating programs and initiatives or improving how current youth leaders are engaged, connected, and empowered throughout the advocacy process:

- How can leaders support youth and young adult advocates' mental health, well-being, and identities as they navigate their own experiences and life changes?
- How can leaders build relationships that facilitate connection, growth, and knowledge sharing?
- How can different community actors create spaces that provide pathways to leadership and intergenerational healing spaces?

In this YMHL Annual Report, we identify and explore these core questions with recommendations at each of the levels of power. We draw on the collective wisdom of members to point out opportunities for growth and success in youth mental health leadership and organizing programs that can be used by other youth and adult allies to make inclusive and empowering environments. Intentionally addressing these questions acknowledges the humanity of youth leaders and creates more sustainable spaces for long-term engagement, improving outcomes for advocates and communities so that all generations can collaborate and move toward collective, transformational action.

To create environments where youth mental health leaders can thrive, leaders must:

1. Communicate that living experience is a superpower and it is ok not to be ok.
2. Create space for young people to explore their identities and mental health needs.
3. Embrace and provide access to resources on the many pathways to well-being and perspectives on mental health.
4. Provide validation, encouragement, and stability.
5. Understand that youth have a lot to add *and* provide youth leaders with learning and growth opportunities.
6. Provide mentorship and sponsorship to support youth in navigating advocacy spaces.
7. Prioritize intergenerational approaches that build community and avoid stereotypes about youth and adults.
8. Create multiple pathways for youth leadership and impact, including opportunities to connect with leaders across sectors and organizations.
9. Integrate youth advocates into all leadership structures.

Mental Health America's Young Mental Health Leaders Council

MHA's YMHLC identifies young leaders (18-25) who have created programs and initiatives that fill gaps in mental health supports and resources in their communities. YMHLC members are selected annually from applicants across the U.S. for their ideas, leadership, and programs. Through YMHLC, MHA:

- Convenes a select group of youth and young adults for a six-month term;
- Identifies members' perceptions of problems and solutions in youth mental health; and
- Promotes member recommendations and youth-led solutions through an annual report, web content, and technical assistance.

In addition to exploring members' recommendations for the mental health advocacy field, this report includes highlights of YMHLC members' programs and leadership.



Power Within/Individual Level

To ensure young people are strengthened with resources for their own mental health and confidence, leaders must:

- Communicate that living experience is a superpower and it is ok not to be ok.
- Create space for young people to explore their identities and mental health needs.
- Embrace many pathways to well-being and perspectives on mental health.



Communicate that living experience is a superpower and it is ok not to be ok.

Youth leaders in mental health are experts by experience, but they may not feel or be treated this way. Adultism, or a system of “[behaviors] and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their permission,” is pervasive throughout all institutions and communicates to youth that they do not belong in certain spaces.ⁱⁱ Adults are viewed as having the most (or only) important contributions to decision-making due to their positions as adults and any additional years of education and professional experience they may have.

At the same time, young people are often going through major life transitions. With 75% of mental health conditions beginning by age 24 and the growing distress faced by youth, many youth advocates are exploring how to navigate their own mental health journeys as they champion change.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition, they may be experiencing discrimination and mental health-related stigma and interact with systems that prioritize academic and professional knowledge over all other forms of knowledge. This means youth advocates face the intersections of adultism and mental health-related discrimination, as well as any other forms of oppression they may experience as members of LGBTQ2+, BIPOC, or other communities.

Instead of serving as a barrier, youth initiatives and those who work with youth should communicate that young people and their experiences make them especially qualified as leaders in advocacy. Today’s youth live in a world far different from anything adults have experienced; adult perspectives may miss or inadequately capture young people’s wants and needs. While often termed “lived experience leadership,” YMHL members prefer the term living experience because healing and progress are never linear and look different every day. Identifying barriers and solutions on a topic does not mean you are still not figuring things out for yourself. Calling it “lived experience” can make young people feel they must be “recovered,” past any challenges, or unable to experience or disclose struggles while engaging in mental health advocacy work. Youth advocates should feel free to be wherever they are in their process and be valued for their previous and evolving knowledge and wisdom. The value of living experience can be communicated in training and program materials for youth and adults, as guides for individual conversations with youth advocates and by leaders modeling disclosure of personal experiences.

Create space for young people to explore their identities and mental health needs.

Youth advocates are creating resources and change in their communities – often inspired by supports they could not access. Unfortunately, many outspoken youth leaders do not have access to mental health resources themselves, making mental health advocacy spaces an important point for connection to support. Spaces for youth advocates should provide access to mental health education and tools that young leaders can use to support their well-being. Instead of assuming what young people want, leaders of youth initiatives can collaborate with youth to identify what they feel would be most beneficial and engaging. Options for including mental health in youth advocacy spaces include integrating mental health education and well-being-focused activities into meetings, communicating about and connecting youth to relevant community or national resources, and offering connections to mental health providers or peer supporters during events and as part of programs. Access to these resources and education can also support youth leaders in building confidence in their communication about issues in mental health.

Additionally, mental health programs do not always reflect youth's identities, which are essential in explorations of their mental health journey and the identification of gaps in available resources. Leaders in youth mental health advocacy should provide spaces that integrate and embody the importance of equity. This includes centering and amplifying the voices of those who have historically been left out of conversations, providing education about how different identities and experiences – e.g., being transgender, an immigrant, or part of the BIPOC community – impact mental health, and creating practices identified by youth participants as important to accessibility.

Programs and initiatives should prioritize representation and leadership that reflect the population being served so that more youth and young adults can see themselves in these positions.

Spaces should encourage youth to engage in advocacy in a way that benefits or does not harm their own mental health. While sharing one's living experience is an important aspect of advocacy, it is also essential to share that not everyone is entitled to a person's story or current experiences. Many advocates, especially youth, may feel they are being exploited for their stories yet ignored when providing concrete ideas or opportunities for change. Adult leaders should explicitly tell young people that they have the right to change what they share, including how much or how little and when or with whom, and that it is ok to say no to opportunities or other initiatives that feel misaligned with their boundaries and needs or damaging to their mental health. Organizations and youth initiatives can also regularly check with youth leaders, either directly or via surveys, to evaluate how supported and heard youth in their programs feel. Youth leaders and adult allies should also call in other leaders who might be creating spaces or practices that feel exploitative or tokenizing for young people who may experience contradictions around openness in different spaces.

Finally, youth programs should communicate that this work does not rest on one person and that advocates can take breaks or ask for help without shame. Those who work with young people can model and disclose how they have struggled and needed breaks so youth advocates can see that it is not a performative statement but a true belief. Leaders should communicate that taking care of themselves is how to sustain advocacy.

Embrace many pathways to well-being and perspectives on mental health.

Mental health spaces should also leave flexibility for how people understand their own mental health. For example, some youth may resonate with specific mental health labels and others may be critical of diagnostic language and the medical model of mental health. Some people want to be called a person with a mental health disability, while others identify as Disabled. They may be predominantly interested in mindfulness and spirituality, arts, neuroscience, technology, intersectionality, or social justice. Their feelings and understandings may also change over time. Collective values are important, like increasing

access to culturally responsive support and maintaining human dignity, but it is also important to acknowledge that there are many ways people may relate to their mental health. Instead of telling a young person they are wrong for disagreeing or finding other pathways, leaders can collaborate to find shared ground, communicate with openness and curiosity, and refer young people to additional resources or organizations for them to explore interests that feel compelling for them.



Power With/Building Solidarity

To build supportive mentorships and relationships with other youth leaders and adult allies, leaders should:

- Provide validation, encouragement, and stability.
- Understand that youth have a lot to add *and* provide learning and growth opportunities.
- Provide mentorship and sponsorship to support youth in navigating advocacy spaces.



Provide validation, encouragement, and stability.

Being engaged in mental health advocacy does not mean these young people are experiencing the stability needed to support their mental health. They may be in environments, including with family and friends or at school and work, that do not validate them or their experiences. People in their lives may discourage them from their mental health work through bullying, shaming, or other means, and youth advocates may still be in many harmful situations.

Relationships are key to well-being and feeling connected to a community. Leaders in youth mental health programs should demonstrate consistency and care, as evidence shows that even one caring adult can significantly impact people's long-term well-being. Serving as a supportive adult or leader means prioritizing individual and group check-ins with participants to build connections and demonstrate caring for them as people beyond their advocacy. Check-ins can be simply listening, sharing encouragement, or problem-solving in a person's personal or

professional capacity. Mental health advocacy spaces should not lose sight of the importance of mental health and the relationships that promote it. A supportive figure that checks in acknowledges someone's full humanity when advocacy initiatives can feel transactional or as if you are a means to an end for another person.

While having clear expectations and boundaries for program participants is important, it is also important to understand that youth and young adults are in complex periods of their lives, often with competing demands like work, school, mental health, and relationships. Therefore, programs can emphasize the importance of communication and flexibility in their materials and prioritize understanding and nonpunitive responses when youth may need extended time on projects. The same should apply when they need to miss a meeting or event.

Understand that youth have a lot to add *and* provide learning and growth opportunities.

Acknowledging youth wisdom and expertise should not offset their interests in growing and learning as young people. Instead of a one-way opportunity to learn from youth perspectives, youth leadership programs should prioritize bidirectional growth. Adult leaders can learn from young people while also providing resources, whether as an organization or through connections to relevant organizations, to help youth gain new skills or improve current strengths, as discussed by YMHLIC Pameela Boorada in her 2022 MHA National Conference Presentation.^{iv}

Humility, openness to new ideas, and creativity are essential to this process. When young people introduce new ideas, instead of

saying something cannot be done or defending why things are done a specific way, adults can explain why things are done this way and explore strategies to address barriers when relevant. For example, funders or other decision-makers may reject a specific program because it is not considered evidence-based. Leaders can connect youth to evidence-based frameworks, support them in learning about what makes something evidence-based, or support youth in advocating for flexibility in funding or supporting programs that are not considered evidence-based.

Provide mentorship and sponsorship to support youth in navigating advocacy spaces.

Learning how to navigate advocacy spaces, whether policy, nonprofit, or systems of care, is an ongoing process. Leaders who work with youth have wisdom in this space based on their personal experiences, whether as youth or adults. Adult leaders should provide space for young people to solve problems and explore their current and future options. Leaders can name the strengths they see in the individual, provide insight on how they have responded to similar situations, or provide guidance on the transition to adulthood – either generally or as an activist. While

not everyone will be interested, leaders should offer themselves regularly as a resource and plan one-on-one check-ins with new members of leadership or advisory programs. Adults taking the lead in outreach can ensure that youth who may be less comfortable asking for support will still receive it. Beyond mentorship, advocates can practice sponsorship, where they are also providing direct opportunities for young people to be in positions that they may not otherwise access.



Power To/Building Power

To create inclusive and empowering environments, leaders must:

- Prioritize intergenerational approaches that build community and avoid stereotypes about youth and adults.
- Create multiple pathways for youth leadership and impact, including opportunities to connect with leaders across sectors and organizations.
- Integrate youth advocates into all leadership structures.



Prioritize intergenerational approaches that build community and avoid stereotypes about youth and adults.

Movements require people of all ages to strategize and build momentum for change. Beliefs that today's youth will be "the ones to save us" discount the work of earlier generations of advocates and put undue pressure on young people. Stereotypes of youth being the energy to propel older generations' ideas forward may feel empowering for some but also discounts the continued energy of previous generations and the unique ideas offered by youth leaders. Creating intergenerational spaces offers the opportunity to break down these stereotypes, create nuance across generations and among individuals, and build bridges that can further sustainability and impact. Intentional outreach and community-building toward intergenerational spaces include having regular check-in meetings, inviting individuals or organizations to present on their work and pressing issues, or offering meeting space or other resources to help build trust and mutuality across institutions, organizations, and organizing spaces.

Establishing humility as a core community value is also essential. Organizers and leaders should educate community members on adultism and how that may shape their understanding of young people's ideas and work. Leaders should also communicate the importance of current lived experience in leadership – although all adult leaders were young at one point, being a young person today is very different from being a young person in previous generations. Amplifying the importance of listening to young people to reach a shared goal can help community members avoid or more easily call out and address instances when youth ideas are being dismissed or not taken seriously. While adults need to learn about their biases, youth advocates should also learn about the individuals and work that has advanced change over time – even if the current world is far from their vision for how to address mental health.

Creat multiple pathways for youth leadership and impact, including opportunities to connect with leaders across sectors and organizations.

Pathways to mental health advocacy are not always clear. Government, nonprofits, and the private sector all have roles to play in clarifying and advancing youth engagement opportunities and can co-create a broader ecosystem where youth can see the many ways they can contribute and advance as advocates. The Mental Health Youth Action Forum at the White House in 2022 is one example of bringing together leaders from multiple sectors to build impact and create new pathways for advocates. The forum convened representatives from the media, youth-serving nonprofits, government, and youth organizations to share ideas and cross-pollinate to create new projects – ones that could not be accomplished as effectively by one organization alone. Youth participants were matched with leaders from

different sectors and pitched their program ideas at a national event at the White House.^v Participants are now continuing to collaborate on program implementation, including examples like the MTV Hidden Healers services that was co-led by YMHLA member Mahmoud Khedr.^{vi} National, state, and local actors can create similar spaces by bringing together leaders, like media, foundations, government, nonprofits, and youth organizers. This type of organizing can help identify gaps in resources and youth leadership, connect leaders to create and improve projects, provide networking opportunities, and illustrate pathways for youth leaders in the present and as they consider opportunities for their transition to adulthood.

Integrate youth advocates into all leadership structures.

Young people should not be limited to roles as advisors or only in youth organizing spaces. While opportunities to connect and organize with peers are important, the voices of young people should be included in all spaces where decisions about their lives are being made. Youth leadership integration and elevation go beyond advisory roles to include organizational and board

leadership and leadership roles in policymaking, systems design, and research. Community and organizational leaders should conduct analyses to identify gaps in youth representation within their leadership structures, focusing on representation across historically excluded communities, such as BIPOC and LGBTQ2+ youth.



Conclusion

There is growing agreement that youth voices are critical in addressing the current mental health crisis. As programs, governments, and organizations continue to advance youth leadership, all actors should take steps to empower youth on the individual, relational, and systemic levels. By identifying and addressing the needs of young people at each level, we can more effectively address the youth mental health needs of the moment and create early opportunities that can lead to long-term leadership and engagement in mental health.

Citations

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Fast Facts

Impact Playground had 25+ educators in the fellowship ecosystem to deliver lectures, facilitate discussions, and host skills-based workshops.

The fellowship's mental health curriculum consisted of 20 60-minute lectures.

All the lectures on Impact Playground are designed and peer-reviewed by youth advocates supporting a myriad of social-justice causes.

While the fellowship was launched in the United States, the group continues to receive applications from candidates in India and the United Kingdom as well.

Summary

Mental health is heavily stigmatized across the South Asian diaspora, where people with mental illness are often shamed, ostracized, tortured, or even killed. The detrimental attitudes, violent outcomes, and lack of education – along with a history of post-colonial, patriarchal, intergenerational, inter-community, and immigration-driven trauma – drove an urgent need to design safe spaces for youth.

In 2021, Prameela Boorada launched a nationwide (virtual) South Asian Youth Fellowship. The program consisted of four months of mental health education in a seminar/discussion format and a two-month capstone. The entire program ecosystem identified as South Asian and came from diverse backgrounds – academics, clinicians, artists, and organizers. Many had lived experiences with mental illness. The curriculum featured lectures and discussions about mental health from the lens of race, gender, sexual orientation, family, politics, patriarchy, faith, etc. The capstone training centered on understanding needs, collecting data, building solutions, analyzing metrics, and presenting the results. Additionally, youth fellows were paired with mentors who helped them navigate moments of vulnerability, bravery, empathy, compassion, and authenticity. Some of the youth-designed solutions

include:

- Workshops for parents on how to talk to their kids about mental health.
- Research papers on the impact of depression/anxiety on teenagers; the impact of patriarchy on both men and women; and how to address Islamophobia in your communities.
- Several blogs and podcasts discussing mental health.

While the program was a success, it also showed that exclusively focusing on “empowerment” over-simplified macro-barriers to individual struggles. Despite an increasing number of youth advocates, the pathways to pursuing social impact remain daunting, inaccessible, and excruciating. “Empowerment” alone wasn’t catalyzing long-term action because there is a severe lack of:

- Collaborative pathways to build collective **power**.
- Long-term, diverse, and reliable impact-**ecosystems**.

Boorada said she didn’t know how to disrupt these macro-inequities, but MHA’s Young Mental Health Leaders Council presented a platform to learn about interdisciplinary solutions, systems-thinking, allyship, coalition-building, and power-building. Boorada took those insights and created **Impact Playground**, with a mission to develop personalized and comprehensive social-justice education that empowers and equips youth to pursue social impact. The core principles of what the group is building include:

- *Foster a sense of belonging to disrupt historical exclusion.* The platform will host educators with diverse identities and feature meaningful content centered in those lived/living experiences.
- *Nurture agency to disrupt disempowerment.* Impact

Playground is building a personalized curriculum that allows space to experiment, explore, fail, and flourish on the individual’s terms.

- *Build foundational equity to disrupt systemic inequity.* Impact Playground aims to build a larger impact infrastructure that includes access to mentorship, sponsorship through social impact organizations, resources to build solutions, and skills to pursue careers.
- *Build collective power to disrupt disproportional disparities.* The group wants to support diverse pathways to advocacy by building pipelines that include mentors, allies, organizations, resources, etc.
- *Nurture ecosystems to disrupt isolation.* The group aims to build collaborations to encourage interdisciplinary solutions and coalitions to support cross-movement organizing – and by extension, build cohesion between social-impact movements.

Getting Started

Boorada said, with all honesty, that the organization started from a place of despair. She has been working in this space, in various capacities, for more than 10 years – from charity drives at age 6 to starting social justice initiatives at 16 to building social impact solutions now, at 26 – and describes herself as a “passionate” advocate. However, passion isn’t enough when you encounter these hard-hitting truths:

This journey starts solitary and lonely. You struggle with feeling included. Inequity is everywhere – institutions, systems, and culture.

There are disproportional disparities in what people can accomplish with and

without power.

Navigating the social impact labyrinth can get disempowering.

Boorada’s journey frustrated her to a point where she realized that this friction wasn’t a consequence of “following her dreams.” She said the friction was there by design to stop her from the dream-chasing business. Working within inequitable structures lets you “manufacture” impact – but only up to a magnitude that doesn’t disrupt the underlying disparities. While this makes the world seem bearable, it doesn’t give you the courage or energy to hope for a better one. Boorada didn’t want to work within structures that predefined what her hope should and could look like.

Boorada’s first step was acknowledging those truths as gaps that define the “problem space” instead of constraints that limit the solution space. She got into advocacy because of its propensity to generate moments of radical hope, connection, and joy. Her reasons, passion, and potential for impact didn’t change, but the barriers on the path to breaking down social inequities inevitably broke her down. Boorada had to create a space that would recenter hope – honoring those reasons, empowering the passion, and making the impact possible while making barriers negligible.

Her second step was to define a vision that determined the capacity, direction, and magnitude for radical change. That’s when she came across a quote from “Teachings for Diversity and Social Justice”: “The process for attaining the goal of social justice should also be democratic and participatory, respectful of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change.” This guidance became

her organization's vision.

Her third step was to develop solutions that matched the vision and solved (or at least disrupted) the problems mentioned above:

- “*Democratic and participatory*” meant building a platform where **equity** is the non-negotiable core driving product decisions.
- “*Respectful of human diversity and group differences*” meant building space for true **belonging** through love, compassion, and inclusion.
- “*Inclusive*” meant building **ecosystems** that work toward a common goal of solidarity and restorative justice.
- “*Affirming of human agency*” meant building digital and real-life spaces centering autonomy.
- “*Working collaboratively with others to create change*” meant building allies, accomplices, sponsors, and **power** at every level.

Boorada's next steps will be building, learning, taking accountability for mistakes, and always moving forward – together.

So, yes, the organization started from despair. But that's ok, because what also started is an earnest pursuit of alleviating that despair.

Potential Barriers

Before you start:

- Stay rooted in what the community needs, not what you think is the best solution. Spend time in your problem space to develop an intimate understanding of the barriers, systemic inequities, and pressing needs. Then, reflect on what you're capable of solving. It may feel slow and frustrating – but you need a solid foundation to

build something meaningful.

- Document the following: **core** (mission and principles), **focus** (problems and solutions), **scope** (success criteria and failure criteria), and **strategy** (short-term and long-term vision). Have a strong clarity about things that matter so that you don't get swayed by things that don't.

After you get started:

- Make it a practice to trace every decision back to your problem space. Does your decision solve the problem you defined, or does it solve an entirely new one? Ground yourself in what you set out to do so you don't feel guilty about all the things you couldn't.
- Develop both success and failure criteria. Success metrics determine when you're on the right path. Failure metrics determine when to pivot and redirect your resources. Knowing when to say “no” conserves energy to keep moving forward.

Along the way:

- New ideas are shiny – and pushy. But every idea is based on assumptions (factors that need to be in place for your solution to work). When you feel compelled to build more, pause and determine if you've addressed and resolved the underlying assumptions.
- It's easy to feel trapped in the belief that big problems can only be solved by big solutions. Start small and make it sustainable.

You cannot, should not, and need not build this alone.

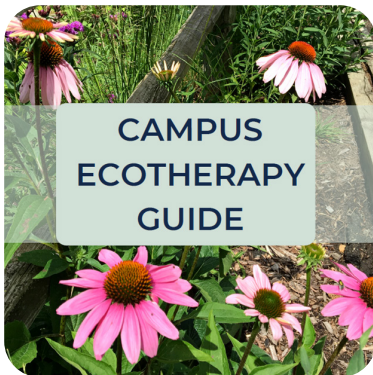
- **Make friends.** People get into advocacy as a means to find community. So, find your people. Share art. Rant. Make memories. Heal together.
- **Make allies.** Find the people who

will help you build solutions – whether it's through co-creation, collaboration, providing resources, connecting you to opportunities, etc. Grow and nurture their active presence in your life.

- **Find your role models.** They are your aspiration, pathway for growth, and accountability checks. Some may be present in your life; most others may not.
- **Find your supporters.** Before you set out to find who can help you – figure out what you need. Mentors provide emotional and strategic support. Coaches help with professional development and accountability. Sponsors actively grow your network and link you to opportunities. While the titles may differ, be mindful that different people have different interests and capacities to help.
- **Relationship-building is tough work, so stay organized.** Build a dedicated partnership tracker. Consistently email major updates. Set up coffee chats or zoom meetings. Whatever the cadence and communication method, keep it going. Keep sharing your progress so that we collectively feel less alone.

A world of people is willing to believe in you and support you. It's OK to ask for help.

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Summary

The Campus Ecotherapy Guide and Campus Ecotherapy Trails aim to change campus culture and provide intentional, safe, and accessible nature spaces for supporting mental wellness. Many college students are so busy that they don't have time to reflect on their feelings or acknowledge when they are struggling with their mental health. Students being told they need internships, volunteer experience, perfect grades, a blooming social life, and income to cover student loans might not know what mental health resources are available to them, let alone have time to access them.

Ecotherapy is one way to fill that gap and start to change the collective mindset about how and where mental health support happens. Ecotherapy takes many forms, but at its heart is the goal to work with nature to encourage mindfulness and greater connection with the world around an individual. Spending time in nature has demonstrated health impacts for the mind (improved focus, decreased stress, increased positive affect, and greater opportunity for social connection) and body (reduced impacts of chronic stress on the body, lower blood pressure, better sleep, and improved immune function). Ecotherapy can include animal-assisted therapy, adventure

Fast Facts

The Campus Ecotherapy Guide and Mindful Moment activities provide 17 different locations around campus as examples for where and how students can practice ecotherapy.

The Campus Ecotherapy Guide features over 20 different ecotherapy and mindfulness activities tailored to Butler University's unique natural spaces and student life.

There will be two different Ecotherapy Trails on campus. The first will be an accessible 30-minute route closer to the main parts of campus. The second route, which takes about an hour to move through, uses spaces like an urban farm, rain gardens, and wooded trails.

It took a little over one year to see the project through – from making connections, to brainstorming ideas, to conducting research, and then to installing the physical trail signs and updating the university website.

therapy, or shinrin-yoku (forest bathing). These styles combine nature with mindfulness or therapeutic intervention for mental health benefits.

The Campus Ecotherapy project specifically targets students and helps them take a break using the unique natural spaces around them, whether in the shade of a tree on the quad, next to a landscaped water fountain, or even off-campus exploration. The goal is to prevent stress and burnout that can escalate into further mental health challenges and to change the stories about stress that individuals tell themselves (e.g., that slowing down is a bad thing and not great for health).

The Campus Ecotherapy Guide and Ecotherapy Trails are a collaborative project between Butler University departments and community volunteers. The guide is an online document that helps students find nature-based activities that fit into their schedules and lifestyle. The trails are two different routes with ecotherapy activities listed on signs along the way, giving students an accessible 30-minute easier route or one-hour more rugged trail to choose from. After a year of research, planning, and designing, the trails opened for the fall 2022 semester.

Getting Started

This initiative got started because of a shared passion for ecotherapy and improving students' mental health. Marissa Byers was an environmental studies major at Butler University and involved with the Center for Urban Ecology and Sustainability as a student and intern. As her passion for combining nature and mental health grew after graduating in 2018, her former advisor reached out about the interest another

Butler staff member had in ecotherapy.

Soon a small project team was formed with representatives from different university departments, local parks organizations, and current and former university students. Over a year, the team researched, mapped, collaborated, and organized to create the final guide and trails. Additionally, involvement with the Mental Health America Young Mental Health Leaders Council inspired Marissa to share this work beyond Butler University's campus with the platform Ecotherapy for All.

The biggest lesson learned from how this project came together is the importance of speaking up about your passion. Without multiple people sharing their niche interests in ecotherapy, there would not have been the opportunity to come together and create something new. In addition, being willing to collaborate and ask for help from others amplified the accessibility of the project. For instance, the university's Office of Disability Services provided input on the trails and language used on the trail signage.

Potential Barriers

Start by connecting with others who share your mission – be creative in where you look for allies. When working to make large-scale systems change, it can be frustrating not to see results or progress immediately. Tackling a project as a team gives the opportunity to brainstorm together to make implementation more efficient and sustain each other's energy over time.

Place-based solutions to social isolation and building a community to support mental health are so valuable in changing the societal landscape, but

it often involves red tape. Think outside the box, be willing to work together with partner agencies or organizations, and make sure you have friends and mentors to support you throughout your project.

Catherine Delgado



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Fast Facts

In its inaugural year, the SWEAR Committee had 33 members representing 16 high schools in the San Diego Unified School District.

SWEAR co-wrote and unanimously passed a resolution with the SDUSD Board of Education to provide comprehensive, research-based mental health education on an annual basis to all secondary school students in the district.

SDUSD received a health education grant from the San Diego County Office of Education that enables curriculum rollout beginning in the 2022-2023 academic year.

SWEAR holds an annual March for Mental Health at the SDUSD Central Office to raise awareness around mental health initiatives within the district. The first year's themes were communication, representation, and implementation.

Summary

The SWEAR Committee is a student-led mental health advocacy group at the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) created to fight for the mental health and wellness of all students districtwide. With two student representative positions available to every SDUSD high school, the SWEAR Committee is leading the effort to reform how schools view and address mental health as an essential factor in education and wellness. SWEAR's mission is to empower and connect youth advocates for student wellness by supporting mental health campaigns at every SDUSD high school, incorporating mental health education into the curriculum, and increasing access to resources. The committee aims to bridge the gap between schools in an effort to create a more standardized and equitable system of addressing mental health issues districtwide.

The SWEAR Committee is founded on the belief that to support students effectively, it is not sufficient to address the issue in the short term. Instead, the school district must implement systematic, long-term, and large-scale solutions. SWEAR aims to achieve this mission through a commitment to mental health and wellness curriculum development. By educating students on coping mechanisms for basic wellness

and serious mental health illnesses that could affect them or their friends, classmates, or family, SWEAR believes that SDUSD students will have the knowledge and resources to lead more happy, healthy, and productive lives. During its initial founding at the height of online learning, SWEAR members presented to school counselors and teachers about creating an atmosphere of understanding on Zoom and integrating wellness practices into classroom activities.

By May 2021, SWEAR successfully wrote and passed a resolution with the SDUSD Board of Education to provide comprehensive, research-based mental health education on an annual basis to all secondary school students. The curriculum, written and organized primarily by the SWEAR Committee, contains five units: wellness education, mental health education, recognizing early signs, mental health resources, and allyship and leadership. Collaborators on the curriculum include experienced professionals from the University of California San Diego, Rady Children's Hospital of San Diego, JED Foundation, Mending Matters, and more. With funding from the San Diego County Office of Education, one unit was piloted in schools during fall 2022, and the full curriculum will be processed and released in schools in the 2023-2024 academic year.

Before, San Diego students may have found it challenging to make an impact as individuals. Now, SWEAR serves as a megaphone for the community. SWEAR connects students, teachers, counselors, administrators, and district officials to share important resources, coordinate efforts, and create valuable connections. At SWEAR, the student representatives drive the creation of

goals and methods of implementing change. SWEAR representatives organize student-run groups and partner with faculty to implement mental health initiatives at their respective high schools. These students are some of the most dedicated, passionate, and driven mental health champions and youth leaders in San Diego and SWEAR remains committed to empowering their voices.

Getting Started

The SWEAR Committee was founded in 2020 by Catherine Delgado and Hannah Griswold. Growing up as students in the SDUSD, Delgado and Griswold watched the youth mental health crisis unfold firsthand. As a result, the young women took it upon themselves to tackle the educational system and create strong mental health support for all students. Separately, the two co-founders embarked on a fight for student mental health and wellness.

Delgado began her advocacy by establishing a mental health coalition on her high school campus. She formed a collaborative initiative of school administrators, counselors, and students who work together to increase access to mental health resources, promote mental health awareness, restructure the response to mental health needs, and redefine the relationship between staff and students at school. Delgado wanted other San Diego high schools to do the same.

After observing her friends and classmates struggle with mental health in middle school and learning about mindfulness through the Aaron Price Fellowship Program, Griswold began to lobby at the state level for all California

students to receive mental wellness education. In SDUSD, she met with administrators and organizations and became chair of the SDUSD Student Equity Ambassadors' Mental Wellness Subcommittee. Griswold became frustrated with the little progress made, especially after one of her classmates and family friends passed from suicide. She was determined to increase her ability to make an impact and save student lives.

While Griswold and Delgado positively influenced their communities independently, their impact would be greater if they worked together. In May 2020, Delgado and Griswold's journeys finally converged. As the COVID-19 pandemic continued and SDUSD transitioned to online learning, students were abandoned in isolation and mental strain. When Griswold and Delgado met, they realized that many students across San Diego had similar desires for mental health reform on campus. These students had neither met, nor were they effectively given the support needed to launch their initiatives. Inspired, Delgado and Griswold created the SWEAR Committee to amplify the fight for the mental health and wellness of students districtwide.

They spent their summer writing a constitution, building their network of educational institutions and community organizations, interviewing over a hundred applicants for SWEAR membership, and designing the SWEAR structure and agenda. By the start of the school year, the SWEAR Committee was fully operational, with 33 members representing 16 high schools in the San Diego Unified School District. To this day, the SWEAR Committee remains integral to student advocacy in SDUSD.

Potential Barriers

The most significant challenge facing the SWEAR Committee is a lack of follow-through and communication from the school district. As an organization closely tied to school administrators, the lengthy approval processes, bureaucracy, and red tape are ever present in SWEAR operations. Sometimes, SWEAR members are not looped in, and projects are delayed for unforeseeable periods.

Additionally, for most young advocates, the slow nature of the public education system is frustrating. They feel as though their voices are not recognized or heard. The frustration is especially true for high school seniors with a graduation date looming over their shoulders. Thus, producing a cyclical nature of student organizations aiming to create change quickly without consideration for longevity.

SWEAR quickly realized that the fight is bigger than one individual advocate: It is powered by the collective. Together, SWEAR members used district policies to their advantage and found beauty in the small wins. Implementing a structure of actionable concrete steps is key to advancing the SWEAR mission. A strong leadership organizational structure produced effective delegation of responsibilities and empowered other members to become leaders within their spheres of influence. SWEAR also legitimized its group by leveraging a network of educational institutions and community organizations to grow its membership and influence. While it may not be easy, the SWEAR Committee continues to fight for a seat at the table and empower young voices.

Bre Kennedy



Overview

Bre Kennedy is currently co-director of social media at the Yellow Tulip Project, a youth-driven organization dedicated to smashing stigma, and a junior at the University of South Carolina-Aiken studying molecular biology. Kennedy is a strong advocate for helping eliminate the detrimental stigma of mental health and creating safe spaces for individuals of all ages to be authentically themselves. They love reading, hanging out with their family and friends, painting, and writing poetry.

As a volunteer at the Boys' and Girls' Club, Kennedy provided safe spaces for the teens to be heard and listened to. Whether it was really listening when the preteens told them about their days or just stopping by to visit, the youth valued someone checking in on them and supporting them to prioritize their mental health. Kennedy also reminded the upcoming leaders and directors that these kids have "little bodies with big emotions," and their experiences deserve to be validated. This advocacy helped her realize that small acts of caring are tremendously loud. In her advocacy, they also led and hosted multiple events with her residents as a resident mentor and created spaces

for individuals to share and access resources and activities to reduce college stress.

As a college student, Kennedy has experienced the feeling of putting their mental health on the back burner, and she made sure to help their residents understand the importance of mental health being a large factor in their everyday lives. Over the summer, Kennedy had the opportunity to spread mental health advocacy into something even larger when she became a client advocacy and court support intern for The Bail Project. The organization provides low-income individuals with resources to help them through the legal system and lessens financial burdens by paying their bail. Overall, being an advocate and leader for mental health has shown Kennedy how many people struggle with mental health, no matter their age, making stigma reduction critical to shift hidden conversations to open ones.

Whether through community service or advocacy to eliminate mental health stigma, Kennedy has not only felt the impacts that individuals have had on various communities, but they have also felt the enriching difference within themselves. Leadership and mental

health advocacy have truly transformed Kennedy into who they are today.

Advice for youth advocates

Kennedy's advice to youth leaders is to never doubt yourself. No matter if you think your dreams are too big, if the task is too much, or if you feel you don't have the resources to lead at that moment, Kennedy said you can do this. Over the years, her meaning of leadership has changed because being a leader is not a linear process in which everything is cut and dry. Being a leader is about facing the unknown and embracing the hardships and sacrifices that often come with it. It is also about guiding others through these hardships and life experiences together rather than individually. Working within a community and taking the time to listen and communicate with them without her assumptions has been one of the most important lessons they have learned.

Leadership is an incredibly powerful thing that requires patience, selflessness, and a listening ear. It has left a tremendous effect on our community and Kennedy as well.

Leadership allows individuals to take the opportunity to learn something greater and more powerful than what we could have ever imagined. Whether the task is big or small, Kennedy's main goal as a leader is to not only create an impact in people's lives but also continue to make a difference in the community that has given them so much.

Mahmoud Khedr



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Fast Facts

FloraMind has served more than 50,000 youth.

FloraMind has trained over 100 teachers and parents worldwide.

The organization has reached on 2,000,000 people through social media campaigns.

Summary

FloraMind is a leading youth mental health organization focused on mental health equity for young people worldwide. FloraMind's creative and innovative culturally relevant approach has empowered over 50,000 youth across the world by working strategically with schools, districts, libraries, museums, nonprofits, and mission-aligned corporations. It makes a positive impact by intentionally designing products and services with youth and bringing in other nontraditional mental health stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, musicians, artists, poets, and business leaders. FloraMind meets young people where they are and creates experiences and services to address underserved communities specifically. FloraMind is currently designing technology to address mental health with an equity lens because the organization believes technology should be an enabler, not a divider or the only solution, to supporting youth well-being. The organization has received honors and awards from the Biden-Harris Administration, Mental Health America, Forbes, BNY Mellon, Ashoka, and the World Economic Forum.

Getting Started

Mahmoud Khedr started FloraMind after a decade of suffering in silence with depression and anxiety and being a survivor of multiple suicide attempts. Using his living experience and co-creation with youth, mental health professionals, artists, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders, FloraMind created one of the first culturally relevant mental health education programs. In addition, the organization partnered with local governments, schools, and corporations to implement its programming.

Potential Barriers

One barrier is choosing the right approach and focus to make a change. When young people think about solving a social issue like mental health, many think the only way to do this is through starting a nonprofit or startup. Khedr is an advocate for entrepreneurs; however, it is not the best route for everyone and may not solve the issue they care about. Khedr advises spending a good amount of time understanding the problem, underlying causes, current solutions, and approaches across the spectrum – then aligning that with your passions, interests, and skill sets. For example, as students spend time understanding the problems around mental health, they will learn about the spectrum of mental health and key areas, like education and housing that directly impact mental health. Khedr encourages advocates to dig deeper into these issues and how they are interconnected and understand how people are currently solving the problems. He also encourages learning about startups and nonprofits and spending time understanding government and policymaking,


corporations and ESG (environmental, social, and governance), technology and infrastructure, art and music, and media and advertising – then pick a specific area and try it.

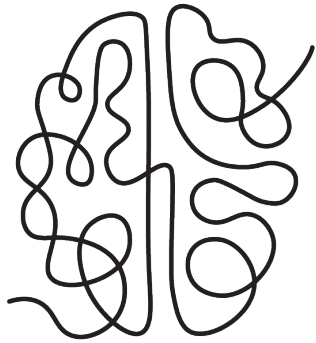
Another important issue is collaborating to drive collective, urgent action. Too often, people view solving societal issues as competition towards being the “best,” which is measured through the number of people reached, funding raised, revenue, impact, and so on. Those things are important and you should care about making clear goals and measuring them. But above yourself and whatever you decide to work on, make sure you spend time thinking about, networking, and collaborating with the wider ecosystem.

This step is critical and can seem like common sense, but it is not common practice. Many entrepreneurs, leaders, policymakers, and changemakers work in silos and build alone. This split causes further division and does not build a true movement that can make change happen faster. Khedr points to one of his favorite African proverbs: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” He would edit the quote to make it relevant to his life and what he’s have learned and say: “If you want to go fast, burn out, encounter unsolvable challenges, have no meaningful relationships, and live an unsatisfying life, go alone. If you want to go far, build connections, feel supported and celebrated, and create experiences worth living for, go together.”

Anthony Sartori



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Fast Facts

Over 100 students across D.C. and Maryland have completed the Resilient Leaders training.

On average, students build four meaningful connections during the training.

As a result of the Resilient Leaders training, 85% of students agree that their caring for other students increased.

Summary

The Resilient Leaders program through Evolving Mind is an experiential training where students practice resilience skills to positively impact their mental health. From mindfulness to kindness, students learn essential leadership tools to develop empathy across differences and authentically connect students with each other, themselves, and their student-led initiatives. The training inspires students to act and share the resilience skills with their peers. With the resilience curriculum, students learn how to transform their meetings and create supportive peer environments where they care deeply about each other and their mental health. The Resilient Leaders program fosters three essential mental health outcomes for students: a sense of community, meaningful connections, and a culture of care. These core outcomes are measured in a post-program survey on a 1 to 7 Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Getting Started

Evolving Minds incorporated as a 501c3 nonprofit in May 2020. Since then, it has built three innovative and highly impactful mental health programs, trained over 500 students, educators, and business leaders and positively impacted tens of thousands of people

across the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia. Partners include Baltimore City Public Schools, University of Maryland, MOM's Organic Market, Our Minds Matter, and many other social impact organizations. Additionally, Evolving Minds built a grassroots donor network of over 200 supporters and generated over \$40,000 in donations and program revenue in a little over two years.

Training participants sit in a circle with a room full of students. The Resilient Leader trainer, a young adult, asks participants to toss around an imaginary ball and respond to the resilience skill prompt: Where do you see goodness in the world? As the ball bounces from one student to the next, each person shares where they see goodness in the world. For the next 20 minutes, the imaginary ball is creatively passed around again and again – it's tossed in slow motion, rolled on the ground, kicked, bounced off walls, caught on the head like a soccer ball, and even spun on a finger. Each time someone catches the ball, they must respond with where they see goodness in the world.

After seeing goodness, they explore gratitude then delve into hope. The ball moves around the space again and again. Together, students begin to create a life worth living. Near the end of the training, they pause, practice mindfulness skills, and then break into engaging one-on-one pairs to discuss the importance of the mission: to create a culture of care.

The Resilient Leaders program meets the moment – that we're living in one crisis after another – by offering light and connection and molding compassionate student leaders who value bringing people together to be

vulnerable and human.

There are three impactful Resilient Leader training models offered in person or online:

- One two-hour training session over the course of one day
- Two one-hour training sessions over the course of two days or two weeks
- Four one-hour training sessions over the course of four weeks (one hour/week)

Potential Barriers

Two major barriers advocates will face are toxic cultural pressures and one-and-done mindsets. Evolving Mind leaders say embedded in our society is a myth that we must strive for wealth, fame, status, beauty, productivity, and perfection. These unattainable societal values destabilize the collective mental health by fueling loneliness, disconnection, and apathy toward humankind and/or the planet.

Additionally, Evolving Mind leaders say people often don't have time or space to connect, and the schools and systems reinforce this harm. Connection experiences are often given the least amount of time, attention, and effort. Connection events are usually relegated to the end or the beginning, in a way that makes room for something else. They're icebreakers that fail to break the ice. Most of the time, there is no connection experience, unlike what the Resilient Leaders training offers.

Joseph Sexton



 @josephsexton



vanderbiltcritpsych.org

Fast Facts

Vanderbilt Mental Health Reform is a close-knit student group of 10-20 students passionate about understanding mental health through political, ethical, and historical frameworks.

In January 2022, Vanderbilt Mental Health Reform hosted the Vanderbilt Critical Psychiatry Conference, a virtual one-day event attended by over 200 clinicians, activists, students, and academics.

Continuing education units (CEUs) were provided for all practitioners who attended the VCPC.

Summary

Vanderbilt Mental Health Reform is a student organization founded by Joseph Sexton that provides a space and program for understanding mental health as it exists within political, historical, and ethical frameworks. Members meet biweekly to discuss relevant topics that frequently go unmentioned in traditional coursework. Examples include the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s, controversies in mainstream clinical models, and psychiatric coercion (involuntary treatment). A short, informal lecture is given by a member of the group, a professor, or a local activist, followed by a group discussion. Time is also invested in practice – e.g., emailing elected officials on relevant bills and encouraging peers to do the same. A primary mission of Vanderbilt Mental Health Reform is to move beyond medicalized models of mental health. The group is built on the premise that mental suffering is best understood *in context*. While conventional mental health student organizations focus on reducing stigma – a noble and important goal – Vanderbilt Mental Health Reform aims to name the social and economic conditions that *produce* mental illness in the first place.

The culmination of Vanderbilt Mental Health Reform is the Vanderbilt Critical

Psychiatry Conference (VCPC), first held in January 2022. Critical psychiatry is a new, mostly academic field that focuses on reforming mental health care through careful consideration of psychiatry's historical, scientific, and political structure. With few, if any, conferences on the topic, Sexton decided to create the VCPC to disseminate these perspectives to a broader audience, connecting academics with on-the-ground activists and practitioners. Assembling a board of co-organizers from Vanderbilt Mental Health Reform – and with oversight from then-CEO of MHA of the MidSouth, Tom Starling – the VCPC was a one-day, online event featuring symposia and roundtables on such varied topics as navigating patient-clinician dynamics, the continued and evolving effects of race in health care, and the history of diagnostic nomenclature. A poster session was also held, where students (including a number of Vanderbilt Mental Health Reform members) presented critical approaches to mental health care. The VCPC was well received, with over 200 attendees and highly positive reviews. Most attendees were Tennessee-based clinicians and counselors who were able to receive continuing education units (CEUs). In light of this success, the VCPC is now planned to occur annually.

Getting Started

While taking coursework from neuroscience and psychology to anthropology and philosophy, Sexton felt that other student organizations were advancing nuanced understandings of mental health. However, he did not see a space to articulate what they felt was not working in commonly used mental health education. Furthermore, he saw

that mental health is a consistent and trying challenge for young people even as stigma decreases. Vanderbilt Mental Health Reform looks not at who people are responding to and talking about mental illness but rather the conditions that produce it.

To mitigate work on the bureaucratic side – all the paperwork that comes with starting a student organization – Sexton established Vanderbilt Mental Health Reform as a subgroup of Vanderbilt Active Minds, a larger and more established student organization promoting well-being among college students. The Mental Health Reform group works independently from Active Minds in many ways. Still, functioning as a subsidiary reduces workload significantly (e.g., unnecessary paperwork) and provides a unified larger body for advocates to meet with and learn from one another.

Funding for events – like the VCPC – came through appeals to local microgrant funders. Ultimately, Vanderbilt Behavioral Health funded the VCPC with some support from Mental Health America of the MidSouth. Additionally, some events were funded by local fundraising programs, like sponsorships from nearby restaurants who donate 10% of the profits for a night.

Potential Barriers

One issue in starting and maintaining mental health programming is seeing practical results. You can put a lot of time and energy into an event only to have few attendees, and you frequently don't know if the work you're doing is actually productive. That is, you hear when people on campus die by suicide,

but you don't hear of those cases where folks decide not to harm themselves. Even as the stigma of mental health seems to decrease significantly – though certainly still present – the prevalence of mental illness is not much better today than it was a decade or two ago. It seems like after all of the advocacy, progress is still lagging in community well-being. So, there's the first, most daunting issue: How to reinvent advocacy to make it better than what has been done? To address this issue, Sexton recommends contacting folks that have been working in this field for a long time, and longer than you, to see what they felt was and wasn't working. This can be previous student leaders, or it can be representatives from local mental health nonprofits.

A second issue comes in the form of funding. Most events need funding, or at least will benefit from it. Yet, assuming you aren't willing to use money from your own bank account, this can be an intimidating challenge. Fortunately, it comes with the same solution as the last issue. *Contact the people with more experience than yourself.* Sexton didn't know the about microgrants or small-scale sponsorships until he emailed and developed a mentorship with Tom Starling, a nonprofit aficionado who worked at MHA of the MidSouth. Starling introduced Sexton to writing proposals and requests for these funds, and they ended up ascertaining money for the projects. Other student leaders at Vanderbilt had resources Sexton hadn't thought of, too, including lists of local businesses that were willing to provide food or promote fundraisers at their locations. Reaching out will never hurt and is often highly productive for *any* issues you may face.

Finally, one last piece of advice: delegate.

Projects can feel extremely personal, especially when they pertain to mental health, and it can feel challenging to trust others with effectively managing your work. Yet, you will always be able to get more things done when you have more people working with you.

Jaden Stewart



 @JStew

Overview

With everything going on in the world, there needs to be a balance between good news and opportunities. To help create more good in the world, Jaden Stewart created a YouTube channel to advocate for mental health and build awareness of ways to promote mental health. He conducts interviews with the public on his channel and records youth football games. Stewart also works with the communication office at Kenyon College to create content for the campus community. He approaches conversations in ways that make the audience feel comfortable and relaxed, especially with topics many struggle to discuss. Stewart also helps his audience build “swagger-gaining confidence.” Stewart said his confidence and swagger came from doing YouTube and using his platform to build up others and help them find their pathways to greatness.

Advice for youth advocates

Find a community like the Young Mental Health Leaders Council (YMHLC) that can help you expand your knowledge and understanding of how others operate and approach mental health through different methods. These approaches include working out, reading, doing yoga, and many other ways to relax the mind and body for the moment. Through virtual meetings and emails with different people in this community, Stewart could plan for his goals going into the next year with the clear purpose of helping people feel safe and welcomed in conversations about mental health. Being part of this community helped him in ways he could not imagine, and he said others should try to find similar places to grow and connect with others.

Partnering with other organizations is also important. For example, during Stewart’s time with the YMHLC, he built a relationship with MHA’s IDONTMIND brand. He gained opportunities to build his branding through collaboration with their team and help advance his ideas around mental health promotion and awareness.

Sophie Szew



 @sophie_szew



youthlatinxleadershipconference.org
 @latinx_leadership

Overview

Growing up in a community where discussions about mental health stopped short of nonexistent, Sophie Szew never considered the possibility that she would dedicate her life to advocacy and mental health activism until she recovered from nearly dying because of America's extremely broken eating disorder treatment system. After experiencing medical abuse and malpractice in mental health facilities, Szew turned to writing poetry as an outlet to rebuild her identity and process trauma. As she used writing and literature to explore and learn about the defining aspects of her identity, she felt at home in a larger movement that challenges traditional societal systems that exclude individuals from marginalized backgrounds. This experience drove Szew to co-found a student-led organization, the Youth

Latinx Leadership Conference (YLLC), in 2021.

The YLLC is a community of Latinx high schoolers who convene once a year to garner strength from cultural empowerment, receive mentorship from top professionals in various fields, and find support in tackling tough topics like cultural mental health stigma, machismo, and racism. The inaugural conference was successful beyond Szew's wildest dreams. Hundreds of participants signed up to hear from inspirational leaders, including U.S. Sen. Alex Padilla; U.S. Rep. Grace Napolitano; entrepreneurs from companies including Subject Learning, SUMA Wealth, Zone One Productions; poet Carmen Jimenez Smith; and reporters from Spectrum News One and NBC 4. During the event, Szew led a conversation with Napolitano, who is the founder and co-chair of the Congressional Mental Health Caucus.

Following the events, Szew was invited to join the California Mental Health Consortium, where she met weekly with mental health professionals and policymakers to discuss how to improve programs in place that advance mental health throughout the state.

Enchanted by the link between the clinical and political aspects of mental health, Szew dedicated her gap year after graduating high school to learning how to tackle injustice in clinical mental health systems, like the malpractice she experienced as an eating disorder patient, through policy. She moved to Washington, D.C., and participated in three congressional internships at the House of Representatives. Szew had the opportunity to look at global mental health by advocating for the passage of the MINDS Act and heard the stories of community-based clinics on the verge of closure.

In addition to political mental health activism, Szew said she fell in love with the world of nonprofit youth activism. She participated in Lady Gaga's Born This Way Foundation's Youth Advisory Board and Mental Health America's Young Mental Health Leaders Council. In May 2022, she stood in the White House with 29 fellow youth mental health advocates during MTV's Mental Health Youth Action Forum (MHYAF) and shared with President Biden her experience with the broken health care system.

The MHYAF also consisted of pitch presentations on campaigns that progress the conversation about mental health into action. Szew participated in a pitch for a concept entitled "The BrOKen Universe," a virtual and in-person campaign that teaches marginalized youth that they are not the ones who are broken, society is. It's hard for her to think about the MHYAF and the BrOKen Universe pitch without feeling emotional. About a year after recovering from her eating disorder, she wrote a poem called "The BrOKen Theme Park," where the theme park was an allegory for the lifelong gaslighting she experienced being told she was internally and eternally broken. Through advocacy, Szew found the "OK" in her broken heart, and she hopes that everyone will have the tools to do the same.

Advice for youth advocates

As Szew looks forward to beginning her undergraduate career at Stanford University in the fall, she feels like she should be the one receiving advice on how to be a youth leader rather than giving it. However, throughout her time leading mental health work during her gap year and in high school, some of the most important lessons Szew learned came from institutional challenges that set obstacles in creating the impact she aspired to create. As young people, traditional societal systems were not built with youth and their progress in mind. Szew said we live in a culture that expects us to pick ourselves up by our bootstraps and create a better world for ourselves, but it is also a culture that often doesn't even provide us with the resources to buy boots. As a result, we often have to create our bootstraps, or mental health programs, using insufficient materials. It took Szew a lot of time and reflection – especially, she said, as someone who grew up with much more privilege than her parents and grandparents – to recognize that when she did not meet her organizational goals, it was not her fault but instead institutional shortcomings. Szew said you are already creating a better world simply by recognizing that the world needs improvement. Don't let society's brokenness discourage you from channeling that recognition into action; rather, allow it to remind you to practice self-compassion when you don't meet your goals. Szew said we need to be the change we wish to see in the world, but if we don't accept ourselves, we won't be able to create a world that accepts us.

Melanie Zhou



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Fast Facts

Oasis was the recipient of Denver Startup Week's \$100,000 grant

Oasis' advocacy led to an increase in student mental health funding, which allowed one county high school to hire three new counselors.

More than 3,000 students in Colorado have experienced an Oasis room.

Summary

Oasis Mental Health builds physical mental health “oasis” rooms in public Colorado schools. In these rooms, students find peer counselors, nontraditional resources like therapy animals, and a safe place to be vulnerable. The oases create a student-centric environment by allowing walk-ins anytime during the school day and introducing peer counselors – other students – that can relate to students' daily struggles. In addition, innovative mental health resources, like guided meditations and self-care kits, are offered with student input and allow students to develop an individualized mental health routine.

The first Oasis room supported more than 3,000 students in Oasis Mental Health co-founder Melanie Zhou's former high school. Since that Oasis room opened, students now stop in the halls to discuss mental health. These conversations slowly chip away at the stigma associated with the issue. Pre-pandemic, Zhou and her team began developing three new “Oasis” rooms at schools with a history of violence and suicide. Oasis' advocacy has even encouraged the superintendent to raise the contribution of a newly passed mill bond levy, which is a property tax, of an originally planned \$3.6 million to \$6 million toward mental health. In 2019,

each high school in Douglas County hired three new counselors with the help of Oasis advocates.

Getting Started

After a classmate died by suicide during her sophomore year of high school, Zhou recognized a vast disconnect between students and mental health resources. Students did not feel comfortable going to the traditional counseling office because, even in a crisis, the process involved making appointments weeks in advance with already-overwhelmed counselors. Zhou and her friend Mia Hayden banded together to make mental health a stronger priority in their high school. They co-founded Oasis with the aim to destigmatize the mental health conversation by establishing physical mental health rooms.

Within five months of starting Oasis, Zhou and Hayden accomplished their goal of building an Oasis room at their high school. In October 2018, they won a \$10,000 social entrepreneurship grant to fund their ideas. Zhou and Hayden also established a self-sustaining revenue model by selling branded merchandise that generates \$4,000 per semester. In September 2019, going up against hundreds of adult entrepreneurs, the co-founders won the Denver Start-up Week \$100,000 grant. They relied on hard work to initiate action when the school district could not.

Potential Barriers

It may feel really challenging to fund new initiatives. A lack of funding may even be one of the reasons why your school or community does not robustly support mental health. Zhou advises to pursue nontraditional funding

solutions that you may not necessarily connect with mental health. Oasis received so much funding because they applied for several entrepreneurship grants that only adults or businesses normally applied for. By going for as many opportunities as possible, no matter how outlandish, the Oasis team were able to gain self-sustaining funding outside of the school district. This gave them additional flexibility and credibility when reaching out to new schools to build the Oasis rooms.

One of the toughest challenges in creating a nonprofit is getting people in your community to buy in to your idea. The single most effective way to get others to believe in your initiative is showing them data about how your program improves the community. Oasis established several data collection mechanisms to measure usage, engagement, and positive effects, which was key in getting several school and district officials to get on board with the program. Before launching your program, Zhou suggests planning data collection strategies so that you can show the quantifiable impacts of your work.