

For better mental health policies, hear what young people have to say

World Mental Health Day is a timely reminder of the need to prioritise the youth voice in the design of policies right from the get-go



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For *The Straits Times*

"Just found out my mum has cancer. I'm taking O levels this year... (my mum) wants me to focus on my exams but I really don't feel like doing anything," read a post that went viral on a popular online forum, Reddit, just days before this year's World Mental Health Day on Monday.

Though I am 23 this year, the heartfelt lament hit home as my mother, too, was diagnosed with cancer when I was in my third year of medical school in 2020, a critical one transitioning from sterile textbooks into the world of "real medicine" in the hospitals.

My mother's diagnosis came in a series of neatly wrapped biopsy images – rectal cancer, stage 2. Though surgery was deemed "curative", its side effects were debilitating, and my mother suffered multiple complications that rendered her bedridden for months.

A once active woman who hustled between grocery shops on top of a busy social life in church, my mother now spent hours in bed staring blankly at the ceiling. At one point, her face seemed permanently tear-streaked, pain descending in sporadic spasms relentlessly.

My third year of medical school was largely spent shuttling between hospitals – one where I was posted to hone my clinical skills, and another where my mum would greet my late-night arrivals with a gentle, tired smile.

All this was taking place even as I continued pursuing a string of extracurricular activities in global health and the community, never giving a thought to cutting down on my commitments.

This was grit, after all, was it not? Pushing on even when the going got tough.

But grit meant quietly crying into my pillow in the wee hours of the morning, when my parents were already asleep. It meant coping with the gnawing anxieties

about my mother. Grit meant plastering on that bright-eyed smile through insurance fiascos and fears about Covid-19.

I spent an entire year struggling with mental health issues. It took months before I finally decided to seek help, at first googling for pointers to various subsidised services and then agonising over choosing one.

"What if this stays in my records forever? What if this means I can never pursue my dream of psychiatry or paediatrics? What if I'll never be allowed to work in public policy?"

Eventually, I did settle on a subsidised service even though the average \$40 it would cost was still a handsome sum for someone on an intern-grade salary. I had to schedule my appointments accordingly. Thankfully, I got better over the course of the year.

COMMON UNIVERSE

My experience was not unique, as I later found out.

I had taken a year off medical school to pursue a budding passion in mental health, and satisfy a longstanding interest in public health and writing.

I spent nearly a year at the Ministry of Health's Office for Healthcare Transformation, working on the youth arm of mindline.sg, a national digital mental health programme.

There, we went through round after round of interviews with diverse groups of young people and relevant partners from various sectors.

Months later, I joined the consulting team in a study commissioned by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) to explore needs in the space of youth mental health. The study was a part of the Inter-Agency Taskforce on Mental Health and Well-being.

Time and time again, the same stories were prevalent. The help-seeking journey resembled a game of ping-pong, with youth the unfortunate casualties of a fragmented system. Stigma stifled the attempts of many in reaching out.

A 2022 global meta-analysis estimates that 35 per cent of mental health issues surface by the age of 14, and 62.5 per cent by the age of 25.

In Singapore, we are fortunate to



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have had many community and health partners stepping up over the years to fill the gaps. Since the onset of Covid-19, both the public and private sectors have stepped up publicity efforts in an attempt to destigmatise mental health.

Despite this, why do so many young people still flock to online forums to share their woes? Why did I, a medical student supposedly well versed in mental health, take over a year to see a counsellor?

"If young people aren't at the table, we should break it," former Danish prime minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen declared at the recent International Association of Youth Mental Health (IAYMH) Conference.

INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE

"The truth is, we don't really know how youngsters really are, nowadays," he said, half in jest, at the conference in Copenhagen.

What would it look like if we celebrated the youth voice, not just in surveys and focus groups, but at the very highest levels of policy?

Australia's first integrated youth centre for youth, headspace, was founded by Professor Patrick McGorry in 2006 with a youth advisory council. Today, it boasts more than 150 centres across municipalities, each and every one created with the youth voice at its core. The success of this model has

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prompted 13 other countries, including the United States, to adopt headspace-type models.

Youth partnership has proved valuable even in the space of research and grant-making.

Jigsaw, another integrated model of care that has registered great success in Ireland, has a youth research council to co-create evaluation protocols and research studies in youth mental health. Wellcome Trust, a charitable foundation in Britain, has instituted a lived experience department to emphasise the importance of this space, while also valuing the inputs of researchers.

The University of Oxford recently commissioned youth to co-create a peer support intervention where young people even co-created the structure of the research team.

In Singapore, multiple ministries and community organisations are

doing great work with youth engagement.

MCCY has a youth advisory group, Holler?

A multi-ministry partnership also yielded a Youth Mental Well-Being Network that champions youth-led programmes. Peer support programmes are becoming mainstream in educational institutions. The list goes on.

But youth partnership goes beyond focus groups and surveys.

In many successful case studies overseas, young people are valued as active co-creators of policy.

They pitch and critique everything right from the get-go – from the time an idea is conceived to its implementation and evaluation.

In the dictation of youth "seeking help", we sometimes assume they are passive victims of an increasingly complex world. In one breath, we bemoan the "strawberry" softness of this young generation, and, in another, paint them as hapless teenagers in need of assistance. Yet, their lived experience is critical to building mental health programmes and systems that are truly youth-friendly.

Largely, we all come to the table of youth mental health from at least one of the following four categories – having lived, loved, laboured and learnt. Most of us have personally

lived through an experience with mental health, others have a loved one who faced the challenge. Others have laboured as practitioners in the space, or learnt about it through research.

What if we came to value each and every one of these experiences as critical to every conversation we had about youth mental health?

FORGING AHEAD

Covid-19 has sparked perhaps the loudest and widest conversation yet on mental health.

As we commemorate World Mental Health Day this year, what if we came to value young people as equal partners in our journey towards change?

My mother is still undergoing palliative chemotherapy following the recurrence of her cancer. In the low moments, I worry and feel that familiar twitch in my heart, reliving the year when I was confused over where to seek professional services.

I think of the stories of dozens of youth I have interviewed for months on end. I think of the stories of 17-year-olds who laugh off all-night anxiety as a rite of passage in school.

Youth mindline is the programme I wish I had when I was in the trenches of my caregiving journey. It features anonymous digital community portals, an engaging content hub and self-care exercises, among other things. It was co-designed with the youth advisory board that I founded. I believe that this element of co-creation has made all the difference in the final programme.

Today, we have an opportunity which no other generation has had to transform the way we approach youth mental health in Singapore.

Decision-makers have the power to prioritise the youth voice. Young people should be valued as partners in the design of policies right from the get-go. World Mental Health Day is a timely reminder of the need to do so.

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