

"BRING OUR COMMUNITY UP AND FORWARDS"

Mental health conversations among South Sudanese young people in the south east of Melbourne

Introduction

Burnet Institute, Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), and Monash ActionLab (MAL) teamed up to understand emerging health and wellbeing needs of young people from the South Sudanese community in the south-east of Melbourne as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

What we did



We worked together with a project officer from the South Sudanese community to help us shape the project's direction, develop project activities and work effectively with young people in the local community.

We organised two group discussions with 26 young people. They talked openly about what their community needs. Ten of these young people attended co-design workshops to design potential solutions to their needs.

What we heard



Addressing mental health issues was a priority for young people from South Sudanese backgrounds as they had recently lost multiple young people to suicide and agreed that changes are needed to prevent further mental health harm.

Navigating Identity and Belonging



Most participants arrived in Australia between the ages of 5-10 and felt torn between two worlds. They identified with both South Sudanese culture and their Australian upbringing. They experienced racism and discrimination and this has resulted in mental health impacts.

Participants empathised with their parents' difficult experiences and often hesitated to share their own struggles and found conversations challenging due to their differing experiences and identities. They want support to find ways to bridge this intergenerational gap and create better dialogue on mental health. Young people want to be a driving force in change for the better.

"Although it's only the planning process, the future is looking bright for my community and I'm proud to be part of that change"

-Young South Sudanese participant



Community Knowledge, Skills and Practices

Youth suicide in the South Sudanese community is believed to be related to an underlying mental health crisis that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Lack of mental health literacy amongst older generations could potentially be addressed through explaining symptoms rather than conditions or diagnoses. Participants believed this could help the community better understand mental health and know how to respond. Religious leaders could aid mental health discussions due to the community's high religious participation.

Culturally safe and accessible services are also needed. Participants considered that any service making them feel acknowledged and understood is valuable; however, services can employ bicultural workers, offer low-cost or free services, consider the impact of structural racism and build understanding of family and community context to improve responsiveness.

Co-designed solution

The co-design sessions allowed the young people to ideate and create content and an approach for a future program.

Essential qualities for an effective leadership program

Develop good leaders

Leaders should understand diverse perspectives within the community and encourage collaboration and strong relationships with communities and stakeholders. Good leaders know how to engage, listen, promote ideas and advocate for community needs.

“[A good leader is] Someone who listens attentively and takes the time to understand people’s concerns”
-Young South Sudanese participant

Foster safety and support for youth Initiatives

Time with community and religious groups is key for well-being, providing spaces where young people feel safe and can relate to others. Having access to education, employment and training opportunities which incorporate practical support and resources to translate ideas into action are needed. Mentorship programs should focus on pursuing purpose including how to mentor others in the community.

“Community is always something you want to stay connected to because it’s where you feel the most sense of belonging”
-Young South Sudanese participant

Promote positive shifts in mental health

The program should engage the community in conversations about mental health both in person and via social media. This will involve planning and resourcing community events focused on mental health and the facilitation of youth-led community dialogue in workshop settings. Young leaders should capture key themes of dialogue to share with people with influence and access to resources and support the evaluation of the impact of the program and adjust the approach based on findings.

ACTIONS

We have developed content for a program that would support young people to lead open conversations about mental health within their communities.

The program consists of a series of modules that cover the following areas:

- 1 Mental health content knowledge, talking about mental health, getting help
- 2 Collaboration and planning, facilitation, community engagement / citizenship
- 3 Data collection, synthesis, sharing, advocacy, evaluation, iteration
- 4 Storytelling, content creation, producing youth-commissioned media

If you have any questions, please email:

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