Youth Mental Health Promotion at Youth Services: Experience Sharing by Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service

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Abstract

Youth mental health has been under the spotlight of Hong Kong public health since 2015, especially with the rising concern of students’ suicide problem and hidden mood problems among the population (Yang and Yip, 2021). Injecting resources for primary and secondary care which focused on treatment and rehabilitation are important. However, young people have low motivation in reaching out to services when compared to other age groups. Thus, early detection and health education are the forefront work for youth mental health. Youth services’ trials and experience of Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service will be shared in the article, together with insight gained through the process.

Keywords: Youth, mental health promotion

History: Trend of youth mental health

The deinstitutionalization of mental health services has shifted the focus of treatment from specialized asylum to community-based services, and from treatment to prevention (Lamb & Bachrach, 2001). Apart from the health economic consideration, benefits to population’s health through such shift was a factor leading to the change. There are growing evidence which shed light on the importance of enhancing population’s knowledge and awareness of mental health (Henderson, 2013).

With such shift happening in Hong Kong since 1995 (Yip, 1998), community services emerged and expanded, stretching to reach for the youth in need, that led to the move of social service too which Integrated Community Centre for Mental Wellness lower the service age to twelve in recent years. The enhancing service availability and accessibility does not equate to the increase of service seeking willingness, help seeking behaviours in young population continue to be low (Kieling et al., 2011; Patel et al., 2018; Sum et al., 2023). To heighten young people’s presence, community services have tried to incorporate mental health services in mainstream youth services, support knowledge and awareness enhancement in youth population. Such approach is supported by the World Health Organisation (WHO). WHO recommended population level health interventions with overall health promotion focus, to fill the treatment gap for mental, neurological, and substance use disorders worldwide. (Colizzi, Lasalvia & Ruggeri, 2020).

With such foresight, a pilot project, “Levelmind@JC” was launched in 2019. It was a trial of incorporating community psychiatric and multidisciplinary service in general youth services. Evaluation shown that it was successful in building youth engagement, providing empowerment and stigma free youth mental health service. The great success included the recruitment of the usually low presence young population and managed to get them involved in different stages of care and intervention. The evaluation report of this project has provided insight on how the non-stigma environment may promote the participation of youth, which is of crucial importance for youth mental health services (Lam et al., 2021). Youth has
been hesitated to reach for mental health services as worrying about stigma (Rickwood et al., 2005), thus having a service that is friendly, all welcomed, not mental health specific but mental wellness focused acknowledged the difficulty. The open to all policy welcome anyone to join any of their programmes, ranging from leisure to mental health specific ones, thus one does not have to worry about being recognized as someone seeking for mental health support, which one may feel shameful to either accept or admit. The project’s overall effectiveness is yet to be evaluated since the project is still ongoing, evidence thus far demonstrated community youth mental health services could have single access point for mental health promotion, education, screening, triaging and interventions.

The mentioned project success aspired the potential of youth mental health promotion in mainstream youth services. Different youth services initiate mental health projects in attempt to solve the problem over accessibility and youth friendliness, individual projects’ evaluation on the overall effectiveness Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service as one of the many youth service providers, would present our journey in youth mental health work and insight gained through the journey.

**Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service (YMMSS)**

Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service (YMMSS) was founded in 1967 and dedicated to serve the youth in need. It has the mission to gather a diversified team who are committed to social welfare, to create a “social services laboratory” that provides innovative, professional and diversified social services to all, and certainly young people as well. YMMSS is keen to nurturing creativity to fill the gaps in services. For example, being one of the operators of Navigation Scheme for Young Persons in Care Services since 2015, it started off with a view to inject new blood into the social welfare care sector by providing opportunities for employment and training. With the awareness of the difficulties in integrating ethnic minority groups in the neighborhood, playgroups and young person activities were launched in Yau Ma Tei to promote integration since 2002. (Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service, 2002) These are one of the many examples of the dedication of innovation for YMMSS.

Following YMMSS participation of territory-wide Joy@school mental health promotion programme school in 2015-2016 academic year, mental health promotion has been the focus for YMMSS youth service. There is an obvious surge of need in this area. With the development through the years, we are humble to share some the observations regarding integration of early intervention in schools and youth services.

**Importance of mental health psychoeducation at campus**

The implementation and participation of Joyful@School enlightened school social workers in their mental health work possibilities. School social workers have been swamped by increasing number of students experiencing mental health distresses. The resources from Joyful@School supported the early identification and screening of at-risk students and promoted the potential of mental health promotion at campus. To continue the good work of the project, school social work service initiated ‘Affective Education Programmes” in schools at Ho Man Tin, using similar screening tools of the Joyful@School programme to identify students who had high level of distress and provided them with emotion and mental health education programmes.

Few years down the road, we are delighted to see the gradual rise in motivation on sharing and opening up of discussion over mental health and the realization of the importance of mental health among young people in those campuses. Students gained insight and awareness over mental health issues, and extend their knowledge to support fellow students in either doing referrals to social workers, or encouraging each other in sharing over distresses and to seek support. Campuses served as a great platform for psychoeducation.

**Emotion education and normalization**

To facilitate more in depth sharing and reflection, which is necessary yet not seen over mass psychoeducation programmes, YMMSS initiated different projects in the Integrated Children and Youth Service to address the issue. “Promoting the mental well-being of local youths” is a programme that received the grant from the Kowloon City District Office and it was a resounding success and lasted for about six months. It enabled young people to participate in a range of groups and hands-on activities to help them recognise, express and deal with their emotions, as well as learn how to approach challenges with a positive mindset. This is one of the first programme that incorporate meaningful engagement activities with mental health knowledge to encourage young people to participate in the service centre. This continuous participatory program openly recruited young people aged 16-20 to undertake different activities such as arts, outdoor activities, mindfulness activities etc. During
the COVID-19 pandemic, young people had limited access to activities due to lock down and quarantine, thus participation of social activities is asking the youth to venture out of their comfort zone at home/quarantine and get back to the momentum of regular social interaction. Reestablishment of young people’s engagement in activities, develop habits of social activities became one of the programme purposes.

In running the second batch of the project, we observed changes which shed light to the importance of continuous emotion education. The participants were observed to be on a journey of learning about their emotion. We observed their difficulties in verbalizing their emotions at the beginning, to gradually becoming more able in naming, and further expanding their vocabulary in describing their emotions. The observed limitation of emotional competence of the participants is universal among youth and that affect help seeking behaviour (Rickwood et al., 2005). While Hongkongers have the fourth highest average IQ score in the world, according to the latest World Population Review report 2023, youth emotional competence does not catch up with their intellectual competency. The participants were not a unique group, similar scenario had been observed in the school emotion education program too. Participants of the group shared how they felt difficult to openly talk about their emotion at the beginning of the programme, as that is not common in their household, and for those who has small social circle they found sharing even more harder. These programmes served as a platform for the youth to experience their present emotion and to express: as they were encouraged and being accepted for being so. In the programme, they practiced and with the help of the group, gradual normalizing and actualizing: is okay to be not okay.

Social network building as firewall for mental health deterioration: sports and art as medium

With proven importance of social network (Jain et al., 2020), supportive social circle is important to the healthy development of young people, especially in mental health. Mainstream youth services focused greatly on developing youth’s social network through different activities. Sports participation and training could not only support development of a healthy and supportive social network, it has been seen as a good way for behaviour activation, and combating depression. (McPhie and Rawana, 2015). New sports trials and learning workshops were organized in YMMSS youth centres as part of the mental health promotion work. Other than obvious change in motivation and engagement, which we normally see in sports participation, participants open up and share about their emotion too. Other than the benefit of experiencing the moments of state of Flow: state of optimal activation in which they are completely immersed in their activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), they spontaneously open up about how is that different from their usually, which at times they would be easily filled with anxiety and other emotions. Such spontaneous sharing was not common among them, which they may not easily managed to do some among peers. Experiences of social support, attainment of excitement with facilitation of sharing, created a safe and comfortable platform to share, and express, and that helped the youth to have a sense of control: they could create moments and time which they could feel relax and fulfilled, at the state of Flow. To facilitate young people in experiencing the state of Flow, different medium was introduced, including Pastel Nagomi Art, fluid painting, and coffee making. These activities allow them a space to focus on tasks they are interested in and aware how such attentiveness led to feeling of positivity and calmness.

Expression and narration: assertion and control

Suppression of emotions are commonly seen in Chinese, especially in youth (Qu et al., 2020). Assertion and emotion expression are part of the key in developing one’s identity. The facilitation of emotion expression has been one of the major work in promotion mental health. With the understanding of how narration of ideas and feelings over events could help regular one’s emotion (Pasupathi et al., 2017), platform was built to facilitate expression of emotion in young people. The “100 voices campaign” aimed at collecting youth’s voices in different social issues and results were published in the quarterly program pamphlets and centre’s social media platform. It was to nurture the atmosphere of sharing and expression of ideas and thoughts. With more than 2 years of effort, young people in the centre were observed to be more ready in expressing their ideas and concerns.

In relation to narration of own stories and feelings, drama has been a good medium. A recently published systemic review supported its benefits on overall wellbeing. (Jiang et al., 2023). Drama production project was launched in a few service centres, with scripts and plots to share stories of youth’s journey on their struggle with mental health and drawn a great crowd of audience which do not usually interested in mental health issues. There were also significant changes in pre and post programme observation in the emotional regulation among the young participants. The participants named how playing their roles in the drama supported them in being in charge of their emotion, and gave them a new sense of control: both in roles and in reality. Similar
reflection was yielded from “Tabletop Role Playing Game (TRPG) project” too: tabletop games have been a current hit among the youth, and service tried to use this medium, with mental health themed plots to support participants involvement over different roles and gain empathy and understanding over mental health issues through role play.

The expression through art, drama, narration, helped young people in developing and reflecting on their own identities. These activities also help them to vocalize their needs and choices. All these help young people on assertion and gained sense of control, which are vital on building their wellness.

Conclusion

To draw a conclusion on the above programmes and initiatives, efforts are put at initiating conversation about mental health issues, and for the youth to experience emotion in a safe environment, either at their natural environment such as school, or in youth services centres as their third support system.

Work at the forefront of youth mental health promotion, creativity on tapping into youth’s interest with the grasp of changing circumstances to make mental health promotion widespread and adaptable has always been the challenge. The journey and experiences shared in this paper are a small part of what the mainstream youth services’ effort to promote youth mental health. The observed changes through programs would be further supported by systematic and evidence-based evaluation. Looking forward for evidence to further support the development of youth mental health promotion in mainstream youth services, and build a stigma free, accessible door for the youth.

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References


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Abstract

青少年服務之精神健康推廣：循道衛理楊震社會服務處青少年服務經驗分享整合

青少年精神健康自2015年起一直為香港公
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