

Summary

Humsafar (We are together) was the first step for marginalised communities in New Delhi, India towards breaking free from the stigma associated with mental health problems through starting a conversation around the topic.

Project Description

How did you decide what issue(s) you wanted to address and what approach(es) or strategies you chose to implement in your project?

The origin of this project was not instantaneous, but rather the result of a long personal battle with anxiety and depression. It was not until after the COVID-19 pandemic that I realized my poor mental health stemmed from undiagnosed ADHD. A turning point in my battle was coming across a book called 'What happened to you by Oprah Winfrey & Dr. Bruce Perry which highlights the importance of mental health and childhood traumas in a person's life. Gaining knowledge from distinct sources and the most important one of them all, my mother, Mrs. Anamika Jindal, who is a mental health expert. We realized the need to start a conversation around this topic.

We ideated the plan and discussed it with Mrs. Sonal Ahuja, an educationist, a child expert, and a mentor for my mother and myself. As the brainstorming sessions went on, we identified that poor socio-emotional growth during the teenage years which is worsened by an unsupportive environment should be the main focus. While both the experts discussed various techniques and methodologies, I ensured securing the funding and connecting with the right people. The program was designed in a way where on the first day we asked the students to complete a projection sheet (consisting of different shapes, designs, and colours and asked for their views and suggestions about each picture) and a landscape drawing. Both the projection sheet and the drawing were analysed by our team of experts and a diagnostic sheet was formed individually for each student. On the second day, we validated the analysis and then completed various therapies on each student over the next 4 days.

Why did you choose your host site? In what ways did local relationships support you or contribute to the project?

Since the origin of the project dated back to my childhood, I worked in the Northeast part of Delhi, Shahdara, where I have an ancestral house and a long family lineage. Shahdara is a part of Delhi that is known for the watery street food but is mostly shadowed by long stretched flyovers, congested with rickshaw pullers and local vendors, and is home to the most deprived people of the city. In the middle of the most crowded area of Delhi, there is Sarovar Bal Vidyalaya Babu Ram Senior Secondary School (est. 1915, one of the oldest schools in the city) and right opposite is Sanatan Dharam Senior Secondary School (known as the 'Gaushala' school by local people).

The students from both schools belonged to the lowest spectrum of society and were subjected to domestic violence, and after-school work, and faced severe financial constraints. On average, their family income was less than \$100 a month. Additionally, the academic result is the one and only focus for the schoolteachers. There was no support for any student in terms of mental well-being and emotional support. Working with these sets of students sometimes amazed our team of mental health experts, who are in the practice for over a decade. Their dreams and ambitions matched any other kid going to a private fully-air-conditioned school, but the cultural and social situation caused a major hindrance to their plans.

What changes or adjustments did you make to your original plans, and why?

Initially, I proposed to work for 8-weeks, spending one day in each school during the month of July and August. The beginning of September is the exam period for the students and of which having them attend our sessions during teaching hours was very tough. Instead, we started the first school in

June and designed a rigorous program to be completed in full 5-days. As the summer vacations started, we had to pause for a bit and then take up the second school in mid of July.

Additionally, on the 26th and 27th of July, the Hindus celebrated 'Sawan Shivratri' when the devotees of lord shiva complete a pilgrimage to fetch holy water of the river Ganges barefoot. That festive period was a busy time for students as the majority of them (mainly between the ages of 16 -18) were walking hundreds of kilometres to gather the holy water and dispense it to the local Shiva shrine. The local market was full of high-frequency woofers and devotees dancing on the street. Though we were unable to progress for those two days, I enjoyed the festive season after a very long time.

Did other fundraising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?

There was no additional funding required for the project. Every member of the team was fairly compensated, something which is a big concern for people in India.

Are there opportunities for continuing your work on this issue? If so, please describe.

Yes. As part of the weeklong program, the students did not only talk with the experts but also learned some techniques that can be used in their daily lives to manage stress and anger, express gratitude, and improve communication skills. These techniques could be used by the students in the future. At the end of the project, the principal and the teachers seemed satisfied with the work done by our team and invited us to complete the same project on another set of students.

Being surrounded by so many counsellors, I started talking with students as well and helped them with their career choices, adolescent issues, and life skills. As many of them reiterated that spoken English and communication skills are their main concerns, I provided them with a book called 'Attitude is Everything' by Jeff Keller. Moreover, I have created a WhatsApp group of 10 students and am conducting weekly mentorship sessions, answering career-related questions, and helping them with university applications.

Reflection

How do you define peace?

Peace for me is having a calm, secure, and quiet mind, and soul. Each morning I start my day with 10 minutes of meditation. I practice calmness, gratitude, forgiveness, empathy, healing, and unconditional love. Peace is holding hands, supporting and putting a smile to a new face each day. Every person in the world deserves all of these and deserves peace as we define it.

In what ways might your project contribute to peace? What changes occurred? Short-term? Long-term?

Project Humsafar was formed with a vision of a generational change. During the start of the project, the toughest job for my team was to convince the schools to agree for spending the precious time of the students on something other than their studies. The most difficult part of the project was to find people who would understand the objectives of the project and then give us the space and the freedom to bring the change. I was amazed at the unawareness or rather ignorance towards mental wellbeing, especially in adults. As we talked with the students, and exhibited our work to the teachers, we introduced the importance and significance of a positive mindset and a supportive environment. Meditation sessions, positive affirmations, anger management and conflict resolution were some of the main teachings throughout all the sessions.

Students in the age group of 16 – 18 years are easily influenced towards drug abuse, communal disputes, and other unlawful actions. Talking about their life goals, reiterating their future expectations, and listening, and understanding their mundane problems formed a clearer picture in their mind which helped them to manifest a positive future.

I am looking to continue to help the students through constantly communicating with them on social media and WhatsApp. I am conducting weekly meetings to answer their questions about life and

career. During the sessions, I introduce them to different career options and guide them with the college applications. Though I have only 10 students in the group, I am expecting that their involvement and success would become a motivation for other students in their school and the local area. In a few months' time, some members of my team will visit both the schools to interact with the students, learn about their progress and guide them through their issues. Uplifting the lives of these students would directly affect their family conditions, and hopefully their future. As mentioned earlier, we are aiming to bring a generational change.

What did you learn about the dilemmas, challenges, or conflicts that underlie the targeted issues or utilized approaches/strategies?

After learning from the experience and having long discussions with my team of mental health experts, I realised the main challenge is the unawareness and ignorance of mental health in daily life. It is very important to normalize the conversations around mental health problems and spread awareness on mental wellbeing. A home is the primary place for any kid to learn about mental wellbeing. Children don't inherit dysregulated behaviours from anyone, they see, hear, and learn.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has the project changed, challenged, or inspired you?

This project was a transportation for me to a different world and exposed me to the truths of life. The students I met in the 2-months valued money, food, family, and work more than anyone I will ever met. There were a lot of learnings through this project which are jotted down on my daily journal, but I would like emphasis on learning about the importance of giving back to others. Each and everyday we entered the school; the students greeted us with touching our feet (even mine!) to pay respect and thank us in an Indian manner. By the end of the project, I called each one of them by their name and promised to help them out whenever they needed. I don't know for what extent I would keep my promise, but I won't leave any stone unturned. A passion has grown inside of me, to help others, pull them out of their darkness and guide them to light. I realised that the world needs my skills, knowledge, empathy and love for the betterment of others more than anything else. By the end of the project, I could better understand the meaning of '*Humsafar*', having a companion.

Personal Statement

"I have become a giver. Making an effort to pull others out of darkness and put a smile to a new face is the most peaceful thing for me in the world. Through this project I have found the motive of my life"
-- Astitva Jindal