

Edu.pression Peer Support Project Report

Country: ESWATINI

Institution: University of Oklahoma

Project team leader: Langelihle S Dlamini

Team member names: Sakhile Shabangu and Simphiweyinkhosi Sigudla

A two-sentence summary of the goals of your project

The goals of the project were to educate and train 35 young college students about mental health so they can be equipped to help others and to raise awareness about mental health disorders. There were two phases of the project; the first phase was focused on training the students to Understand Emotions, Depression, Anxiety, Suicide, Grief and Loss, Active Listening, Coping Mechanisms as well as learn Leadership skills and the second phase of the project was focused on connecting the trained students (Peer Supporters) to Professional Psychologists/Counselors who stepped forward to provide a system of support for the Peer Supporters.

Did other fund-raising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?

There were no other fund-raising efforts that contributed to the project. There were many organizations and individuals that contributed in non-monetary ways. For example, we had local and international reviewers for the mental health manual that was used as a tangible training tool. Dr Samsom Haumba (from Georgetown University Center for Global Health Practice and Impact) and Dr Kathleen Smith (The University of Oklahoma) were some of the reviewers of the manual.

How did you come up with the idea for your project?

Suicide is a tragedy that touches the lives of many Swazis. At the time of the writing of this report, Swaziland has the 3rd highest suicide rate in the world with about 40.5 per 100,000 suicides each year (www.worldlifeexpectancy.com). And yet, this crisis is worsening every year and thousands more experience suicidal thoughts and attempt suicide. These deaths are most common among the youth who are about ages 18-25 years. In 2020, I realized that much more Swazi college students were committing suicide and some of the them were people I knew and had grown up with. Research has shown that losing someone whether it is a close friend or family member to suicide may also increase the risk of suicidal behaviors. I decided to plan a project that would educate young people about mental health and give them suicide intervention skills that would help them help their communities during a crisis. ESwatini has a high stigma towards mental illness so my hope was that learning about mental health would help to also raise awareness about the topic and give young people the language to express their emotions and struggles in a non-judgemental way.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?

Emerging data suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the mental health of many young people and adults and this is related to the stress from isolation and loss. However, even before the pandemic, youth mental health in Eswatini was already a concern. Young people in Eswatini face higher risks of depression/anxiety due to socioeconomic struggles such as inability to work, death of family members due to high mortality rates, high rates of poverty and economic/political instability. It is also important to note that Eswatini has the highest HIV/AIDS cases and deaths in the world. A significant number of young people ages 18-25 are orphans or come from single parent households which further puts them at risk for anxiety/depression. Gender based violence is also a common issue in ESwatini due to the patriarchal nature of the Swazi culture. This means that many women find themselves living in conditions that put them at risk of domestic violence, emotional and financial abuse. In Eswatini, 1 in 4

girls and young women reported experiencing sexual violence prior to age 18. Of these, 65% described the perpetrator as being violent multiple times. Rape victims were three times more likely than non-victims to have ever had a major depressive episode (30% Vs 10%). Since 2020, Eswatini has also been facing political instability as there have been many strikes, violent riots and extreme looting by the public as a way to fight for freedom against the ruling monarchy. All of these factors have contributed to the poor mental health in the Swazi community and this is what the project was addressing.

Why did you choose your host site to work in?

The project was done at Mananga Center for Regional Integration and Management Development which is located in Ezulwini. Many universities and colleges in Eswatini are located in Mbabane and Manzini. Ezulwini is at the center of these two cities which made it easier for students from the two cities to travel when they were coming to the project. Moreover, Mananga is a center designed for education so it fostered an environment for learning. Mananga has beautiful scenery and the room where the training was done had transparent wall high windows that gave the place an indoor-outdoor feel. Through the window, one could see the beautiful green trees and plants thus making the place more calming and tranquil. This was important because we were talking about potentially triggering topics like suicide so the environment had to be soothing and serene.

What was it like to work on your host site?

Working in Eswatini was a great experience because the people are genuinely kind and happy to help. What really made my experience good was the fact that I was working with 2 other young social workers from Eswatini. However, I had not realized that our young ages would cause many to be skeptical about the project. Nevertheless, we were determined to make this project of high quality because we wanted to make a significant impact in our community. Moreover, another issue we had was the tardiness or delay in the arrival of the order for ICE materials like the posters, the t-shirts, and the banners.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?

I did feel like the project was not going to work at some point. This is because it took a while for us to get the money transferred to us due to the procedures of the Financial system at the University of Oklahoma. This caused a delay in the project timeline as the money came around mid June. Moreover, the political instability in Eswatini meant we had to work around unpredictable circumstances such as random shutdowns due to strikes. The instability brought by the political turmoil also caused many colleges to delay exams thus making it even harder for us to find a time that would be appropriate and conducive to have the training.

During the second phase of the project, when we were asking for support from some local Psychologists and Counselors, it brought about many conversations about Mental Health in Eswatini and effective approaches to intervention in an African setting. Some Professional Counselors were concerned that the training did not include the older generation and that this might mean that young people are misunderstood by the older generation. Moreover, some felt as though mental health might be seen by the Swazi society as a western issue and not something that is relevant in an African setting.

Suicide is a sensitive issue and it is even more sensitive in communities with already existing stigmas and ideologies about mental health. We wanted to make sure that the training was relevant to Swazi youth and had taken account of the Swazi context. Therefore, we had Swazi facilitators who were professional counselors come to train the students. The Manual used in the training was reviewed by both

international and local reviewers in order to make sure it was relevant to Swazis. However, even these efforts do not guarantee that it would be effective in helping reduce and prevent suicides in Eswatini.

How do you define peace?

I think Peace is a human disposition and mental position that is stable, safe and secure from distress. Having peace allows one to endure even the hardest times without losing hope. I believe having peace is the result of having hope. Cultivating Peace in a community is a process and it requires effort to reduce harm against self and others. Therefore cultivating hope is vital in bringing about peace both internally or externally.

How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term?

This project was the first mental health and suicide intervention training that has ever happened in eSwatini therefore I believe this project brought a lot of self awareness to the students(Peer Supporters) as one of the topics we addressed was about understanding emotions and understanding self, in order to understand your peers. It addressed topics of Anxiety, Depression, Suicide, Grief and Loss, Coping and Skills needed in intervention and Peer Supporting. In the long term, the two people who were also leading and planning the project with me: Sakhile Shabangu and Simphiweyinkhosi Sigudla started an NGO called Edu.pression Suicide Prevention Services and the main goal of the NGO is Suicide prevention through raising mental health awareness. Since they are currently living in Eswatini, they are continuing to train more students on mental health. We have managed to establish connections with many Swazi universities and they have volunteered to offer support through providing venues for future training. Moreover, the Edu.pression Project was focused on training students to become trainers themselves (train the trainer basis). Therefore, since the training in July 2022, many of the students have led discussions in their colleges and universities discussing mental health and coping strategies. I believe the ripple effects from the project will normalize mental illness and help society be equipped with methods of helping. Furthermore, I believe it will give Swazis the language to talk about mental health in a non judgemental way.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?

This project challenged the limiting beliefs I had on myself and pushed me out of my comfort zone. I had to step out during every phase of the project whether that was during the time when the planning got hard or during the multiple revisions I had to make on the manual. The project also opened my eyes to the power of compassion and empathy. I had a conversation with one of the Peer Supporters after the project and she said: "I am so glad I came for the training. I was contemplating suicide myself but now I feel as though I have purpose and hope". The connections I made with each Peer Supporter made me realize the power of being seen and heard. Most of us listen to respond and this project showed me the transformative power of listening to understand. On a personal level, it also influenced my future career plans and I realized that I want to serve others in this field of Mental Health for as long as I live. I look forward to applying to Graduate Schools for a Masters in Counseling this year.

Please provide a 1-2 personal statement sentence, suitable for use as a quotation, addressing how and why this project was valuable and what was the most important thing you learned as a result. Indicate the student's name (yours or your teammate's) for quote attribution

We are born with limited knowledge, especially about ourselves and how our individual brains work. Education is important to bridging the gap and I believe this project made me believe in the power of education to change the world.

Videos of the Project training in this [link](#)



A student taking notes during the Edu.pression training facilitated by Professional Psychologists/Counselors and the training was focused on Anxiety, Depression, Grief and Loss, Eating Disorders. Understanding Self (Emotions,Moods),Coping Mechanisms, Suicide and suicide intervention skills.



A picture of the 35 students after getting their certificate on the last day of the Mental Health First Aid training



The Edu.pression Team and Swazi Psychologists and Counselors after the workshop discussing how to support Peer Supporters as they support their peers