Project Title: Ghana Youth Movement for Mental Health Program
Location: Ghana            Sponsoring College: Williams College, MA
Project Leader: Papa Freduah Anderson, Williams College, MA
Student Team Participants: Augustine Bannerman (Co-Lead), Harvard College, MA. Margaret-Joy Maison, Cornell University, NY.
Date Range of Project Execution: 5th July 2021 - 3rd August 2021

Background

“I have been underperforming in school. High school is so stressful”.

This was the third time that my sister had said this statement after I had returned to Ghana to see my family during the winter break. I was surprised to confirm that my sister was indeed underperforming in high school. After discussing the situation in greater detail with her, she informed me that the environment in the boarding school was overwhelming. She missed her family, found it difficult to balance her domestic chores with her academic work, and had little time for leisure activities.

This discussion with my sister prompted me to reflect on my time attending high school in Ghana. “How did I deal with stress in high school and what programs were available to help me deal with stress? How did the stress affect my mental health and that of my peers?” It occurred to me that I had no active strategies to mitigate my stress outside of occasionally relying on the support of a few upperclassmen friends. My peers who could not find any form of support struggled with their mental health leading some of them to drop out of school.

Ghana has no established program in place to spark discussions regarding mental well-being. Hence, most high schoolers do not truly understand the impact of mental health on their academic performance. They also lack active strategies to relieve themselves of mental stress. This lack of understanding of mental health is prevalent in the general society, leading to conflicts between students who are suffering from mental health conditions and their peers, parents, and/or teachers. Such tensions result in the stigmatization of individuals with mental health conditions and their alienation from society.

What began as a simple discussion with my sister served as the initial motivation to get me to actively think about ways to help Ghanaian students understand their mental health and to adopt effective strategies to ensure their optimal mental health. The urgency to undertake a mental health project was heightened when I later learned that an alum from my high school had recently committed suicide in college.

Whilst making plans on establishing a mental health initiative, I got to meet Augustine Bannerman, a student at Harvard University, who had also been thinking about carrying out a mental health project in Ghana. Together, driven by the passion to effect a peaceful social change, we have been working on a mental health project in what we call the Ghana Youth Movement for Mental Health Program (GYM Mental Health Program). We anticipate that this program would help promote peace in the broader community by fostering a national awareness of intergenerational differences and opinions that affect the mental health of the youth. The GYM program will also encourage people to open up about their mental health to reduce possible conflicts by fostering communication among students, their parents, and teachers.

Our Initiative/ Approach

GYM Mental Health Program seeks to bridge the knowledge gap in Ghana by sensitizing and educating the youth (students) on mental health, the realities of living with these conditions, and the strategies for attaining a sound state of mental health and wellness. We also seek to draw attention to
suicide, which is caused by some mental illnesses. We seek to achieve this through national media campaign programs, interactive talks, and high school focused wellness clubs.

Our project for peace will be in two parts: a media campaign and a mental health training program for advocates. During the first part, our initiative would start with a two-week mass media campaign to spread awareness on Mental Health. This will involve the distribution of various flyers on all major social media platforms and advertisements on some select National TV networks such as the Ghana Today Television (GTV), which is a national television network accessible to most nationals, and TV3. These flyers will contain information about common mental conditions, their signs, and strategies for coping with these conditions. Also, we will include hotlines where individuals can contact for mental health support. Given the current influence of social media, the GYM Mental health campaign will use social networks such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram for the entire duration of the project to further the campaign. We would also create a “Gestalt Project” Ghana, based on the original version, to show that a mental health condition should not predispose a person to stigma; rather, it should garner support from society. In this project, we would create a short film of personalities who, despite their social success, have gone through some form of mental health issues. With this film, we intend to highlight the fact that it is possible for someone to overcome mental health issues and still attain success. The Gestalt Project will be spread on all partner tv stations as well as the major social media platforms listed early on.

Through this mass media campaign, we hope to recruit a national cohort of 15 fellows who will be trained during the third week of the project, marking the second part of our initiative. The training will be an average of 8 hours per day and sessions will be led by our partner organization, Psych Corps Ghana (PCG), a non-governmental organization that seeks to bridge the gap in mental health services in Ghana by training and equipping mental health professionals and volunteers. Trained cohorts will be charged with educating their peers and advocating for mental health in their respective high schools and local communities. After the fellowship training, fellows should be able to understand and explain the reasons behind common mental illnesses, some basic ways to address them, and how to direct individuals to the appropriate mental health resources in their communities.

Our initiative would help to erase the stigma of mental health in Ghana. In addition, the GYM project would promote mental peace for students. Intraspecific tensions that arise when students, due to their poor mental health, are unable to cope with societal pressures and demands will be reduced. This would give students some form of inner peace and a sense of belonging. Interspecific conflicts that arise between students with mental illnesses and their peers, teachers, or parents will be reduced since these students will now be more aware of their condition and have more effective ways of ensuring that their academic performances are not impacted. We also anticipate that the stigma associated with mental health will be drastically reduced - if not entirely alleviated with time - when there is widespread information on mental health in Ghanaian society.

_Future/Other Works:_

We do not want this campaign to be a one-time initiative but rather a start to an endearing mental health movement among the Ghanian youth. With our partnership with PCG, we hope to make the training of national fellows as mental advocates an annual event. Also, since last summer we have been working together with PCG on setting up Wellness Clubs in various high schools in Ghana and will commence the pilot club in Tema Methodist Day School early this summer. Through wellness clubs, students will be equipped with skills to navigate mental health conditions that may arise in their lives. Students will learn that mental illnesses are common, which will inspire them to develop better strategies to cope with stress and to support their peers. The establishment of these Wellness Clubs will ensure that Mental Health Education is continually present in various high schools in Ghana.