

EPISODE 40. POCKETS OF OPTIMISM: EMPOWERING YOUTH TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH

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Garry Aslanyan [00:00:08] Hello and welcome to the Global Health Matters podcast. I am your host, Garry Aslanyan. In this episode, we will be exploring the perspectives and challenges surrounding the mental health of youth. Young people are living in turbulent times. In the last few years alone, they have lived through a pandemic, faced escalating global conflicts, and are burdened by the ongoing threat of climate change. UNICEF estimates that 13% of adolescents live with a diagnosed mental health disorder, with depression and anxiety accounting for 40%. There is no better way to gain a deeper understanding of these issues than from a young person and a technical expert. I am delighted to be joined by Jaime Young and Zeinab Hijazi. Jaime is a passionate youth leader, mental health advocate, and family caseworker at the Saint Lucia Social Development Fund in the Caribbean. She focuses her efforts on empowering young people to realize their potential, engage with mental health issues proactively, and to be involved in driving change in this area. Zeinab Hijazi is a clinical psychologist and the global mental health lead at UNICEF, based in New York City. She provides program guidance and technical support to enhance UNICEF's multisectoral approach to mental health and psychosocial support for children and families, with a dedicated focus on humanitarian and development settings. Hi, Zeinab. Hi, Jaime. How are you today?

Jaime Young [00:01:57] Good. How is everyone doing?

Zeinab Hijazi [00:01:59] Hi Garry. Hi Jaime. Wonderful to join you.

Garry Aslanyan [00:02:01] Let us get started. Jaime, living on an island sounds very idealistic and very nice. Is it really that nice? Especially growing up on an island and living there as a young person.

Jaime Young [00:02:14] It definitely can be. I think it is more so than a lot of places, especially small countries, as you can imagine. For example, on my daily commute to work, I see the mountains. People are always smiling. If you go to work at the same time every day, chances are you will see the same people and you become friends. Hi, how are you? So, it definitely can be very idyllic. We do have our issues, perhaps more so than other countries, lack of resources and especially climate change affects us majorly, especially between our hurricane season period, which is between June, July to November. We already got hit by one, which was Beryl, and we are expecting a lot more. As you can imagine, a small country with persons living on the coast or with a country like ours that relies on tourism for the majority of our money, it can be a little challenging, but I would definitely say it helps to me to live where people vacation, honestly.

Garry Aslanyan [00:03:18] Zeinab being young should be time marked with a lot of optimism, new possibilities. Do you find that to be the case with young people who you work with globally?

Zeinab Hijazi [00:03:30] Yeah, absolutely. Being young should be filled with dreams and opportunities, but the young people I work with globally are experiencing a wide range of realities. Their lives are shaped by their unique experiences, but also the broader socio-cultural and political landscapes of their communities. They are living at the crossroads of significant global geopolitical and local events. For example, many young people are dealing with the devastating impacts of wars and conflicts in places like Palestine, Congo and Sudan, while others face immediate threats of climate crises like Jaime spoke about. Also, in other parts of the world, like the floods in Pakistan and rising heat in many parts of the

world, and unemployment in countries like South Africa also adds another layer of stress. Many young people I encounter are also incredibly optimistic and resilient. It is incredible and deeply humbling and impressive. They bring fresh ideas and are often at the forefront of critical movements for social change. They take on leadership roles in their schools, communities and organizations, developing skills that are really critical to raise awareness and take action to address the challenges faced within their communities, but also prepare them for the future. I think their passion for social justice, environmental issues and human rights is really inspiring. They are really global citizens using community networks, social media, and technology to connect with others worldwide, learning and really driving impact.

Garry Aslanyan [00:05:08] We looked into statistics from the Caribbean overall in terms of some of the numbers of young people experiencing mental health problems. A staggering number of about 24% are experiencing symptoms. What are the most common mental health issues you have observed among your peers?

Jaime Young [00:05:28] For me, I think as a young person interacting with each other, I can speak for my immediate surroundings, and I would definitely say probably anxiety and depression. I think anxiety and depression really is, and UNICEF did a study in 2021, "The State of the World's Children", and anxiety and depression account for almost 50% of mental health disorders in Latin America and the Caribbean, in young people aged 10 to 19, 50%, that is like half of us. We are dealing with a lot more bad than we were dealing with maybe five, ten years ago. It was mentioned prior, I have gone through a pandemic, I have gone through a category or close to a category four hurricane, I have gone through hearing about wars in different places and all in my life span of 25 years old. Some people have never gone through a pandemic, and then as a young person, you are now expected to perform to get a job, to provide for your family, especially within this region, so as you can imagine, we are a lot more anxious. We have a lot more stresses, and then depression can be something that if you are not sure how to cope with, or if you do not have that support, whether it is with your family or friends or whatever, you feel like your back is against the wall, so you feel anxious or you have anxiety, you are depressed and you cannot talk to anybody about it, because access to actual resources, a counselor or a therapist is extremely expensive in the cases where they are available and where they are not, they are just not. We sometimes in our families do not have the support from parents and friends because it is still sort of a taboo subject. You would hear things like you do not need to talk to anybody because you are fine, or it would be deemed as weakness to try to express yourself. I think all of that just compounds the issue because we know what anxiety and depression is like, we know what it is like to be in your head about something and not know where to go, and then to have the idea that you cannot talk to anybody about it makes it worse.

Garry Aslanyan [00:07:45] Zeinab, do you think that these problems described by Jaime also are a reflection of global trends?

Zeinab Hijazi [00:07:51] Jaime's insights are a really powerful reflection of what we see globally. Jaime, you mentioned UNICEF's "State of the World's Children" report on mental health and some additional statistics to draw and feedback to, are really heartbreaking to talk about, but everyone should know that 1 in 4 children live with a parent who has a mental health condition. For us, this is really a stark reminder of the importance of caregiver mental health and well-being and the needs for interventions that seek to address these needs. As Jaime mentioned, adolescents are really struggling globally. 1 in 7 young people aged 10 to 19 are living with a diagnosable mental disorder, and half of these mental health conditions start by 14 years of age. It is really unfathomable that we know this, and we know that all of these conditions, most of them are treatable, but they go undetected, and they go untreated. Why are we not investing more in prevention in early ages to really prevent long term suffering and struggles by young people as they grow into adults? Suicide is devastatingly the fourth leading cause of death for

adolescents globally. I mentioned earlier there are children and young people who are struggling with a multitude of issues. I mean, we have 460 million children who are living in conflict zones, and these young people experience tragic losses and violence and displacement and missed education opportunities, and so their mental health really suffers profoundly. I think it is important to mention that these are just estimates that we have gathered primarily from high income countries. The reality actually may be much graver, especially in low resourced settings. This is because we also face a lack of sufficient data and evidence on the global mental health burden, particularly for children in low and middle income countries, and mental health data about children and adolescents covers only about 2% of the population in these regions, which is really a staggering realization and it makes it difficult to calculate the global burden. Without this data, we are not really able to adequately address young people's needs.

Garry Aslanyan [00:10:05] I imagine, because how do you actually get around to getting all of that information from especially places which are under stress or conflict, etc.? It is an additional layer of complication. Jaime, from your experience as a youth mental advocate, what is the most? You already alluded to some, but what is the one biggest barrier to youth getting support? What is your experience?

Jaime Young [00:10:33] I would say stigma and perception first. The reason being I have always been of the opinion and I can see it within my community that even if we have the resources because sometimes they are there, very few, but they are there, if there is a stigma, if there is a negative perception and I am speaking about in society or in your community about receiving that help, I have found that it is been a major barrier for persons going to get the help because, for example, we do not have that many mental health resources in Saint Lucia. We do have a national mental wellness center, but if I need professional help, I am struggling and someone sees me going there, they will be like, she is crazy, she is going to this madhouse or she is not okay, so there is a big stigma about persons who seek that help. You have the persons around you saying you will be okay; you will go to church or do something else. They do not deal with the issue that is at hand because I think we have been socialized to believe that it is not really an issue. Caribbean people are extremely resilient, and we continue to see that, we are always looking to after a disaster. Are you okay? I am good. You just lost your house. You just lost everything. We do not sit with our trauma and sometimes the trauma is compounded, so I would say definitely stigma and perception first. Then, of course, we have the lack of resources, but mostly stigma and perception, because like I said, you can have all the resources there, but if people do not believe that they work, if people do not feel safe to go there, then they just will not go.

Garry Aslanyan [00:12:21] Is this the same, Zeinab, globally? It is not isolated just in the Caribbean. How do youth in different parts of the world receive care? Or is stigma one of the major barriers?

Zeinab Hijazi [00:12:36] Absolutely, the stigma around mental health is a universal issue that affects young people all over the world. There is fear of judgment, or being labeled prevents many young people from seeking mental health care. There are concerns about confidentiality and potential social repercussions that also plays a role. Young people may internalize negative stereotypes that lead to self-blame and low self-esteem, which can then also exacerbate mental health issues and discourage proactive management, stigmatized young people also face social exclusion, affecting their support networks and hinders recovery, so yes absolutely Garry. Like Jaime said, stigma can be incredibly damaging, and we have talked a lot about other stressors that young people are facing, including discrimination based on race and gender, disability and sexual orientation or personal history. For example, we know that males are more likely to be stigmatized and to perpetuate stigmas than females. It is not an issue that we only face in one country or another, in high income countries there might be better access to services, but persistent stigma can still deter utilization of those services, and in low middle income countries, we have both the limited resources coupled with stigma, which creates significant barriers. I think maybe just to touch on what Jaime said on resilience, I think that is such an

important statement about young people being perceived as resilient, that they could just get over it, and I think for far too long, resilience was thought of as something inherent, you either had it or you did not. We know now that that picture is far more complicated, instead resilience needs to be understood in the context of supportive parenting and families, communities and schools, the values and beliefs of communities and the ways in which children and young people interpret and understand adversity and loss and mental health. There is really good evidence to show that children can be helped to develop resilience by, for example, helping parents to be more responsive to children's emotional and material needs, building community cohesion and providing children with high quality learning opportunities. It is really unfair to place that burden on young people that they have this inherent resilience to deal with their mental health issues. We need to create that enabling environment to support their mental health, to reduce stigma and help them access the services that they need.

Garry Aslanyan [00:15:11] That is an important insight. Jaime, are there any ways you try to address the stigma issue and to what success, and what have you learned?

Jaime Young [00:15:24] Yes, definitely, for me in my immediate circle, always be the change you want to see, so impact as you would like to be impact. I always say it is okay to not be okay, and sometimes in situations, traumatic situations like I have mentioned, we are expected as young people to be resilient, for example, if you have an 8 or 9 year old primary school child going through a series of changes and they are having behavioral issues, we do not take the time to say, okay, maybe this is something this is a lot for them. They are just expected to get on with it, just move on, you have to change schools, but you are not thinking of that they have lost friends that they have to rebuild attachment and trust and all of these things. For me, I try to be the change that you want to see. We have to be able to influence this unlearning that mental health is weakness, that expression is weakness, that seeking help is weakness. We need to do that by influencing not just our systems, we do not just need programs and projects and of course those things are super important, but it needs to be reflected in the leaders that we have, it needs to be reflected not just in mental health leaders or health leaders, but in leadership in general, because people are influenced by those who need them. That is the purpose of leadership. We need to have our leaders in front of this charge, really pushing, whether it be reeducation in schools, whether it is prioritizing health in our budgets, because currently based on a study that I saw, we only have 8% of our gross domestic products and 4% of that is allocated to mental health, only 4%. In that it only goes to our mental health center, so we have no outpatient projects, we have no community center mental health, we have nothing! Can you imagine how hard it is, you might need to reach out to someone, and the next question is going to be, to whom do I reach out? The only available person is a therapist who will charge you \$200 an hour to speak to you, and with a country like ours, not many people can afford \$200 an hour to deal with their mental health issues, so it is a plethora of issues. I honestly believe that if we as individuals are more aware of the situation and we are more choosing with the words that we use, yes, it will take an unlearning, but it needs to be something where we are reducing the stigma, but that we are also educating as to what mental health is and what it is not. I honestly believe that it is possible because I have seen it happen and we have amazing youths like "Lets impact in youth" and our national mental health focal points are doing amazing work. We have a workbook that we are trying to share, that can help people with their mental health issues, whether it is coloring or, just going through facts, so learning and unlearning what it is and what it is not supposed to be, and also just being there for people when they do not have anyone else to be there for them.

Zeinab Hijazi [00:18:37] It is so profound, what you say, how do we learn and unlearn unhelpful things? Education really is at the heart of this, of tackling stigma. Stigma starts affecting children early in life, by age 6, kids recognize negative terms like crazy, and you mentioned this Jaime, by age 10 they know cultural stereotypes about mental health and often associate it with being dangerous. This stigma can really shape young people's self-esteem and their actions and their emotions and their coping strategies.

I really think it does not need to happen. Right? This does not need to be this way. If the COVID-19 pandemic is to teach us anything, it should be that we need to talk about mental health. We need to be able to talk about it as something natural. There will be good days. There will be bad days. Young people need to know where to turn when their world is looking a little cloudy or is turned upside down, as Jaime said, it is not just about knowing you need support, it is about knowing where and how to access those supports.

Garry Aslanyan [00:19:43] Jaime, you said how important it is for young people to use their voice and speak up about mental health, especially to support others who may not be able to do so. Why do you feel this participation of young people in addressing mental health is so important? I know many of our listeners are in different settings. I think they will benefit from your experience if you could allude to that a bit more.

Jaime Young [00:20:07] I was not always as outspoken as I am now. I started off very, very shy and I was very grateful for the people who were around me, who spoke up for me because I could not speak up for myself, so eventually I said, you know what?, I want to be that for someone else. I hope that me being able to speak out and be honest about my mental health can influence and inspire other persons to do so. As young people, we need to be the ones leading the charge. We hear all the time, we are the leaders of the future, and what is going to happen if we do not change the stigma now, if we do not make those strides now, it is just going to continue into another cycle when we get older, so at some point it needs to be broken, and to adequately address the burden of mental health, we have to challenge these existing norms. It has to be a challenge, and young people are creative, we always looking for something, especially I find in our generation, we tend to push the boundaries a lot more. It is definitely something that we need to be doing. For example, there previously was no comprehensive directory to mental health and a group of young people within our region, we challenged that, and with the help of UNICEF, we now have our very first mental health workbook where young people around the region, and everywhere as long as you have access to the Internet, can go and find the directory for the Caribbean region of where you can get mental health access, and that did not exist before. Now if I am in Barbados, I can go to the directory, and find access to medicine if I am struggling here. These are the little things that we are talking about, and we say we have to start pushing the boundaries, we have to start engaging our leaders, having conversations and challenging them because we cannot continue to say, well that is how it has been. That is something that I hear all the time, or, when I was younger, there was no mental resources as well. It needs to change now, and just because you survived it does not mean that you survived. You might have just survived in spite of that. We want to ensure that going forward, there are resources everywhere that people know that if you need help, that it is there. Youth leading the charge is very close to my heart because as I said, we are going to be the policy makers of tomorrow. I would hate for us to make the same mistakes that our forefathers made, that persons before us made in not adequately addressing it, because it trickles down into who we are. You might start off with some anxiety and then that might become something so big 10 or 15 years down the line, like that I have mentioned, and it did not have to be that way. It is not just for me, but it is for people the younger ones who are coming after me. I have a little sister who is 14, I have a brother who is 18, I want them to see a different world than what I grew up in as it relates to mental health. It is definitely the job of a young person and with the support of everybody else around us, to be able to push forward and to make the changes that we want to see.

Garry Aslanyan [00:23:09] Zeinab, maybe you can build on this and share with us some experiences from UNICEF globally. In your report that we read, there is a real big number of estimated losses in terms of economic loss every year due to mental health among children in Latin America, the Caribbean particularly, because we are talking to Jaime here. I am sure this number is probably greater because of

the underestimated numbers and data that we have. So how has UNICEF been able to embed these things into your policies, your advocacy, your work, and share some insights into it?

Zeinab Hijazi [00:23:53] The economic cost of neglecting mental health is severe globally, and it is estimated at around US\$387.2 billion a year for children ages 0 to 19. The return on investment in mental health can be tremendous. Research shows that for every US\$1 that is invested in treatment for common mental health issues, there is a return of US\$4 in improved health and productivity. We know much more about the efficacy of school based mental health resilience programs as well, which provide a return on investment of US\$5 for every US\$1 investment, so for us, coupled with what we know now about addressing mental health in crisis affected zones, could result in billions of US dollars in lost lifetime earnings at the global level. It is critical for us that we embed mental health strategies across policy and advocacy and service delivery and ensuring that those services meet the needs of young people. A good example of the successful integration of strategies in our work is Serbia, in 2023 there were six ministries that came together and signed a memorandum of understanding. The MOU established sector specific roles and responsibilities to promote positive mental health across a child's life cycle. Like Jaime was saying, resources, opportunities evolve, and our thinking has evolved from this narrow thinking that the health sector can solve everything and can support young people. To be successful in meeting the needs of young people, we need to be meeting them where they are in the community, and that means involving different line ministries and ensuring that their accountabilities to young people's mental health is clear. Recommendations in that memorandum of understanding included forming a National Multisectoral Working Group to implement a multisectoral action plan, ensuring that there is resource allocation for mental health services, that we are integrating mental health care into primary and community level services, supporting the provision and access to evidence based mental health care, strengthening evidence and research on mental health, integrating within school systems, and addressing stigma and discrimination. There were 40 young people who provided recommendations that influenced national strategies and fostered a strong link between youth and government to enhance mental health and psychosocial support in Serbia. It is an important example that really highlights the importance of the Multisectoral approach to mental health services within policy dialog, but also integrating a youth voice and youth participation into those processes.

Garry Aslanyan [00:26:47] Jaime we are listened to, in more than 180 countries and we have already learned a lot from you and from Zeinab. If you could leave a message that could reach youth in other countries, what would that message be?

Jaime Young [00:27:04] I would say prioritize your mental health. I know you might hear it everywhere or you might see it everywhere, but it is one thing when we are sick or we have a broken bone or something, we make our duty to go to the doctor, and it always baffles me that when we know or we suspect that we have a mental health issue, we do not look for the resources. We ignore it, you would not ignore a sprained ankle or a broken leg because you need your legs. I would say do not ignore your mental health because you need your mind, you need to be healthy, also prioritizing positive coping mechanisms has worked wonders for me and the people around me, because I know as a young person what it is to be stressed out. I think that in the absence of those resources, make sure to find somebody that can support you even if it is one person, and to constantly just check on your mental health and be the change that you want to see as well.

Garry Aslanyan [00:28:07] Thank you. Zeinab to wrap up with you again, we are releasing this episode in commemoration of the annual World Mental Health Day, and as we discussed today, much of course, remains to be done, but if we were able to put under the spotlight some of the critical issues, what in your view are some of the pockets of optimism that could serve as an inspiration to our listeners?, and

how can they take forward the lessons in the discussion we had today and how they can use these in their own settings?

Zeinab Hijazi [00:28:44] First of all, I love that phrase, several pockets of optimism. That is such a wonderful phrase. There are really many, as I mentioned, it is not all doom and gloom. I am generally optimistic about our direction. Jaime serves as a beautiful and an inspiring example of the work that young people are doing across the globe in Latin America and the Caribbean region. I am inspired by this innovation that is coming out, the utility of digital platforms and online access to create opportunities and solutions for mental health care. We are seeing other wonderful momentum's that are being gained across the globe on work, on policy and advocacy. For example, in Kenya, the government has incorporated mental health and psychosocial support into its national health strategy, with substantial input from youth networks. Recent emergencies in the MENA region, including COVID-19, the Beirut port explosion, the different earthquakes and the worsening socioeconomic conditions have deeply affected the mental health of everyone, including humanitarian frontline workers and I am inspired by the efforts coming out of that region that is putting a focus on the stress of frontline service providers and really developing support systems for them. There is more good news. We have now a suite of mental health interventions that are available, designed to meet the needs of children and young people across different age groups. These resources span the full spectrum from prevention and promotion to more focused psychological interventions. For example, we have the caring for caregivers to support the very foundation of a child's mental health by supporting the mental health of parents, so we really are making strides in ensuring that there are focused psychological interventions for different age groups in young people. UNICEF recently concluded a trip to Vietnam, where we witnessed a training of trainers on helping adolescents thrive, equipping young people with strategies to navigate their mental health challenges. This package targets young people from 10 to 19 years. There is so much optimism that we can draw from, but I am mostly really optimistic about the power of young people who are speaking up and driving change like Jaime and others across the globe. I am really fortunate to be able to be working with them in this pursuit of improved mental health and well-being for children globally.

Garry Aslanyan [00:31:16] On that note, Zeinab, thank you for joining us today, and Jaime, thank you for sharing your experiences and joining us today. I wish you the best with all of the work that you are doing.

Jaime Young [00:31:30] Thank you so much. It was amazing meeting you guys and speaking to you, thank you so much Zeinab and Garry.

Zeinab Hijazi [00:31:34] Thank you Garry. Thank you, Jaime. Wonderful to chat with you today.

Garry Aslanyan [00:31:42] Young people today face alarming rates of anxiety and depression, and as Jaime highlighted, the social stigma associated is huge challenge. Who better to address this than young people themselves? I am inspired by Jaime's proactive nature and by her boldness to speak up on behalf of the young people. Zeinab highlighted how mental health in children and young people is so dependent on the health of their parents and society. Resilience is required for young people to thrive despite adversity, and this can be cultivated through supportive parenting, community cohesion and ongoing education. Whether in St Lucia, as Jaime shared, or from the innovative other examples mentioned by Zeinab, there are plenty of pockets of optimism driven by young people, for young people. May all of us always remain open to learning and being challenged by those younger than us. Let us hear from someone special who had views about our podcast.

Dr Tedros [00:33:05] "And TDR's podcast Global Health Matters helps disseminate knowledge and encourage debate on key research issues".

Garry Aslanyan [00:33:16] Thanks, Dr. Tedros. Our team and I are so pleased you find value in the podcast. To learn more about the topics discussed in this episode, visit the episodes web page where you will find additional readings, show notes and translations. Do not forget to get in touch with us via social media, email or by sharing a voice message, and be sure to subscribe, or follow us wherever you get your podcasts. Global Health Matters is produced by TDR, a United Nations co-sponsored research program based at the World Health Organization. Thank you for listening.