



The role of community in shaping the mental health of young people

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Speakers

Jake Lloyd, Rachel Kitavi, Karla Jordan, Vincent Ogutu, Samer Raad George, Ivan Monzon Muñoz

Episode 1: The role of community in shaping the mental health of young people

Jake Lloyd 0:15

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Hello, I'm Jake Lloyd and welcome to How to build community, a podcast and a radio show brought to you by Arukah Network and Tearfund's Footsteps magazine. Now, you've probably heard the saying that it takes a village to raise a child. Well, the World Health Organisation says that 10 to 20% of children and adolescents experience mental health conditions of some kind, but the majority do not seek help or receive care. So in this episode, I'm asking the question 'how should a village or a community supports the mental health of its young people?' And I've been putting this question to experts from around the world.

Rachel Kitavi 1:09

Without mental health, then we are unable to function in any other way.

Karla Jordan 1:13

If you want to help young people, help them connect with one another and help them connect with significant relationships. Maybe in the next stage of life, people who will speak wisdom into them.

Vincent Ogutu 1:23

It doesn't matter if it's professional or not admitted that it has empathy or not.

Jake Lloyd 1:29

So over the next 35 minutes, with the help of the voices you heard there and some of us, I'm going to take you on a journey around the world from Kenya to the USA to Guatemala to Iraq. And along the way, I'll be hearing local stories and gaining some wisdom on how a community can help shape the mental health of its young people.

And a word before we start. All of my guests today were also contributors to a [Footsteps edition about mental health](#), and they all joined me on a group Zoom call to share with me their stories and their wisdom. So let's start, first of all, in Kenya, and I'm going to let these two lovely guests introduce themselves.

Vincent Ogutu 2:19

My name is Vincent. Good to I work with Cheshire Disability Services in Kenya. As the programme manager, basically the Head of Programmes in Kenya.

Rachel Kitavi 2:28

My name is Rachel Kothari. I work with Vincent. Up until last year, I was implementing a project on psychosocial disability. I actually grinded very fond of this specific type of disability and the people who suffer from it.

Jake Lloyd 2:45

So, Vincent and Rachel from Cheshire Disability Services in Kenya and Rachel mentioned psychosocial disability there, which she and Vincent describe as when a person feels rejected and misunderstood by their communities. And the combination of psychological and social pressures results in a level of disability that makes it difficult to carry out day-to-day activities. Now, Vincent and Rachel specialise in supporting young people with these psychosocial disabilities, and one way they do this is through talking groups. Basically, they invite young people together who face some kind of mental health challenge and they facilitate conversations between them. And what really interested me from speaking with Rachel and Vincent is that the relatively simple acts of conversation in this group could ripple out into the lives of young people and

their community. Here's Rachel explaining more.

Rachel Kitavi 3:50

You know, the people that the groups are for, people with the same kind of condition. So they have something in common. So they are taking medication. They have their persons with mental illnesses. And that also allows them to share that they can identify with each other, those kinds of problems that they're going through. So it makes it also kind of easy. You know, when when when they hear one of them saying, you know, when I took this medication, I really slept, like for two days. And then they realise, oh, so it's not just me who sleeps when I take this medication. So now they begin to talk, you know, that's kind of okay. So now I know, you know, I went to get my medication and I found this chemist that sells them. But I've got to save, you know, because they are also very costly and they don't have dogs. Yeah. So they advise one another. So if the support group is one of the places where you can help them gain confidence. Yeah. With one another. And also now, learn how to express themselves so that, you know, there's a way you can express yourself to come out as a person who knows what they're saying. And there's also a way where you can just start talking and people are just dismissive. So when you start to learn how to communicate and express yourself and how to advocate for what to believe you deserve.

Jake Lloyd 5:26

And then Vincent told me how these young people, as they share with each other and get better at communicating, start to grow in comfort ends. And they naturally seem to look for ways to have a positive impact on the world around them. Now, unfortunately, Vincent's connection on our call was not very clear, so I'll just play a short clip, but hopefully you can pick out his three observations about what these discussion groups can help achieve.

Vincent Ogutu 5:55

Encourage one another to give us a place where to go into businesses and also get a piece of work on stability because they come back and report how that business is doing and they catch up and appreciate what members are doing and said on their own. It became an advocacy vehicle where they organise themselves and they're able to move from school to workplaces.

Jake Lloyd 6:22

Vincent's line broke up there, but he explained how it was, through talking together like this, that young people ended up developing businesses and they supported each other in these business ventures. And they also became mental health advocates in the place they live, helping to break down the stigma about mental health and making it something people are less afraid to talk about. I was then interested to hear from Rachel, what was the key to making these groups work?

Rachel Kitavi 6:51

First thing is, you give them time. I said when we started, they were quiet, like go for our meeting. You have your agenda and you come out and you basically just have to relax. Until they learn to trust you, they are not going to say anything about their condition because of the way they are treated after that. Yeah, that's where I learned to be patient. Like there was this boy. He's called Ben. I met Ben way back in 2017. Ben would just come to the meeting. 'My name is Ben' and he would just sit there. He will never say anything. So towards the end, and there's that sense, every meeting you would come, it would come faithfully to every meeting up until towards the end of the project. And we had this meeting and now we were sitting around table and we wanted to just talk. And of course Ben was there. So we went round talking and when we got to Ben, everybody was like, 'Oh, if he speaks, it's okay. If he doesn't, it's okay'. We're used to him not talking. So he actually introduced himself again, told us the way he is grateful, told us the way he had gone to school. And when he got to school they formed his support group, even told the teacher what he suffers from, they formed a group and they have been communicating during the time for COVID. You know, schools were closed, but they kept the group going and everybody was like, 'what? Is that Ben?' And they actually wanted to go home and they wanted to end the meeting and go home, because they thought, 'sow, you mean he talks and he actually talks?' Yeah. So you need to give them time. You just cannot, you can't be in a hurry to make them come out.

Jake Lloyd 9:07

So, there's Rachel and Vincent from Kenya, and you'll hear more from them towards the end of this episode. But now let's move on to the Middle East, where I spoke with these two guests about their youth work in Iraq.

Karla Jordan 9:23

My name's Karla. I'm from the United States. I am kind of an Aid and Development Generalist. I work in protection, education and most recently in the Middle East in Iraq.

Samer Raad George 9:35

So my name is Samer Raad George. I grew up and Baghdad, then move to Mosul, Iraq, which is in the northern part of Iraq. So I'm a teacher. And also after the crisis and 2014, my attention got more for development and relief.

Jake Lloyd 9:54

You will have noticed that Samer was a little difficult to make out. He was speaking to us from a lively café in Iraq, but I really wanted to include his contribution because he shared some really helpful observations about the importance of young people in his country having good leaders and good role models. So Karla

and Samer worked together with Tearfund, where they helped to support young people who have had multiple experiences of trauma in their lives as a result of conflict and terrorism. And Karla explained to me how she felt arriving in the country and realising the intensity of trauma that many young people had been through in recent years.

Karla Jordan 10:38

When I first went to Iraq in 2015 and as a young practitioner, I remember thinking, How will we ever address this? These people have been through horrific experiences. I myself began to learn about psychosocial support and to understand that with the support of a community, family and friends, most people can recover from those bad experiences. So you don't need a psychologist or psychiatrist, except in very few cases, 5 to 10%, which is quite small, which means a community can activate itself on behalf of those who are suffering and really make a tremendous difference.

Jake Lloyd 11:16

Karla and Samer then told me that they think the young people they support are one of the most neglected sectors of society. They said that the trauma many of them have experience just as such, are normal parts of life that no one really talks about it. And I know Samer himself has experienced persecution and trauma at the hands of terrorist groups, and that he now helps young people to talk about similar experiences. And so I asked him how important it is that these young people have a role model like him who has experienced some of the same things as them. And here's what he told me.

Samer Raad George 11:55

It's a very important. And I would connect this to, one thing I will say, our leaders and the examples in our country, when they just get to the chair or when they get to the point that they want to reach, all their promises will be gone and he will start thinking about himself.

Jake Lloyd 12:16

I know some of that is hard to make out, but one thing that is clear is that he sees a real need for better leaders and role models for young people in the country. And he then told me about what better leadership would look like, speaking from his own experience.

Samer Raad George 12:52

I have been through all the hardships, but when I get to the point that I will be responsible, and a leader. So that's what I said. Like serving others. Loving them. Thinking about their needs, more than my needs. This is what will make the change and also changing from self-serving leaders to serve.

Jake Lloyd 12:59

Samer told me there how he has been through the same hardships as the young people he serves, and that when he finds himself in a position of leadership, he is determined to continue to serve others as opposed to himself. And I really hope to return to some story on this podcast at a later date, because his is an amazing story, and I reckon he's somebody with a very bright future ahead of him. But given the quality of our connection with him on this occasion, I'm going to give the last word now to Karla. As she describes in her own words, why Samer is exactly the kind of role model and leader that young people in the country can look up to.

Karla Jordan 13:44

I think in Samer they see someone who is always actively pursuing the good of others, but also developing himself and doing what he needs to do to become better, to do his best, and to make his best better. They see an example of someone who works across lots of different lines, to be honest. He's an ethnic Christian and a spiritual Christian, but he has a passion for working with Yazidis and Muslims and seeing the community come together. He works with other minorities and he does it so well in a way that is so inviting and inclusive, but invites others to maybe try something they haven't done before. Or imagine a new way of living. That's for sure.

Jake Lloyd 14:29

So, thank you to Karla and Samer for shedding a little light on the importance of good role models for young people. But we're going to go from Iraq now to Guatemala and Central America, where we're going to hear from Ivan.

Ivan Monzon Muñoz 14:44

Yes, my name is Ivan or Ivan in Spanish. I am from Guatemala. I work here as a missionary. And at the same time, I'm a social psychologist and clinical psychologist. And my main work leaving Guatemala is to create a more supportive network of ministries, churches and local organisations to support youth.

Jake Lloyd 15:12

So Ivan helps equip church leaders to support young people in some really challenging circumstances in the country. And to help set the scene for you here. I'm going to quote from Ivan's recent article in Footsteps magazine, in which he wrote about mental health in his country. And he said this He says, many young people are exposed to violence and crime from an early age. And this includes recruitment into armed gangs, domestic abuse and sexual and gender based violence. Other pressures include unemployment and natural disasters, then the COVID-19 pandemic has made some of these problems worse. Sadly, some try to escape from reality through drug and alcohol use, compulsive video gaming, pornography and suicide.

Many struggle with anxiety and depression, leading to lack of motivation and in some cases, violence and unpredictable behaviour, even when, to quote the boy who told him, we can get food and clothes. But what we need the most is more people believing in our dreams and believing that we can reach these dreams. And so I started by asking Ivan if his aim was to help churches do this.

Ivan Monzon Muñoz 16:30

Some months ago, we launched a campaign called You Are Not Alone. And in this campaign we send this message. You are not alone in the social networks and will boost it from Facebook in the different, you know, groups in the mall and some other countries as well in partnership with local church in Guatemala. It was amazing that in the first two days of the campaign, we got about 200 messages asking for help because of suicide thinking. Actually, that was the goal of the campaign. It's to, you know, to catch youth that were about to commit suicide and in helping them to, you know, link in them with some great support in trying to pass from a crisis to a more stable condition. And we realise that many of those youths, they were linked in some manner with the local church. But this local church was not supporting them. They didn't feel really good link with anyone in the church that they can trust to talk about these very deep and intense suicide impulse. So we remember one boy and one girl, particularly, that I worked with after the the the campaign we organised. We did not, we didn't expect that that response from the youths in the first days. So we very quickly needed to make an appeal for psychologists that were Christians or counsellors with experience so that we can link with those youths to have a greater support. And I was working with those two youths, it was a really touching for me experience to notice how if they didn't send a message, if they didn't have this contact with their support, they will probably be killing themselves because of the level of depression. There is not very robust public or mental health programmes in Guatemala. I mean, there are some programmes in some of my friends are running these programmes. But the the the level of demand is not matching with the institutional capacity to respond of from depression, anxiety, panic attacks and some other mental problems. We have many, many teenagers with a very complicated problem of attention disorder that they never got to diagnose. This is about that. And they are dealing with many problems, you know, trying to, to, adjust themselves to the rules. And the churches are just for them. For some of them, they are just authorities that are trying to make them to fit in society, but not necessarily given the support they need. So this is one of the of many experiences we have had in Guatemala. And we are still working with creating these bridges between the community and the church. Sadly, in Guatemala, even if the massive population, it's nominally Christians or at least they say they have attended a church or they attended church.

But when we see the level of exclusion, the level of violence, you can see that not many of them, they are actually following Jesus in their lifestyles. So many churches are full of youth that are actually dealing with suicidal thinking, dealing with violence, with drug consumption. And we want the pastors to be aware of that. The government to work together in a common solution in the community for does youth. It's wonderful to see when you know, when you remove the curtain and you see what is going on in these houses the violence sometimes a background of sexual abuse, sometimes a background of, you know, this sense of some of themselves that are really, really limited in the possibilities of those use of this youth to work ahead in their lives. And in many, many, youth, they really want to talk with someone. It's one of the main problems in Guatemala City. Even if you see many youths having many friends on Facebook or Instagram, people following them on Twitter, they feel alone in this loneliness. It's really deep. Even if they

have, they are living in a small room with eight people from the family. They feel that they are alone. They feel disconnected, not attached to their families. And this is something that is mainly an urban problem more than rural problem. But it's really sad to see as well the level of need they have to have someone to talk with. It doesn't matter if it's professional or not admitted it if it has empathy or not. And that's why the pastors and the leaders, we need to acknowledge that if they have a better preparation, a better training in how to be supportive as the front line of the risk situation, they can make a huge difference. And, of course, we all the time, we train pastors I have trained last year maybe 2 to 100 pastors in emergency response and you know how to counsel in this in an emergency situation.

And it's a relief for the pastors as well to have a tool in how to respond to that, because they do want to support. But there are so many cultural, you know, blocks and walls to talk about suicide openly, to acknowledge that a Christian person can deal with suicidal thinking if they are having a problem like depression. So it's hard for the local culture to be more open to talk about those topics at the same as sexual violence. But I think it's a great hope to see people more often risk getting some help.

Jake Lloyd 23:54

That was given in Guatemala, on why he thinks the church has a huge role to play in supporting the mental health of young people where he lives. So you've now heard Vincent and Rachel in Kenya explain how talking groups can have a huge impact on young people, especially when there is patience and trust slowly built within those groups. You've also heard Karla and Samer in Iraq talk about the power of a good role model, especially one who has had first-hand experience of the same challenges that young people face. And Ivan in Guatemala has told us how simple training can equip faith leaders to help youth navigate through the temptations in society and to follow their dreams. And so finally, I wanted to ask each of these guests what advice they may have for you, our listeners, on some simple ways you can help to support the mental health of young people locally. And first of all, you're going to hear from Vincent in Kenya.

Vincent Ogutu 24:56

This does take time, as Rachel indicated, it does take time. But when it organically grows, as you want it to, to grow, it does accelerate at the end of the day, because they give us a narrative there that when we started those psychosocial support groups, basically it was for their psychological well-being and also for business ventures. But when their confidence was being able to coalesce themselves and organise themselves in a manner as an as a community based organisation, and they were then able to champion issues around mental health in schools and also in workplaces.

Jake Lloyd 25:35

Brilliant. Thank you, Vincent, and Ivan, can I put the same question to you then? Are there any particular tips you would like to share with people?

Ivan Monzon Muñoz 25:44

Yes. Yeah. I would like to highlight three main roles that a church can play in this challenge. The first one is helping the church members and local programmes to create more supportive community for the youth. And that includes detecting, being aware to detect the problem very quickly before the problem becomes a crisis or, you know, a worse situation. There are some signs that churches can read in the middle of the daily activities. Even if they are virtual, they cannot, a particular messages of risk that could be detected if they have the training to do. Secondly, a quick response, doing a quick response to the youth, helping them, creating a very, you know, a very good moment, empathic moment to talk into, get some guidelines, referring the youth to services, linking with some professional linking with some mental health programmes. That could be very, very helpful for them. And following the progress. It's very important for the youth to have someone I remember a youth that told me, 'it's really good that you call. You called me after one year. We were talking, and you were following me up. And it's really amazing to see that you are still, you still remember what we talk about and that you are really interested to know how things are going now. Thank you very much. I didn't expect that', he said. Secondly, it's important to work in building a sense of belonging to the local community and to the church. If youth has, if they have this kind of sense of belonging, if they feel like they belong to the community in a stronger manner, if they think that they are actually part of a very active part of the church, that will make a huge difference in the way they respond to crisis and to mental health problems, because of this meaning of community that will actually it will give them the chance to have some social interaction that, you know, it's very healthy to have this social interaction, even if you don't feel like to interact with people, but if you are depressed and you interact with the people, it's, it's tested that you will feel better. I mean, if you have COVID, you need to rest in home, and stay in bed and don't do anything until you feel better.

But if you have depression, you need to go out and do something else and be more active and reactivate your body. We say the joke, it's actually not a joke, but we say that for in the past the psychiatrists that they use it to do for depression is electroshock and put in the person in a nice place with eyes. So, they are like, you know, reset actually working. So I say to the pastors 'don't do that with the youth please, but you need to help them to, you know, to move ahead'. And thirdly, it's very important to help them to have meaningful lives, to discover what is beyond the crisis, what is beyond the pandemic, what is beyond the problems they are talking about. It's great to talk about these problems, but let's see. It's a more existential topic that the churches, they have the power to work in these topics in a very strong manner. If a youth knows, if they discover a reason to keep alive beyond the problem they feel, beyond of the pain that will be really, really powerful. And so, if the church work in those three topics together with the community, we can make a huge difference. That's the experience we have in Guatemala.

Jake Lloyd 30:48

So interesting. Thanks, Ivan, and Karla?

Karla Jordan 30:53

Yeah, my brain went to a lot of different things and I think you could sum them up with the words people purpose and perpetuity. If you want to help young people, help them connect with one another and help them connect with significant relationships. Maybe in the next stage of life, people who will speak wisdom into them also help them to become people.

I'll say for me, working in a cross-culturally in aid and development, I think I've become more human, more compassionate, more empathic, more understanding of what it means to be a human. And I've seen through the groups that we've run, people learn to listen. They learn to forgive, they learn to grieve well. And it amounts to becoming better people, better humans purpose that time has to be structured, it has to have purpose. So whether it's a basketball league or a cooking group or sewing group, carpentry, whatever it is doing, the activity in and of itself is a great thing. But it also needs some structure. It needs some good structured conversations. What does this mean to you? How do you feel loved? How do you feel cared for? How can you care for other people? What's the hardest thing you have ever done? What are you most proud of? Having a purpose in that time and then also helping you connect to a purpose? Ivan you said it when we have a higher purpose, we're more resilient. When we know why we're suffering, when we know what we're working for, we're more able to endure what it takes to bring that about. So having a purpose, helping youth connect with their purpose in life. And then the other word that came to me is perpetuity youth. Today, many of them did suffer one event, but often they're in a state of tension, a state of stress, whether that's poverty, COVID, though, the loss of someone who typically took care of a need for them, uncertainty. There's this perpetuity of what they're suffering. And so they need those relationships and they need that purpose in perpetuity. And so I think psychosocial support groups are wonderful, but if they last longer than a few weeks, it gets real boring. So things like basketball, sports activities, sewing, crafting, cooking, whatever it might be, things that can go on and on and on and continue to develop skills and be enjoyable. We need that during COVID and youth who are in uncertain situations and who are facing a status of being in tension or and stress need that perpetual support. And so those are the things that came to mind. And thanks to those who answered before me, because I think you helped craft my thoughts.

Jake Lloyd 33:38

And thanks Karla, and Rachel?

Rachel Kitavi 33:41

Okay. So for me, I would say that first of all, all we need to know is that mental health is health. And without mental health, then we are unable to function in any other way. Yeah. So we need to appreciate our, our mental health. And the second thing I would say about if you are undergoing something that you don't understand, please ask for help. Just ask for help. Ask us for help. When you get to ask for help, then you get to help. You know your health at the end of it all. So as a youth or a person who is suffering from mental health or psychosocial issues, and especially during the first five days of the whole thing, like a crisis, you don't understand what you're is, you don't understand. Please ask. And also to the person always asking, listen, just listen. You know, we all want to be listened to. And when you listen, you get to understand more

what that question is going to get. You get to think about it. And we get together to give informed answers, information, you know, so we all want to be listened to. So I would say that awareness that supports that the child could be the tax, it could be the community, it could be your child that anyone, when they listen to you, when you feel listened, you begin to recollect that. You begin to recollect and seek help. And when you feel that nobody cares, nobody's listening to you, you just want to go and go, you know, they just move and go, you know, you'll go to those places that are not good for you any more. So listen, ask for help and mental health is how you need to take care of your health.

Jake Lloyd 35:49

So there you heard Vincent and Rachel from Kenya, Ivan from Guatemala and Karla from the USA. And of course you also heard from Samer in Iraq.

That's almost it for this episode. Before we go, I'll say what I normally say at this point in the show, which is this You can catch up on previous episodes of How to build community on our SoundCloud page or in your podcast player. Just Search How to build community, Arukah Network. You can help support this show by making a small monthly donation on our Patreon page. Just visit Patreon.com/Arukahnetwork. You can learn more about Arukah on the website arukahnetwork.org and you can learn more about Tearfund's Footsteps on the website learn.tearfund.org

And finally, if you have some feedback on this show or you might have suggestions for future interviewees, then you can reach me by email jake@arukahnetwork.org .

But that's it for me. Until next time. Bye for now.

Tearfund, 100 Church Road, Teddington, TW11 8QE, United Kingdom.
☎ +44 (0)20 3906 3906 ✉ publications@tearfund.org learn.tearfund.org

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