



EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD

MENTAL HEALTH AND PREVENTION IN MOZAMBIQUE

Mental health has become a significant global health issue. Mental distress and disorders harm the psychophysical well-being of those affected by them; however, it is not easy to take care of one's own mental health. This is especially true in the case of adolescents, particularly African youth living in challenging environments. A study in Beira, Mozambique, analyzes a psychodrama intervention among adolescents.

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MENTAL HEALTH IN MOZAMBIKAN ADOLESCENTS

No matter what country one is born into, adolescence is a period of profound physical, psychological and social transformation. The World Health Organization estimates that one in seven 10-19-year-olds experience mental health issues, accounting for 15% of the global burden of disease in this age group¹. In 2015, 21.2% of Mozambican adolescents struggled with psychosocial distress, and 18.5% of the latter even attempted suicide.

A NON-MEDICAL INTERVENTION

Recognizing the growing need to prioritize mental health, Doctors with Africa CUAMM has been active in Mozambique for around 15 years, supporting *Servicios Amigos dos Adolescentes* (SAAs) – outpatient clinics that provide services to adolescents in the areas of reproductive health, sexually transmitted diseases and psychosocial support. Working alongside the SAAs and led by activists from youth associations, a separate network of *Cantinhos de Escuta* (“listening corners”) reaches out to young people in places they are likely to frequent, such as playgrounds and cultural centers, inviting them to participate in activities designed to promote good mental health and prevent mental distress. It was in this non-medical setting that we decided to test a preventive approach through emotional psychoeducation, with the active involvement of adolescents themselves. Funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) with the collaboration of the University Hospital of Padua's Child Neuropsychiatry Operative Unit (UOC), the *Conoscere per Curare* project, based on the psychodrama therapy technique, saw the participation of over 300 young people aged 15 to 24.

THE PSYCHODRAMA THERAPY TECHNIQUE

Developed by Jacob Levy Moreno in the early 1920s, psychodrama

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1 World Health Organisation. Adolescent mental health; 2018. <https://www.who.int/newsroom/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>
- 2 A Cruz, CMD Sales, P Alves, and G Moita. The Core Techniques of Morenian Psychodrama: A Systematic Review of Literature. *Front Psychol.* 2018;9:1263

is a group therapy method with deep roots in theater, psychology, and sociology². It offers participants the opportunity to explore their emotions, thoughts and behavior in an environment where they can safely express themselves and connect with others. Feelings, memories and relationships are “staged” as a sort of theatrical performance, allowing participants to reenact their life experiences, and observers to gain insight into underlying elements of discomfort. Co-led by a Junior Project Officer (JPO) specializing in child neuropsychiatry and specially trained local activists from the Anandjira Association, our psychodrama therapy project consisted of ten sessions focused on four key areas: i) breaking the stigma around mental health, ii) recognizing and managing emotions, iii) learning assertive communication and empathic listening, and iv) developing effective coping strategies³. By administering questionnaires both before and after the psychodrama therapy sessions, we found that participants had gained a better understanding of mental health and greater ability to recognize and express feelings through actions, and were also experiencing fewer feelings of hopelessness. Their responses also highlighted the importance of peer-to-peer support and relationships during the critical phase of adolescence.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND PREVENTION OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Our goal was to help these young people develop social-emotional skills such as improved interpersonal communication, emotional regulation, higher-order thinking (for example, decision-making and problem-solving), self-esteem and coping strategies. These skills are essential for empowering individuals to actively foster their own mental health, while also promoting supportive and effective relational networks within the community.

“During the face-to-face game I realized that others were facing the same challenges as me, that I wasn't alone.”

(Testimony by a session participant)

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- 3 Benoni R, Malesani C, Sartorello A, et al. Assessing the impact of a community-based psychodrama intervention on mental health promotion of adolescents and young adults in Mozambique: A mixed-methods study. *J Glob Health.* 2024;14:04182. Published 2024 Jul 26. doi:10.7189/jogh.14.04182