Empathising with Mentally-Challenged Teenagers: Project Work Report

Group ID: 4-030

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Abstract:

We investigated society's attitudes towards teenagers with mental illnesses, concluding that part of society trivialised mental illnesses and looked down upon these teenagers. For our resource, we conducted an interview with the school counsellor Mr Vincent Tan, from which we and viewers gained valuable information and perspective. We also created an Instagram page, uploading posts regarding our cause, aiming to inculcate a deeper sense of empathy into teenagers for their suffering peers.

Introduction:

Rationale:

According to Samaritans of Singapore (SoS), suicide is the leading cause of death for those from 10 to 29 years old (SoS) ,including teenagers. According to Boston Children's hospital (BCH), 90% of people who died from suicide had a mental illness then (BCH), showing a link between suicides and mental illnesses. If we increase awareness in teenagers about mental illnesses and what to do if they find someone with mental illnesses, less teenagers will commit suicide, enabling more young people to survive and have a second chance at life. One life lost is one too many!

Objectives:

1. To inculcate a deeper sense of empathy within teenagers towards their peers suffering from mental illnesses.
2. Provide tips to let teenagers know how to support peers with mental illnesses.

Target Audience:

Our target audience are teenagers from 10 to 20. Since our project is focused on inculcating empathy for teenagers with mental illnesses, targeting these teenagers peers is most effective in helping them since they come into contact with their peers more often.

Proposed Resources:

We interviewed our school counsellor to obtain information and perspective about mental illnesses, created a video compiling the interview questions, and started an Instagram Account to inculcate the value of empathy in teenagers and to give tips on how to help those with mental illnesses.

Literature Review:

An article by 'The New Paper' showed an increase in students developing mental illnesses and seeking help at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) due to school stress, with an average of 2,400 new cases annually from 2012 to 2017 (TNP,2019). For example, a junior college student committed sucide due to developing depression from examination-induced pressure (TNP,2019). From this, we see the severity and adverse effects of mental illnesses that teenagers in Singapore suffered. Current solutions include posts online, like those on 'Psychology Today', where tips on helping mentally challenged loved ones are given (PT,2012). However, we find that these posts are too general. There can be more targeted resources that help these teenagers.

Methodology:

<u>Needs Analysis:</u>

In March, we conducted a needs analysis to determine our project's necessity, from which we gained 71 responses. Since the proportion of non-Hwa Chong students was significantly large, the survey was more representative of Singaporean teenagers' true sentiments. Almost all surveyants correctly identified common causes of suicide, but half identified a wrong option 'impulsivity', showing that our target audience has misconceptions about teenage mental illnesses, which emphasises the need for our resource.

Which, among these options, are the common causes of suicide
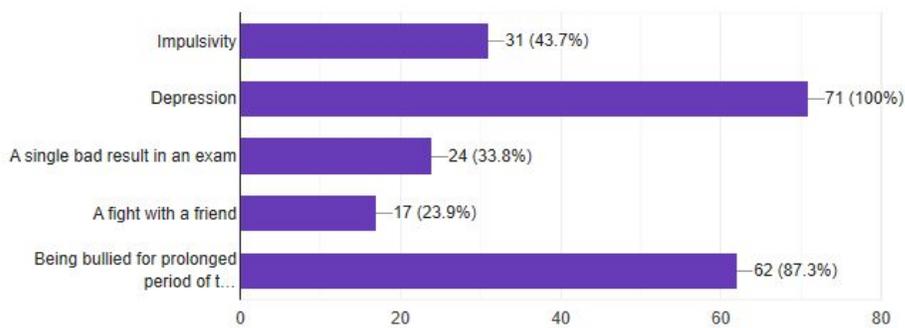
71 responses

Figure 1: Perceived common causes of suicide

We have also noted very differing opinions on whether they should treat those with mental illnesses similarly to other people with 40.8% disagreeing, 33.8% agreeing and 25.4% not completely agreeing or disagreeing, each with respective logical reasons. The differing reasons given for these answers include 'a way to provide acceptance,' 'an act of love and care' and 'they need extra attention'.

Would you treat a person who has suicidal thoughts / mental illnesses the same way as anyone else?

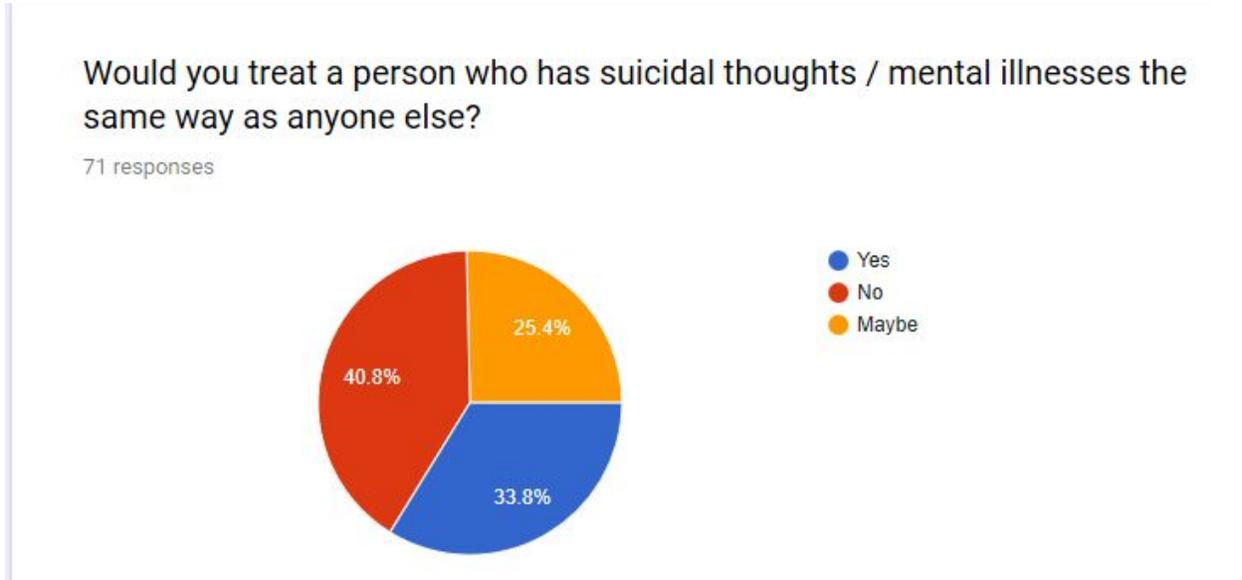71 responses

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

40.8%
25.4%
33.8%

Figure 4: Opinions on whether those with mental illnesses should be treated the same way as others

We also received several alarming responses to our open-ended questions which include "Who cares" and "People kill themselves only because they are cowards". This further demonstrates that our target audience has many misconceptions or even biases and discriminatory ideals about teenagers with mental illnesses and emphasises our resource's necessity.

On 31 May, we interviewed the school counsellor Mr Vincent Tan to gather information about teenagers with mental illnesses and gained many insights. He told us most teenagers disliked being counselled for fear of social stigma, leading them not to seek help. Thus, we should destigmatize counselling and take it as a form of self-improvement. He also mentioned the importance of peer support, empathy and lending a listening ear. The interview was videotaped, edited and posted on our Instagram page.

Instagram:

We started an Instagram page to post content related to mental illnesses, such as quotes and clips of the interview, so as to further fulfil our objectives. We chose Instagram due to its current popularity among teenagers. Over a few months, we have created much content to post on Instagram, including quotes and write-ups, and publicity was through our peers so that more teenagers would view our page, amassing 10+ posts and more than 60 followers, excluding views. Lastly, we conducted a pilot test to determine how effective was our solution. Below are some examples of our solutions:

Figure 5: Example 1

Destigmatizing Mental Illnesses

Our Project Work group has observed a stigma against mental illnesses and this must stop! Currently, mental illnesses are frequently trivialised. We just do not take them seriously in the same way we would take a broken leg. Perhaps it is just because it is hard to see the effects of or maybe the idea of it is not well established enough. After all, people tend to trust more in what is visible and the concept of mental illnesses has been brought to the attention of the public relatively recently. This leads people to think that a mental illness is less painful than an injury or physical illness. For example, a student said that "I guess *[an example of a stigma]* would be the way people use the word *'autistic' casually as an insult"*. Also, people commonly use certain mental illnesses to describe themselves when in reality, they are nothing like that (i.e. "I am depressed" when the person is just a little sad).

Secondly, there is also a stigma against being counselled. Being counselled is associated with completely losing control of yourself. In Singapore, it is somehow shameful to go for counselling as if you cannot take care of yourself so you are being counselled. It in some way is being thought of as a sign of madness, weakness or inferiority hence people do not talk about it as they do not want to be perceived as such. Our school counsellor has said that "*There is a stigma attached to [mental illnesses], sometimes [people] think that those who see the counsellor must be... 神精病, Screw Loose!*" which shows that people think that those who see counsellors are somewhat mad. He also said "*In the West...it's not shameful, actually, to see a counsellor. So, in Singapore it takes time and slowly, I see the shift over the years*" This means that there is indeed a stigma here against being counselled.

In conclusion, there is a lot of stigma against mental illnesses and we must exercise empathy by putting ourselves in these people's shoes, thus destigmatizing mental illnesses and integrating these people into society.
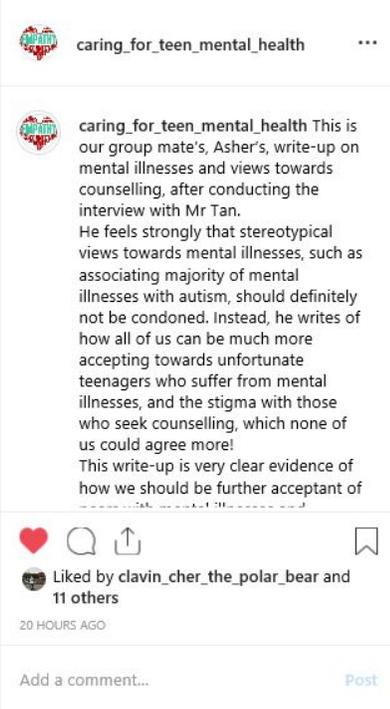
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caring_for_teen_mental_health •••

caring_for_teen_mental_health This is our group mate's, Asher's, write-up on mental illnesses and views towards counselling, after conducting the interview with Mr Tan.
He feels strongly that stereotypical views towards mental illnesses, such as associating majority of mental illnesses with autism, should definitely not be condoned. Instead, he writes of how all of us can be much more accepting towards unfortunate teenagers who suffer from mental illnesses, and the stigma with those who seek counselling, which none of us could agree more!
This write-up is very clear evidence of how we should be further acceptant of

❤ ⬜ ⬆

Liked by **clavin_cher_the_polar_bear** and 11 others
20 HOURS AGO

Add a comment... Post

Figure 6: Example 2

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caring_for_teen_mental_health •••

mental health situation in our society, and what actions should and should not be taken against it.
Let's start off with not trivialising the situation, because we should know that the situation has gotten to a rather serious state that needs help, desperately, even though the trivialisation may come from an attempt for consolation that the situation isn't as bad, although it actually is! Thus, what we should do is to understand and fully gain the sense of the magnitude of the current situation, so as to start alleviating the situation!! #mentalhealthawareness #empathy #love #destigmatisingmentalillness

1w

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Liked by **clavin_cher_the_polar_bear** and 7 others
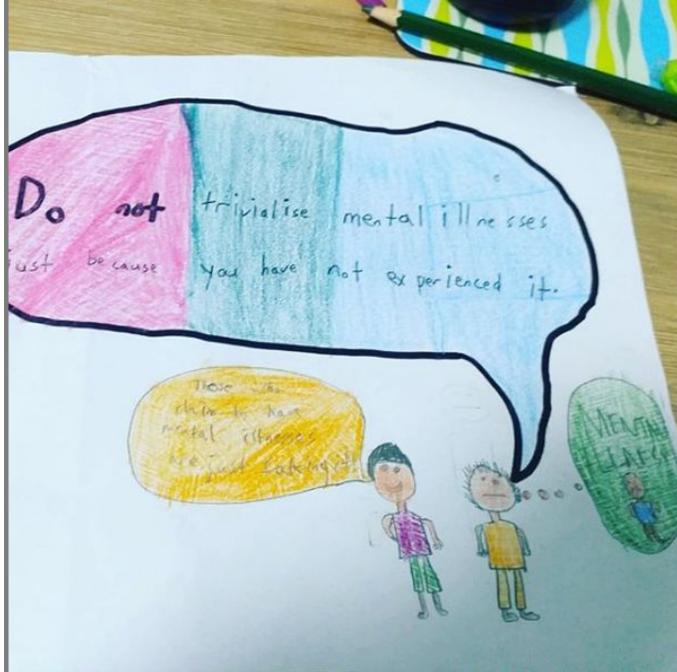JULY 28

Add a comment... Post

Figure 7: Example 3

Pilot Tests:

In order to assess the effectiveness of our Instagram page, 2 pilot tests were conducted: before mid-term and final evaluation. The first survey was conducted orally on 6-7 students to gain qualitative data while the second survey was conducted online with 66 respondents. For the first survey, we asked the students about their impression on Mental Health or people with Mental Illnesses. Then, we showed them an excerpt from our Video Interview, or let them view the online resources. Afterwards, we asked if their impression had changed. Before seeing our Instagram Page, most respondents were ignorant of mental health illnesses. For example, one of them claimed that mental illness "affects older people" and another who replied "Not exactly" when asked about mental health. However, there are some who have a basic impression of Mental Health, such as "I think people with mental illness should be empathised with." After viewing the content and video, almost all of their impressions changed as our resources provided tips on how to help people with Mental illnesses. This can prove the usefulness and ability of our resource. However, some of them did not show any change in opinion and were unimpressed by our work.

For the second pilot test, we asked the respondents how empathetic they were towards those with mental illnesses before and after visiting our Instagram page. As seen below, the average level of empathy has increased by 1 -2 and thus we have achieved our first objective. Some of their elaborations were "I simply haven't experienced the

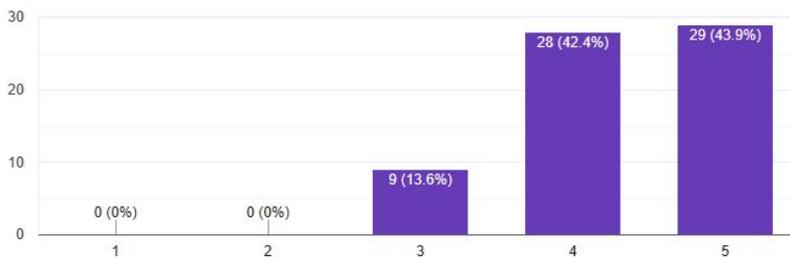illness and I keep feeling that I will never become that way"

On a scale of 1 to 5, how much empathy did you feel for teenagers with mental health issues before getting to know our Instagram page?
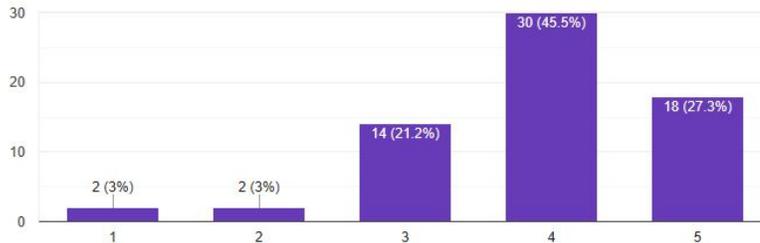
66 responses

On a scale of 1 to 5, how much empathy did you feel for teenagers with mental illnesses after getting to know our Instagram page?
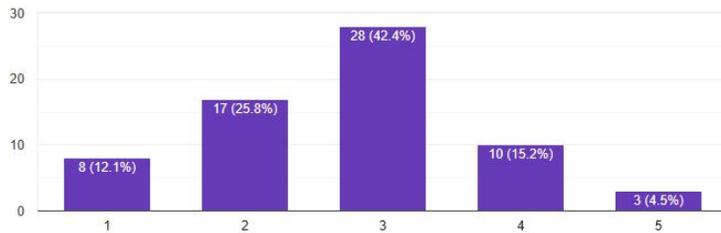
66 responses

We also assessed the respondents' confidence at helping teenagers with mental illnesses before and after visiting our Instagram. As seen below, the average level of confidence increased and we achieved our second objective. Some elaborations for before include "Not sure how to approach them and not aggravate the condition" while those for after include "I have learnt some ways to handle the situations."
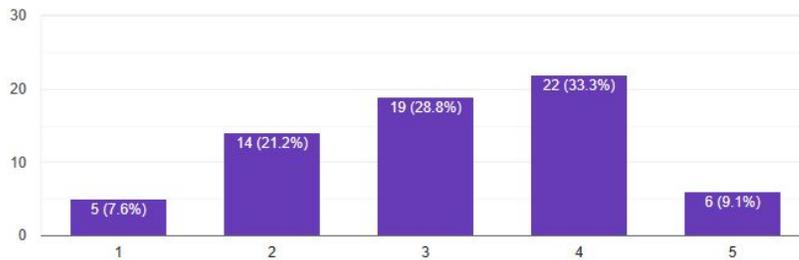
On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident were you at helping those with mental health issues before looking at our Instagram page?

66 responses

On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident are you at helping those with mental health issues after looking at our Instagram page?

66 responses

Outcome and Discussion:

Our interview video and Instagram page were successful. We reached out to teenagers and achieve our objectives, also incidentally reaching out to other strangers. As seen from the pilot tests, they have fruitful takeaways from our posts and resources.

Limitations of our project was that we could not reach out to as many teenagers as possible, and our viewer size was slightly smaller than expected. We suggest wider publicity in future, even maybe collaborations in future to make up for these limitations.

Conclusion:

We have acquired many valuable skills and insights. Firstly, we have learnt how to manage team dynamics and roles better. As the roles were not clearly stated, we started facing problems regarding efficiency of work and task management which led to our work being not as refined as what was required. We also faced problems in time management. As there were no clear roles, our members all thought that another member would finish the work for us. However, we learnt to be more responsible by setting deadlines and completed our project on time.

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