



Issue Brief

ADDRESSING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH ON THE ISLAND OF CURAÇAO

2024

Research conducted by the Gen-irators

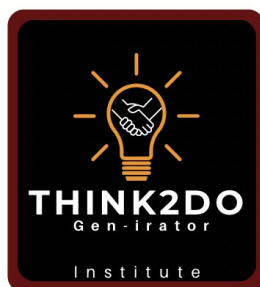
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Mental Health Trends and Concerns Among Secondary School Students

The Think To DO Institute is an independent, apolitical think tank located in Curaçao, Dutch Caribbean. The T2DI has as its purpose to help Curaçao become a more resilient society by producing research that is based in best practice, and which delivers practical solutions to the barriers that hold the community back from becoming resilient.

This document is the product of research conducted by the Gen-irators, secondary school researchers of the Think To DO Institute, Curaçao, in February-April 2024.

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Introduction

Recently there has been an increase in news relating to Adolescent mental health in Curacao. This attention has brought several concerns and trends in adolescent behaviors to light. As a society, there has not been enough attention to the necessary changes to meet the current needs of mental health, in adolescents specifically.

With the rise of worldwide depression rates in teens and the influx of social media, a question arises: How can we as a society better understand and help our youth to manage themselves and not fall into these very negative trends of self-doubt and loneliness in this age of technology?

The Gen-irators, being secondary school researchers of the Think To DO Institute, have taken note of this increase in mental health issues and, hence, have done extensive research to better understand and explain this phenomenon. In this issue brief, the root causes of these mental health issues as well as what can be done to remedy them will be discussed. The research is focused on Curaçao and on its cultural impacts. Though the side effects mentioned below will be similar, it is important to note that these are specific to the topic at hand.

Issues for Discussion

The following issues have been selected for discussion in order to give breadth and depth as well as local context to the research. Fundamental to the research is to first express the causes of mental health issues, to look at genetic and environmental factors that contribute to mental health issues, to consider cultural contexts that influence attitudes about mental health, and to look at best practices to intervene on these health risks by parents and schools. Finally, it is important to consider mental health policy recommendations that can reduce the negative consequences of mental health risks.

Causes of mental health issues

Though the exact causes of mental health are not set in stone, through various research it is now known that mental illness is caused by a combination of biological, psychological, and environmental factors. Here are just some of the factors that multiple sources state can lead to poor mental health:

- childhood abuse, trauma, or neglect
- social isolation or loneliness
- Social or cultural expectations
- experiencing discrimination and stigma
- severe or long-term stress
- having a long-term physical health condition
- bereavement (losing someone close to you)
- Poor lifestyle(work, diet, substance abuse and lack of sleep)

Effects of Isolation

After Covid-19 it is safe to say that almost everyone has had a taste of what loneliness feels like. Social isolation/loneliness typically refers to solitude that is unwanted and unhealthy. Among adolescents, isolation has increased and had a negative impact on mental health. Those affected can suffer from low self-esteem, anxiety, and/or depression. If left unchecked it can reach a harmful emotional level where one may not even have the ability or drive to share one's feelings with others. This can lead to emotional numbness and/or detachment from one's own feelings. Other notable symptoms and warning signs associated with social isolation are:

- Avoiding social interactions, including those that were once enjoyable
- Canceling plans frequently and feeling relief when plans are canceled

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- Experiencing anxiety or panic when thinking about social interactions
- Feeling distress during periods of solitude
- Feeling dread associated with social activities
- Spending large amounts of time alone or with extremely limited contact with others

Effects of Social Media

Several studies have pointed out the potentially detrimental effects of social media use on mental health. The American Psychological Association (APA) issued its own health advisory. The warning and health advisory included some examples of these effects for people to be alert for, which contained: pressure to compare oneself to others, an increase in sadness and isolation, body image dissatisfaction, as well as increased risk of addiction, cyberbullying involvement, and “phubbing behaviors” (the act of ignoring someone you are with and giving attention to your mobile phone instead).

What makes users keep coming back to social media?

The hope is that social media will enhance connections, increase self-esteem, and improve a sense of belonging. The boosting of self-esteem happens when people post content with the hope of receiving positive feedback. “Fear of missing out” (FOMO) also plays a role. If one is not able to partake in social media, while others are, there is concern that they will miss jokes, connections, and/or invitations. Missing experiences can create anxiety and depression. When one feels excluded from an activity, it can affect their thoughts and feelings and can affect them physically.

Social Stigma/Taboo of Mental Health

With the rise of mental health issues in recent years, the stigma regarding mental health in Curacao is ever concerning. “ ‘Stigma’ is the biggest killer out there. Stigma kills more people than cigarettes, than heroin, than any other risk factor. A stigma is a set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something. Because it keeps people in the shadows, it keeps people from asking for help, it keeps good people from being willing to offer help” states Dr. Jerome Adams. Former U.S. Surgeon General 2017-21.

Stigma arises from a lack of understanding of mental illness (ignorance and misinformation), some may also have negative attitudes or beliefs towards it (prejudice). Stigma often involves inaccurate stereotypes. Those with anxiety may be labeled as being cowardly rather than having an illness and those with depression may be told to ‘snap out of it’. They may even be mocked or called weak for seeking help. Some cultures have a built-in stigma against mental health issues, and this can hinder a person from seeking and getting help. This may give rise to shame.

People with mental illness may be viewed negatively, treated differently, and made to feel ashamed or worthless. Stigma can lead people with mental illness to be discriminated against and miss out on work or school, be bullied, be excluded from social groups, and/or become a victim of violence. Because of this, they may also internalize the prejudiced views others hold, which can affect their self-esteem. They may feel ashamed or embarrassed. This can lead them to not seek treatment, withdraw from society, abuse alcohol and drugs or even commit suicide.

Effects of Performance Pressure

“Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” – Albert Einstein

Though it can be beneficial for students to feel some kind of pressure as a kind of motivator, pushing them to work harder and strive for more. The expectations of family, school, and society as a whole for a student to not only do well, but to excel academically can more than often cause more harm than good to a student’s physical/mental

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health, development, and behavior. This remains the case whether these expectations are met or not. These issues not only bring harm to the individuals themselves but also to the families, schools, and even society. What we will be looking at are the pressures from parents, extracurricular activities and school.

Parents

Parents wish the best for their child and sometimes this goal may lead parents to resort to methods that may even unintentionally harm their children. For example, by resorting to pressure. In one study, 86% of parents said they pressured their kids because they wanted to be more attentive than their own distant parents had been. Of course, as a parent you have to put some pressure on your child to do certain things, but how much is too much?

Some experiences between a parent and a child may prompt them to put pressure on their children, such as: your child struggles with something that came easily to you; your child makes different life decisions than you did; your child chooses friends who you think are poor influences; etc. Parental pressure is the emotional stress parents impose upon their children and is often related to: academic performance, sports or other extracurricular activities, cultural or social standards, appearance, friendships, romantic relationships.

The general goal is to make their lives easier, more successful or to even earn the admiration of your peers. Whatever the reason, putting excessive pressure on your child can lead to devastating results and put a damper on your relationship. This pressure can come in two forms: direct and indirect pressure. Direct pressure often involves yelling, force, or complaining. Indirect pressure may involve guilt-tripping your child or reminding them of rigid expectations. Parents who put excessive pressure on their children typically exhibit authoritarian parenting, which is characterized by very high expectations for children with a lack of feedback and responsiveness from the parent. This style of parenting is quite prevalent in Caribbean islands, which is concerning. A 2015 study suggests that children who face excessive parental pressure have a greater likelihood of experiencing negative effects in adulthood, these include: Depression, Negative self-talk, Social withdrawal, Eating disorders and body image problems, Poor academic performance, anger management problems, physical aggression, delinquency and trouble maintaining relationships.

Hobbies/extracurricular activities

The pressure that adolescents have to go through due to extracurricular activities is steeper than one might think. It often starts with a simple nudge to encourage youngsters to do their best and reach their full potential. However, once the expectations get to a critical level and the fear of failure gets too high, these adolescents can experience negative effects such as anxiety, burnout, or even loss of interest in the activity altogether.

In 2017 research was conducted surveying 1000 young American athletes on how rampant the pressure to succeed is within youth sports. This research suggests that coaches, friends, and parents put the most amount of pressure on young athletes, with 42% of the pressure coming from their coaches, 27% from friends, 21% from fathers, and 6% from mothers, though millennials (people born from 1981 to 1996) were 10 times as likely to feel pressured by their mothers than baby boomers and female respondents reported to be twice as likely to be pressured by their mothers than male respondents. Among these 1000 surveyed students a whopping 76% of respondents stated to be disciplined for poor performance and up to 57% of them were pressured to play despite wanting to quit. Another study focused on why junior-elite track and field from Caribbean islands (Jamaica, Trinidad, Tobago, Dominica) athletes quit. It was found that these athletes quit for four reasons, two of which being the pressure to commit, and the constant competitiveness.

Along with sports students also tend to do performative arts as extracurriculars. And in the world of performative arts, there are also many stresses. To put yourself out there in front of an audience is a very anxiety-inducing experience, which can only be understood by the performers themselves. For these performers, many things have to come together to equal a successful demonstration, and on the other side it is this fact that also contributes to

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performance stressors. Our natural fight or flight response causes the performance pressure felt in the performing arts, but in this case the fear is not of a physical attack, it is the fear of humiliation or negative evaluation. This can pose a threat to one's ability to perform in the form of some reactions/effects, which include: an increased heart and/or breath rate, blurred vision, a dry mouth, poor concentration, and sweating. These symptoms can interfere with the overall performance, affecting how an actor would speak a line or how a musician would play an instrument, making them anxious and panic, causing further hindrances to their performance.

School/Academics

This is the pressure students have to perform academically and is arguably the biggest source of stress/pressure among adolescents and follows them as they go up in their academic achievement.

It is important for all involved to take this fact seriously. When talking about performance pressure, a distinction must be made between different types of pressure that students have to go through academically, these being:

- **Self-imposed academic pressure:** the pressure you put on yourself to perform well academically.
- **Academic pressure from a career aspiration/society:** the pressure you put upon yourself to enter a highly competitive profession such as law, medicine, software engineering, or consulting.
- **Family pressure:** the pressure your family places upon you to perform well academically.
- **Academic pressure from upcoming exams or deadlines:** the pressure/stress felt from anticipating/thinking about upcoming exams or project deadlines.
- **Academic pressure from your course/curriculum:** the pressure you get from the difficulty/workload of your own coursework
- **Comparing yourself to your friends or peers:** the pressure you feel to outperform your peers and friends academically
- **Pressure from poor organization and time management:** the indirect pressure felt by not being able to plan, manage, or organize your academic life properly

Though all of these are contributors to academic pressure, many times it is not about a single factor but multiple contributing factors to the stress students feel academically, further increasing the pressure felt and the effects of which are also bolstered. It is not always clear that students are dealing with academic pressure but there are signs, namely: Extreme competitiveness, Obsession with grades, Anxiety, Working constantly, Changes in appetite, Difficulty sleeping, Inability to relax, Refusal to socialize, Loss of interest in previously enjoyed pastimes and Abusing stimulants (e.g., caffeine, prescription medications, etc.)

Worth noting is that the numbers for these conditions were also reported to be lower during periods of school closure, implying that students experience less mental anguish when school is out. This statistic points to schools contributing in one way or another to mental health issues in students. Of course, with all the stress caused by performance pressure, it is clear that there are going to be some mental side-effects but also some that are physical. According to multiple studies, academic pressure has an influence on and or correlation with mental health disorders and problem behavior among local youth, namely: depression, anxiety, self-harm, lack of self-control, feelings of inferiority, and suicidal thoughts.

Bullying and discrimination amongst students

Bullying and discrimination in schools is something that most readers have either seen, experienced, or even taken part in. The Gen-irator's School Student Attitude Research Report of 2023 shows that around one-third of all students in Curaçao have been bullied in school. Sadly, it does not end here. With the ever-increasingly modern society comes both positive and negative change. One of which being the use of social media and online platforms to do what is known as cyberbullying, the use of technology to harass, threaten, embarrass, or target another person online. Bullying is by far one of the most concerning issues in local schools over the years, and sadly, due to the rise in technology, it has only gotten worse. Regardless of what is thought of cyberbullying, it can have the same or even worse effect as in-person bullying. These being: Depression, Anxiety, Lack of performance in the

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classroom, Decrease in self-worth, Decrease in self-confidence, Increase in self-criticism, Increase in self-loneliness and Suicidal thoughts

In the above-mentioned School Student Attitude research, it is stated that 37% of local students do not feel happy and do not feel like they are a part of the school. Alongside this, it is interesting to note that up to 36% of local students have experienced a form of bullying. Though it cannot be said that it is the same people who have been bullied who feel unhappy at school, it is remarkable to see a close similarity between these numbers. But what strikes the researchers as very concerning is that 15% of students do not feel safe at school. It is not only concerning that around 1 in 7 students do not feel safe, but also that despite the fact that 36% of students have experienced acts of bullying, only 15% do not feel safe for whatever reason. This could imply that the students do not recognize when they are being bullied and is definitely reason for concern. This can not only lead to negative effects on the child as they are but may also follow them into adulthood.

Recommendations

Addressing the social stigma/taboo of mental health

Tackling the issues of stigma surrounding mental health is very difficult, but not impossible. Raising awareness of mental health is a great place to start. Studies show that having exposure to and contact with individuals having mental health issues can be one of the best ways to reduce stigma. Schools as well can help students understand the importance of mental health by means of showing videos, documentaries or presentations and/or hosting conversations. Alongside that, promotion of the importance of mental health in the media, showing brief videos, promoting articles of people sharing experiences with mental health. Additionally, campaigns and movements addressing the stigma present on the island can be organized. This could aid in opening the conversations regarding stigma and increase the amount of people who can have the opportunity to be exposed to mental health illness.

Alongside that, we can also start by offering and making aware to our people a means of support by using what is already available to us: our phones. Many countries have apps and resources that promote or even help those in need of mental support. For example, Haiti created a culturally adapted cognitive behavioral therapy program that was specific to their socio-cultural environment, and other apps of the sort, where someone can privately get the help they need without the judgment of others. Curaçao has institutions such as “GGz Curaçao” which aims to maintain, recuperate and promote the mental health of people in Curaçao. “Stichting Kinderbescherming Curaçao” aims to prevent abuse, maltreatment, neglect or any other form of harm among children and young people. As an extension to their services, they have a number as well as a website, Ayudo pa Mucha i Hóben 918, where a child can contact an individual and speak on their concerns. These are just two of the many institutions of mental health, which are encouraged to be promoted and made aware of in the venture to raise awareness of this issue. This may not fix the issue as a whole, but it could be a start and a way to open the conversation of continuing this discussion about mental health.

Addressing the use of social media among our youth

The use of social media must be addressed by involving both parents and teachers. It is impossible to forbid a child from accessing social media for their entire lives. Therefore, a better option is to moderate and monitor their use of social media as well as educate them on how they should engage with it. Moderation can be done in different ways. Parents can allow children to use social media at specific times of the day or maybe after they have completed a certain task. This can all be done by simply using parental controls which are prevalent in most well-known social media apps.

Before having access to social media, parents should talk to their children and educate them about what they should and should not do on social media, such as: not sharing private information to strangers, posting inappropriate things, being mindful about what they follow, like or comment, how to deal with

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harassment/cyberbullying and knowing when to put the phone down. Experts say that It is important that parents monitor their child's use of social media in the early stages of access to make sure they are not misusing, abusing, or posting inappropriate things on these apps. There is a clear need to raise awareness about the possible risks that can negatively affect mental health and everyday functioning. By teaching people social media literacy, we can maximize their chances of having balanced, safe, and meaningful experiences on these social media platforms. Further, if a child is not able to self-regulate the use of their smartphones, parents and schools need to step in and limit access to smartphones so that students are encouraged and even forced, to participate in family and school activities, reducing opportunities for isolation and loneliness.

Addressing the loneliness/social isolation

To address the so-called loneliness epidemic, some things can be done, and which do not have to be overthought. Successful interventions for reducing social isolation must be rooted in communities and integrated into comprehensive school and community health plans. If this is broken down a bit more, parents and schools need to design home and school activities that require adolescents to socialize, to work in groups, to solve problems together and engage in outdoor activities. Schools should have available “clubs” in the likes of sports, the arts or even just recreational activities as a means for students to be able to feel at home in the school and as a part of a group. Government should promote or even initiate outside social communities, groups, or institutions where not only students, but citizens can participate and feel at home such as dance clubs, sports communities, or even volunteering programs. much like the “Culture makes you strong” program in Germany.

Addressing the school performance academic pressure

Sadly, there is no clear way to deal with academic, parental or extracurricular performance pressure without complete overhauls on how these environments are governed. But what can be done is adopt attitudes and support systems to aid in relieving our youth of these stressors. Parents and school personnel must take note of these pressures and determine if they, in their specific roles and relationships, are easing or increasing these factors

Parents can adopt a more authoritative parenting style, a style , rather than authoritarian. This type of parenting can be thought of as a middle ground between an authority-based and passive parenting style. Authoritative parenting uses rules and discipline, but it's used with respect to a child's individual personality. It encourages respect and intimacy, along with a loving relationship. Certain behaviors can also help lessen the pressure parents place on children, some being:

Praise effort, not just achievements. Instead of only celebrating the "A," praise your child for studying hard or asking questions when confused. This builds confidence in their ability to overcome challenges.

Avoid appearance-based comments. Even "positive" remarks about looks can make kids self-conscious. Focus praise on things like kindness, curiosity, and perseverance instead.

Let them take the lead sometimes. Resist the urge to micromanage. Letting kids make age-appropriate choices builds their sense of autonomy and competence.

Validate their feelings. Remember, your child is a unique individual, not an extension of you. Listen to and acknowledge their perspective, even when it differs from yours.

Set collaborative rules. Kids are more likely to follow rules they had a voice in creating. Make expectations clear and consistent, but leave room for flexibility and discussion.

Addressing bullying and discrimination in schools

This is a difficult task especially in underfunded schools. However, there are possibilities to do so even with the existing constraints. Schools need to establish and enforce rules that clearly describe how students are expected to treat one another. School staff must be trained to be able to recognize, address and resolve bullying.

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Alongside this, we need to create a sense of trust so that students can feel comfortable speaking up about such issues they may be having. In the results of our “Student Attitude Survey 2023” we found that a majority of students find it difficult to talk to an adult about their problems at school. The adults that are trusted to go to for help are not necessarily teachers. What schools can start by doing, which not only would help in this area but also in all the others, is to have sufficient well-trained counselors students can freely share their struggles and receive advice and/or support regarding their studies or anything.

We could also strike before it becomes a problem and adapt practices that prevent students from bullying altogether. Advancing social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools would definitely help in this matter. Evidence-based SEL approaches have been shown to deliver cost-effective, solid results. It involves teaching skills of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationships management, some of which being a part of the 21st-century skills which we have previously recommended schools adopt in their curriculum.

To aid in this endeavor, schools could start by implementing a class in which students would get the opportunity to hold conversations and work together while also having time for direct instruction from and oversight from the teacher. Embedded in the class could be the 21st Century Skills which include practice in valid communication skills. Also built into the school day could be adequate training and education for students to know when and how they should react when getting bullied and discriminated against, but it is also a way for the bullies themselves to be more mindful of their actions.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the challenges of bullying, social isolation, and performance pressure is still seen in schools, influenced by the evolving of technology and societal expectations. However, there are steps that can be taken to address these issues. Promotion of culturally adapted therapy programs accessible via technology, community engagement initiatives, and integrated interventions within school and community health plans represent crucial strides towards minimizing the stigma around mental health and building supportive environments for students. By prioritizing collaborative efforts among schools, parents, and students, bullying and discrimination can be handled more effectively while encouraging acceptance, understanding, and overall well-being among the (affected) youth.

Parents must take more seriously the impact of giving cell phones to youngsters too soon thereby increasing the isolation and negative impact of social media. Parents and teachers need to reach out to each other to share symptoms that arise in their children and the children they serve. Schools, community groups and parent organizations must work to dispel the stigma related to mental health issues in families and youth. Young people must learn the negative effects of isolation and social media and strive to use it less and plan activities that are person to person and involve getting outside and doing physical activities.

It's important to remember that just because people may not know exactly what causes someone to experience a mental health problem, this does not mean that it is any less serious than any other illness, any less deserving of recognition and treatment, or any easier to recover from.

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Endnote

<https://psychcentral.com/lib/parental-pressure-and-kids-mental-health#recap>
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