

Learning from young people in Gauteng, South Africa, about their experiences of depression: a discussion space report

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Foreword

Across the world, rising youth depression is a pressing concern that has animated researcher and popular media attention. Mostly, this attention has missed that youth depression can be prevented, provided we can discover and mobilize protective mechanisms at different systemic levels that have differential (i.e. the most impactful) value for specific youth in specific cultures and contexts. Importantly, we need to consider what combinations of protective mechanisms matter most and pay more attention to mechanisms in the systems that young people are connected to (like their families and communities).

A handful of studies across a diversity of biological, social and environmental sciences are beginning to challenge the overly narrow focus on protective mechanisms at the level of the individual (Arango et al., 2021; Thapar et al., 2022). They show that a wide range of factors, like food security (Teasedale et al., 2021), less polluted or more temperate environments (Sugg et al., 2019; Theron et al., 2022), trusted social connections (Choi et al., 2020), opportunities for school and work engagement and social justice (Minh et al., 2021) matter as much, if not more, than individual resources for youth resilience to depression.

Further, the Resilient Youth in Stressed Environments (RYSE) study is showing that these factors work in combination. RYSE-related work on the multisystemic determinants of the psychosocial resilience of youth living in stressed environments in Canada and South Africa (Ungar et al., 2021), has shown that at-risk youth report negligible depression symptoms when they also report greater access to a culturally relevant combination of relational, institutional and ecological resources (Theron et al., 2022).

We wondered how these insights would hold up in stressed urban environments. We wanted to learn more about the intersection between multisystemic resources and young peoples' real life experiences of mental poor health or depression in overcrowded, violent, stressed city spaces. To do this, we held a Discussion Space in Johannesburg in February

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2023 to centre the voices of Black 18-24 year olds, and engage them in a participatory approach to navigate this emerging research landscape.⁹

Discussion Space



The discussion was attended by 14 young people, aged 18-25 living in Johannesburg and surrounding areas, and youth facilitators from the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation ([CSV-R](#)) and [Afrika Tikkun](#) - non-profit organisations working on youth mental health programmes). Of the 14, 9 were female-

presenting, and 5 male-presenting – we did not probe gender or sexual orientation as this was not a focus of the discussion. All of the young people lived in the Gauteng region around the city of Johannesburg, with 5 living specifically in Diepsloot (a township approximately 30 miles to the north west of the city centre).

We were hosted in the meeting facilities run by the Johannesburg Children’s Home. The discussion was convened by the Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative ([REPSSI](#)), who were represented by two of the authors. As well as REPSSI, our team brought perspectives from a wide range of disciplines, including political science, social policy and social work, criminology, computational modelling, information/disinformation and psychology.

After introductions and some contextualising talk, the young people and their facilitators divided into groups of three, supported by one of the research team. We asked the young people two distinct questions:

1. What makes depression likely for South African youth who live hard lives?
2. What helps these young people to avoid depression?

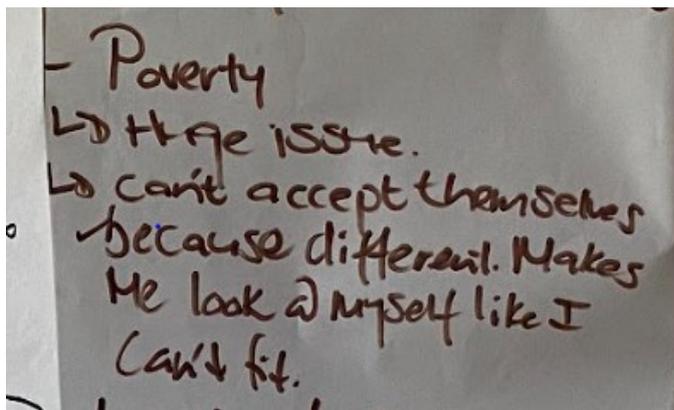
The young people already knew that there were many definitions of depression – some more culturally-oriented than others – but they decided to focus on longer term or incapacitating feelings of sadness. The groups spent 40 minutes in discussion, distributed around the venue both indoors and out. Each group then shared the key points from their discussion, 15-20 minutes per group for sharing and discussion. We closed the workshop with thanks and acknowledgements, and provided the young people with a token of appreciation (a supermarket voucher) for their time.

Challenges

In response to our first question, the young people and their facilitators told us 6 themes were causing them to be at risk of depression.

⁹ The authors gratefully acknowledge the CIHR-funded Resilient Youth in Stressed Environments (RYSE) project (IP2- 150708) in funding this consultation event. Ethical approval for RYSE was awarded through the University of Pretoria’s University Ethics Committee (UP17/05/01) for youth advisory and stakeholder consultation work.

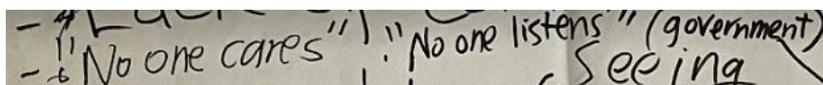
Poverty and inequality



South Africa is challenged by high levels of chronic poverty and extensive inequality. Despite progress since the fall of apartheid (David et al., 2018) and an emerging market, the country remains one of the most economically unequal countries in the world, and the most unequal by some measures (World Bank, 2018), with high levels of socio-economic polarization, slow

growth of consumption expenditure for the very poor, a declining rate of shared prosperity, and high wealth inequality.

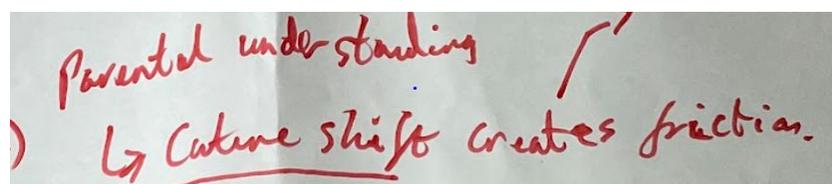
This context certainly resonated with the young people in our discussion groups. For them, poverty and associated structural inequalities represented two related



but distinct challenges. On the one hand, there were the everyday challenges of living conditions and overcrowding, diet, and transport. On the other, were strong feelings of abandonment and a sense of displacement.

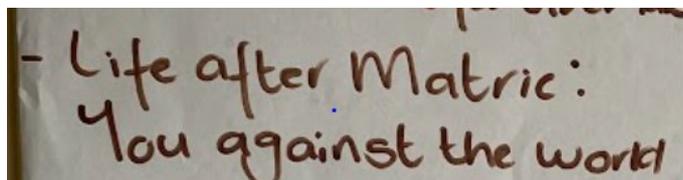
Family, parents, and family construction

In South Africa, as in many locations, families are constructed and intersected in fluid and complex ways (Theron & Van Breda, 2021). For the young people in our discussion groups, parental expectations were a significant source of pressure, which they associated with depression. This was particularly the case for i) young people who were the eldest of the children living at home, ii) for young people who were refugee/asylum seekers (and who therefore had restricted access to services), and iii) for young people living in single parent households. These groups all spoke about wanting to be able to have elders listen to them in a more open way, particularly about their futures, their hopes and aspirations (which to them appeared to be at odds with traditional or expected pathways to success).



Transitions

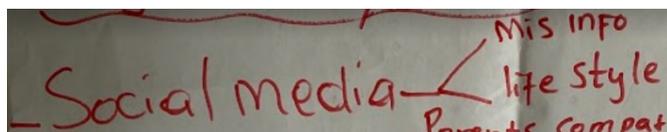
The young people told us that they were frightened and worried about what would happen to them once they left formal education at 18 (at which time they would take their 'matriculation', or 'matric'), higher education, or training. For those who were in higher education, particularly from refugee families, the cost of registration and course fees were the cause of lost sleep, anxiety, and thoughts of turning to potentially harmful lifestyle



choices in order to continue their studies. All of the young people wanted to 'make it' in life, although this manifested in many different ways. However, they did not feel

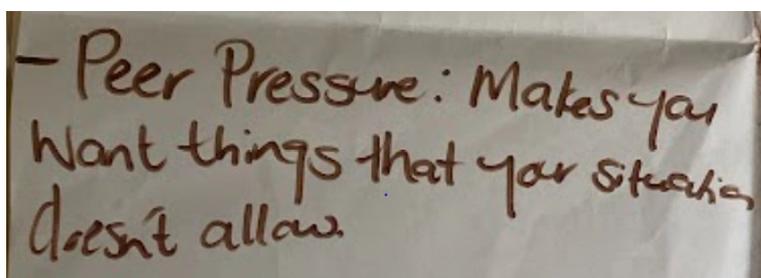
system-level support for their aspirations, rather, for them, it was "life after matric – you against the world."

Relationships and interactions with others



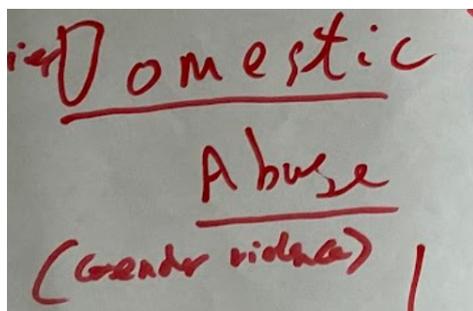
For the young people in our discussion groups, relationships were heavily influenced by their use of *digital technologies*, and the *gender-based norms* that were prevalent in their day-to-day lives. They told us about the ways in which their romantic relationships formed under pressure, and could then easily lead to abusive or violent circumstances. They also

told us that constant comparisons with others as seen on social media, peer pressure, pressure to conform (entirely age-appropriate), pressure to fit in, meant they

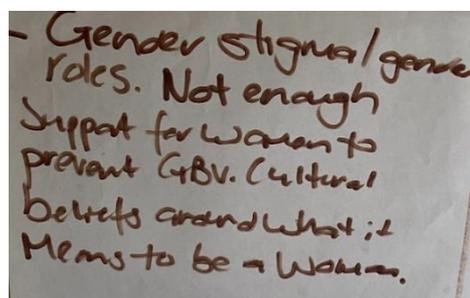


were constantly dissatisfied or felt a sense of failure. As one participant said, "Peer pressure makes you want things that your situation won't allow".

Violence



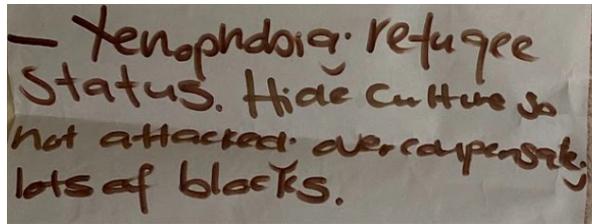
Violence is an ongoing challenge in South Africa (Tomlinson et al., 2022). The young people in our discussion



space told us that gender stigma and roles, gender-based violence and child/domestic/interpersonal abuse were a feature of their everyday lives. For them, most

daily interactions meant being exposed to one or more of these violent situations. The female-presenting young people spoke more frequently about this type of violence than their male counterparts.

For a subset of the young people – those born in other countries in Africa – this was further

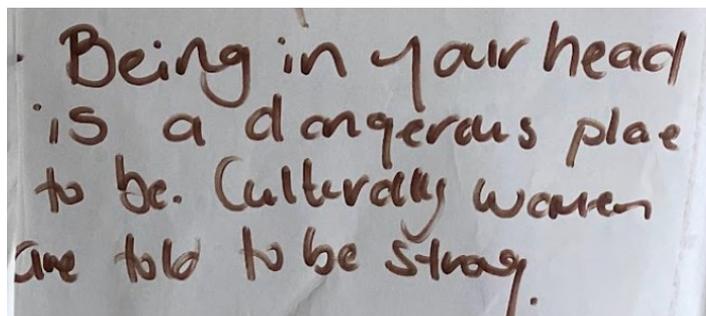


compounded by violent xenophobia, and a sense of constant fear and oppression. This was spoken about by both male- and female-presenting young people. This was also the case for another subset – those who had moved from rural to urban settings, although

this latter was raised more frequently by male-presenting young people.

Internal stressors

The young people acknowledged that some of their challenges were those that existed internally.



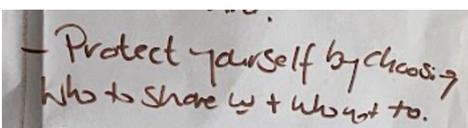
They did not have access to therapy, and faced with the choice between therapy and a meal for the family, they knew this was not a choice their parents could make for them. They told us that they would value more “coachship” in their lives – people who had similar experiences,

or who could guide them through the self-reflection needed to make changes in their lives, even if they had very limited options with regard to the changes they could make. This connected to the disjoint that they felt between the reality of their day-to-day lives, and the dreams they were invited to build based on social media or the activities they enjoyed.

Resources

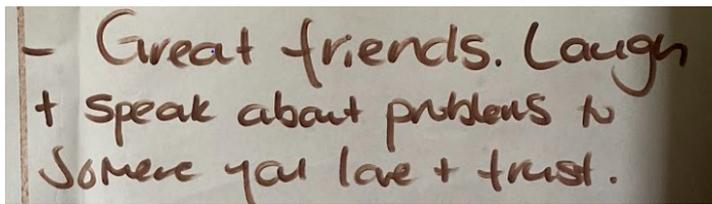
The young people offered 4 strategies that they felt were important in managing the risk of depression, even under especially challenging (sometimes chronic) stressors.

Internal processes

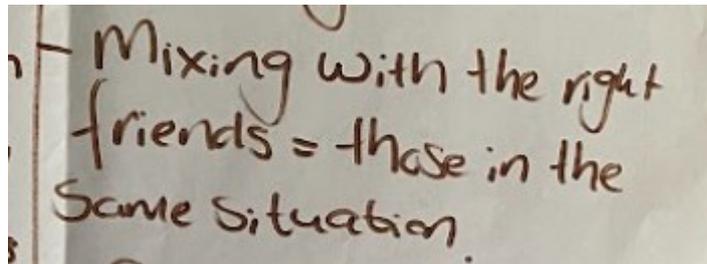


As with the challenges they identified, the young people told us that some of the work they did to address the threat of depression was internal – they spoke explicitly of the importance of self-acceptance, self-knowledge, and self-protection in this context.'

Relationships



- Great friends. Laugh + speak about problems to someone you love + trust.



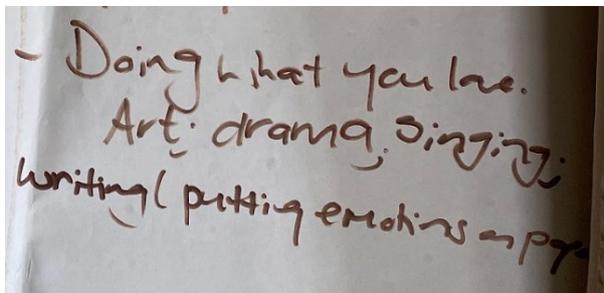
- Mixing with the right friends = those in the same situation.

Unsurprisingly, as much as the young people found their relationships to be a possible source of depressive feelings, they also found both familial, platonic, and romantic relationships to be a source of strength and sustenance in difficult circumstances. All of the groups told us that building trust was sometimes difficult to facilitate, but was a fundamental prerequisite to those relationships offering the kind of mental health support they

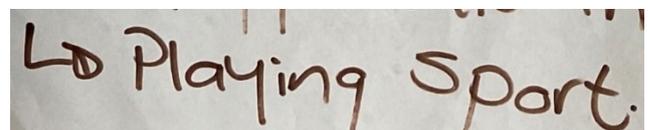
needed.

Activities

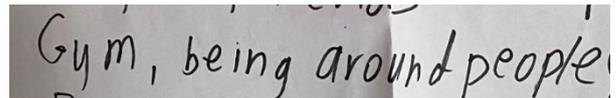
“Doing what you love” was a common theme for all groups during our discussions. Physical activity, religion and spirituality, and music were all mentioned, as well as slightly more niche activities such as drama, art, and journaling. One group also mentioned that good food was an important source of calm during difficult times.



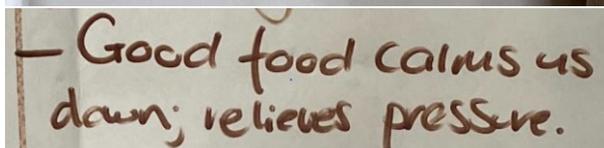
- Doing what you love.
Art, drama, singing,
writing (putting emotions on paper)



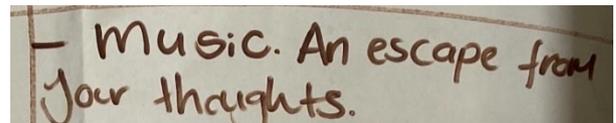
- Playing Sport.



Gym, being around people.

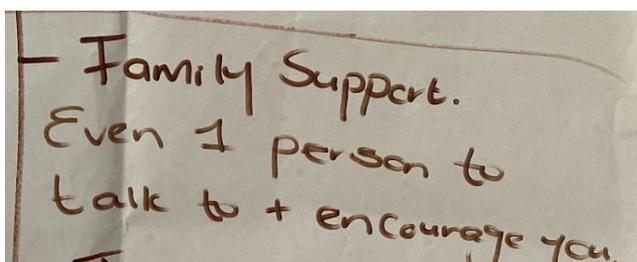


- Good food calms us down; relieves pressure.



- Music. An escape from your thoughts.

Space



- Family Support.
Even 1 person to talk to + encourage you.

While most of the young people did not talk about drawing strength or assurance from their traditional or cultural roots, they did reference the importance of knowing “where I come from, where I want to go”, and “a place where I can go back to”. For some, even school offered a

place of safety.

Conclusion

What we heard from these young people was that their lives are very challenging, and there are times when they feel vulnerable to – or experience – depression. There is an urgent need to develop a study of multisystemic resilience to depression with Africa(n) young people. This should be understood as a clarion call to those working in research and research-informed practice to bring our disciplinary and sectoral perspectives together to create a more meaningful response to the mental health of these young people, and their peers both across the African continent and in African youth diaspora.

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