

My name is Keendi Mwangi, a girl advocate for the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. My biggest concern with our youth is the little awareness of mental health and the continually increasing rates of substance abuse. This has become a pressing problem as more and more youth turn to drugs like alcohol, Cannabis drugs and nicotine drugs for some type of release. In my community many youths feel misunderstood by elders, parents and even peers. They do not feel like they can be open and honest in regards to their personal struggles because of the fear that their perspectives will be overlooked. They do not feel heard. Many a time, this leads to them making destructive choices in the name of 'only living once'

What leads to this? The lack of a trust foundation between parents, children and counselors. Friends of mine have had incidents where they have spoken out to a counselor about their issues. Breaking the doctor-patient privilege, the counselors told the parents everything the child had told them. This fostered a lack of trust, making them keep everything to themselves at the risk of history repeating itself.

A lot of the time, what is referred to as the 'last resort' is brought about by peer pressure. To start to salvage what has been lost, I have started a program at my school, known as 'Roundtables'. Its slogan is 'Not Okay and That's Okay. It is by the youth, to the youth, for the youth-a safe space, meant for listening, not advising (unless it is necessary).

People can come together and talk about the things that are affecting us as the youth, and where we can, we try to find solutions to these problems.

The strategy I would suggest to ensure full-circle outreach, is introducing this program to schools all over the country where it will be welcomed. Additionally, we could have monthly meetings in a central venue so that the youth who may not be in the schools can be reached, each venue will have trusted youth mediator. With the key intention being listening, because we all have something to say, but we never seem to really hear each other,

I hope to continue to work with the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary in conjunction with the UN to ensure our youth feel safe and involved, indulging in the kind of conversations that create ideas for a better and healthier future. Thank you.