

Being_

YOUTH VOICES

The title 'YOUTH VOICES' is rendered in large, dark teal, block letters. Each letter is filled with various illustrations: 'Y' has a small orange and black striped insect; 'O' features a person with orange hair and a teal shirt; 'U' contains a teal cloud; 'T' shows a person with dark hair and a teal shirt with one arm raised; 'H' is decorated with teal leaves and an orange flower. 'V' includes a teal watering can and a plant; 'O' has a large orange flower; 'I' features a small orange and black striped insect; 'C' shows a hand holding a teal stem with an orange flower; 'E' has a teal leaf; 'S' is decorated with teal leaves, an orange circle, and small orange diamonds.

**Anthology of Personal Stories
from the Being Advisors**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Youth engagement and my
mental health journey** 1
by Oriana Ortiz Parrao,
Being Youth Advisor, Mexico

**How youth engagement has
positively impacted my life** 2
by Muskan Lamba,
Being Youth Advisor, India

**How my lived experiences
shaped the programs I've led** 3
By Sankhulani Daka, Being
Lived Experience Advisor,
Zambia

**Meaningful engagement in
youth mental health through
lived experience** 4
by Stuti Jhaveri, Being Lived
Experience Advisor, India

**Reflections from the Youth
Voices report and their
potential impact on future
youth mental health** 5
by Jaclyn Schess,
Being Youth Advisor, USA



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND MY MENTAL HEALTH JOURNEY

By Oriana Ortiz Parrao, Youth Advisor, Mexico

Shortly after graduating from college, I began working at the YMCA—one of the largest youth-focused organizations in the world. My role involved supporting mental health in Latin America and youth engagement initiatives—areas where I had very little experience. At the same time, I was navigating my own transition into adulthood while struggling with mental health challenges. I had battled impostor syndrome for years, lived with a diagnosed anxiety disorder since I was 16, and was recovering from burnout. In 2024, I was diagnosed with depression, marking a pivotal moment in my life.

While grappling with my own mental health challenges, I found purpose in the youth engagement initiatives I am part of. I didn't expect the work to have such a profound impact on my own mental health journey. Yet, through my involvements, I discovered the strength to manage my struggles with depression and anxiety. When I first joined the Being Youth Advisory Group, I was overwhelmed by a wave of impostor syndrome, questioning, "Who am I to speak about mental health and youth empowerment? I'm barely managing my own struggles, and I'm not an expert." But I found safe spaces where I could not only learn and share my experiences but also listen to others and grow from their insights.

My involvement with the Being Initiative has not only helped me become more confident, but it has also empowered me to advocate more openly for mental health—including my own. Youth engagement is not just about advocating for others—it's about recognizing our own power. Even in moments when I feel like an

imposter, I realize that my voice mattered. The more I engaged, the more I saw the profound impact we can have when we, as young people, come together.

To anyone considering youth engagement in mental health, I urge you not to hold back. Even if you feel like you're not "enough," your voice matters. We, young people, are not just the future—we are actively shaping the present. Take initiative. The spaces you engage in will provide you with a platform to change the system for the better, as they will also help you grow.

To partners, allies, and funders: you play a crucial role in amplifying the impact of youth engagement in mental health. Youth engagement isn't just a buzzword—it's a call to action. We need your active support, spaces where our voices are not only heard but truly valued. The more you listen, fund, and empower us to lead, the greater the transformation we'll see in how mental health is addressed at every level. For funders, this means prioritizing resources for youth-led initiatives. For mental health organizations, it's about rethinking your approaches to ensure that young people are genuinely at the center of the conversation. Lasting change requires everyone on board.

The impact of youth engagement goes far beyond personal growth—it sparks a ripple effect that transforms our collective present and future. Being part of youth engagement initiatives has had a profound impact on my healing journey, fueling my strength, resilience, and purpose.

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THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT ON MY JOURNEY

By Muskan Lamba, Being Youth Advisor, India

My time as a Youth Advisor with the Being team has deepened my compassion, agency, and sense of responsibility toward my own lived experience. It's helped me see the value in my own stories—realizing that there's no single "right" way to contribute to mental health. **Sometimes, the most powerful thing you can do is simply show up as you are, share your narrative, and allow yourself to be witnessed.** I'm learning that there's immense power in that.

Through this team, I've felt cared for, nurtured, and truly seen, given space to articulate my own vocabulary of experience. It's been incredibly meaningful to work with an empathetic team of people who listen deeply and remain genuinely curious. Curiosity is a game-changer—it breeds more curiosity within me, pushing me to ask better questions, expand my understanding, and remain open to learning.

One of the greatest gifts of this experience has been connecting with like-minded peers. Meeting brilliant young people, both online and offline, has given me a profound sense of meaning and strengthened my hope to work in youth mental health for a lifetime. I've had the opportunity to engage with experts, to be listened to, to co-create alongside them, and to exchange ideas, which has been empowering.

Professionally, this experience has opened doors, tapping into the right networks, understanding mental health ecosystems on both local and global levels, and developing a curiosity that traditional university education doesn't necessarily nurture. I've also picked up impactful terminology—advisory, funding strategies, ecosystem change—which is quite cool! Beyond that, it's been an incredible space to learn about socio-cultural sensitivities—how youth experiences differ across geographies, how to listen with greater intention, and how to expand on my purpose as a young person.





HOW MY LIVED EXPERIENCES SHAPED THE PROGRAMS I'VE LED

By Sankhulani Daka, Being Lived Experience Advisor, Zambia

I once read a statement that said, "It's usually the kindest people who are hurting the most. This is because they know what pain feels like and wouldn't wish it on anyone else." It has been the case with me; having gone through deep mental health struggles accorded me a profound understanding of pain, mental health issues and the gaps in our healthcare system. It was that understanding that gave me the strength and courage to start providing mental health care and education to vulnerable populations as well as advocating for policy change. From my lived experience, I have learned that mental health advocacy requires a holistic approach, acknowledging the intersections of mental health with social determinants, systemic injustices and personal narratives. I have sought to create spaces that prioritize authenticity, inclusivity and empowerment, advocating for policies and practices that address the root causes of mental health issues.

Through my journey, I have come to realize the importance of amplifying marginalized voices, promoting cultural sensitivity and fostering a sense of community. **I believe that by sharing our stories, listening to each other's experiences and supporting one another, we can break down stigma and create a more compassionate society.** My commitment to mental health advocacy is rooted in my own experiences, and I remain dedicated to creating positive change and promoting healing for everyone who has gone through stressful or traumatic situations.

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MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT IN YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH LIVED EXPERIENCE

By Stuti Jhaveri, Being Lived Experience Advisor, India

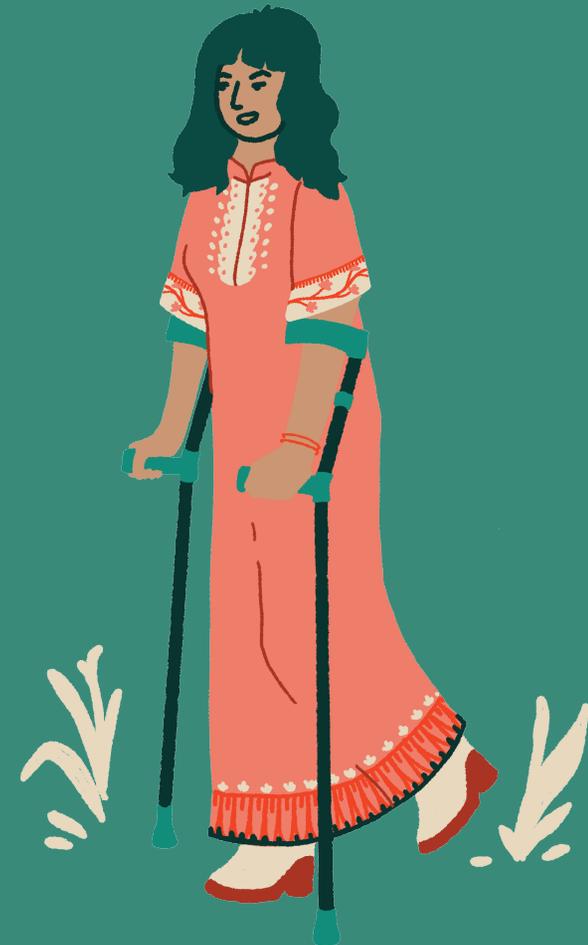
One major gap in current solutions for youth mental health is the lack of authentic youth engagement. Despite being one of the primary beneficiaries of these programs, young people are often excluded from the decision-making process. This results in initiatives that may look good on paper but fail to address the unique needs and concerns of the youth they aim to support.

I was reminded of this gap when I worked with a teenager struggling with depression. His school had referred him to counselling, but he told me, “They just gave me a checklist. I don’t think they even know who I am.” His words highlighted what so many young people feel—that mental health solutions often focus on fixing problems rather than understanding experiences. This is why, I deeply resonate with organizations like Huesofthemind that prioritize lived experiences and peer-led support.

Huesofthemind creates spaces where young people don’t just receive help—they actively shape the conversations and programs. Their approach ensures that mental health support is not just clinical but also deeply personal and relatable. Meaningful engagement is essential to creating a mental health system that truly supports young people. It involves involving them in every stage of the process—from design to implementation. It means listening to their voices, respecting their opinions, and valuing their expertise.

When young people have a hand in shaping these programs, they feel a sense of ownership and empowerment, making them more likely to engage and benefit. **If we truly want a youth-led, youth-focused mental health system, we must shift from doing things for youth to doing things with youth because no checklist will ever be as powerful as feeling heard.**

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REFLECTIONS FROM THE YOUTH VOICES REPORT AND THEIR POTENTIAL IMPACT ON FUTURE YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

By Jaclyn Schess, Being Youth Advisor, USA

Reflecting on the insights from the Being Youth Voices report offers a critical opportunity to shift youth engagement in mental health solutions from tokenism to meaningful, impactful involvement. The future that those reflections paint is one where the priorities of young people are front and center in decision-making on mental health programming and funding. This means unlocking the potential of many youth-led and youth-serving organizations to scale up the solutions they know from first-hand experience will make the most difference instead of being sidelined for the traditional voices in this space. I hope this brings significantly more attention and funding to the importance and impact of prevention in youth mental health, considerations for the broader contexts in which young people exist, and the ways that intersectional lived experiences shape mental health outcomes.

Beyond this, as political environments continue to turn away from pluralistic governance, we risk young people becoming disengaged as they grapple with fear and despair. **Mental health funders can play a critical role by giving young people a space for their voices to be heard and respected, building agency in tumultuous environments.** As this happens in my home country, I am acutely aware of the instinct to disengage. I am glad to have environments like the Youth Advisory Group at Being to make my voice heard. Youth engagement, therefore, goes beyond the success of individual projects, having the potential to provide a counterweight to marginalization where young people can build agency that transforms their relationship with their communities and the world.



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