


YU's Making Space Focus on Youth and Mental Health.
yugta.ca
**Making space
for mental
health.**

BY DANI HOOVER |
LAUNCH COACHING
COORDINATOR

It has been a joy for me to join the Editorial Team for this issue of Youth Unlimited's *Signs of the Times*. This issue focuses on the second major direction of our four-year strategic pathway, "Making Space." Our focus is: **We will intentionally accompany youth in the midst of their mental health challenges, with the hope that they feel well-supported and are better able to flourish.** As we work with an increasing number of youth across the city wrestling with mental health challenges, we know God does not promise us a life without challenge or suffering. He *does* promise that he will always be with us in the midst of it. At YU, we have the privilege of showing God's tangible presence by walking with these young people with love and care. 📌

WE'RE MOVING
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**Being present in the
midst of struggle.**

BY BENJAMIN OSEI | JANE-FINCH OUTREACH WORKER

When I first started working with youth in this community back in 2000, I found it very challenging. I faced behaviours that I could not understand or diagnose. I quickly came to realize something was not right – there was some underlying issue going on. I can say now, it was and is mental health.

Many youth in these communities have been exposed to violence and

this directly affects them. Because of this, most of these youth struggle with mental health issues. The assumption and prejudice about youth in communities like Jane-Finch is that they are all criminals. The behaviours that may seem deviant are in fact undiagnosed mental health challenges. They are not getting into trouble because they are inherently bad, but because

they are experiencing very real challenges in their head, which they don't understand. If undiagnosed, this behaviour can become repetitive and get them into a lot of trouble with the law. The system is not sympathetic towards these youth. In many cases their own parents even deny the underlying issues. It is very easy for parents to burn out and give up. This can be very harmful for the youth because they don't get access to the treatment they need.

But overall, I do see the stigma breaking down. More and more youth are being diagnosed and getting the help they need. Programs and supports are being

set up to address the issue of mental health for both youth and their parents. Organizations like Youth Unlimited are unique in the approach of walking with a youth facing mental health challenges. We offer long-term one-to-one relationships. Our youth workers in Jane-Finch help youth with basic life skills, accompanying them to appointments and following up so they feel supported. For a youth to know that someone will sit and listen with them speaks volumes. Our presence in the midst of struggle is key. 📌

FACTS
Mental Health

- 70% of mental health disorders begin in adolescence
- Wait times are as long as 18 months for professional counselling and therapy
- 28% of students report not knowing where to turn when they experience mental health challenges
- Only 30% of people struggling with mental health will seek help. This means of the estimated 250,000 children and youth in Toronto experiencing mental health problems, only about 75,000 will seek help



Youth give voice to their struggle.

We interviewed two young people we serve (and love!) and here they courageously (and anonymously) share a window into their own journey with their mental health, and how Youth Unlimited was able to support them through it all.

What mental health challenges were you struggling with when you first began your journey with Youth Unlimited?

STEPPING STONES: I remember one of the first landscaping jobs we did, we stopped for lunch and I was wearing a t-shirt which revealed a few fresh self-harming wounds. My supervisor noticed them and commented on them, I quickly brushed it off as no big deal and looked away. Along with self-harming, I struggled with suicidal thoughts, anxiety, and depression.

LAUNCH: Throughout high school I struggled heavily with anxiety. Overthinking and fear would easily consume my mind and make it difficult for me to live my life day to day.

Did you or do you have any ways that help you cope when you are struggling?

S: I was a person that kept to myself. I never expressed what I was feeling outwardly. But I did find a few activities that I could do on my own when I felt overwhelmed. I would hop on my bike and go for a long ride or start watching Youtube videos. I also smoked, maybe not the most positive method, but for me it provided a temporary calmness.

L: Cooking was a creative outlet I used to ease my mind and shift my focus off of fear. I joined a cooking class at school, which allowed me to put my energy into something I loved and gave me a temporary calmness. Cooking uses all the senses, making it a helpful coping mechanism.

How did YU accompany you and what does that mean to you?

S: Eventually as I got to know and spend more time working with my supervisor,

I was able to open up about my scars and cuts. This has opened up our communication and I share with him what I am dealing with. He is someone I can go to when I get stuck on an anxious thought and he helps me work through it.

L: I've always wanted to work in ministry and feared my anxiety would hold me back. So I joined the Leadership Course to help boost my confidence as a leader. The class challenged my abilities, pushing me outside my comfort zone. I was finally able to see the potential others pointed out in me for myself. LAUNCH helped me realize that no matter how small, I can make a difference.

Where have you seen signs of hope or God in the midst of journeying with mental health?

S: I always dreamed of running my own business. But my anxiety and depression took over and this dream seemed to get further and further away. Since starting at Stepping Stones, I have started to make designs and plans for my business. I am making practical steps, like getting my drivers license, towards this dream. I can say that I am looking forward to the future. As my anxiety and depression has become more manageable, I am able to

develop more positive relationships with my family.

L: Even when my anxiety felt like it was running my life, I would do my best to remember God is in control. In times when my mind would be spinning, I would call out to God and He would provide a sense of peace. Even though my anxiety made it hard for me to trust everything and everyone, I was able to trust God and He lifted me out of the pit.

What does life look like for you today?

S: I have stopped self-harming! I still struggle with anxious thoughts, but I am now able to recognize them and don't fixate on them like I used to. Overall, I feel healthier. I am eating a lot better and my mind feels more calm and at ease.

L: I am in my second year of Intercultural Studies at Vanguard Bible College. I am also working towards a Youth Minor as my dream is to work with youth overseas. Over the past two years, my faith has grown immensely. Honestly, I still struggle with a bit of anxiety but my confidence continues to grow. Before LAUNCH I never thought I would be here, I thought my anxiety would hold me back from achieving my dreams. But here I am. :) 🗨

A volunteer's voice: Supporting youth mental health on the streets of Toronto.



BY REBEKAH ERMEL | LIGHT PATROL OUTREACH VOLUNTEER

People who have unstable living situations, like those the Light Patrol team reaches out to on the streets of Toronto, have many stressors that negatively affect their mental health. Factors such as food and housing insecurity are a reality our friends face every day. We connect with youth who have been through the foster care system, who need to make decisions about getting an abortion, and others who have been struggling with addiction their entire lives. It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the challenges in

this community; I've felt the weight of it while on outreach.

One night, I remember listening to a girl who was pregnant and hearing her anxieties around needing to find housing before the baby was born. I left that conversation asking myself if I did or said enough. After receiving Mental Health First Aid Training through YU, I was encouraged to know that simply listening and validating her emotions was significant. She actually returned to outreach and over the past couple

of months Light Patrol has helped her get situated into housing! These conversations could be the motivation youth need to seek professional help and healing.

I feel better equipped and more confident to have difficult conversations with the youth that Light Patrol works with. By being a listening ear and acknowledging their feelings, they can feel supported and hopeful for the future. 🗨





Supporting our “Making Space” mental health focus: Our three-fold plan.



BY HELEN WYSE | PERSONNEL DIRECTOR

Our desire as YU leaders and supervisors is to equip and support our frontline workers as they, in turn, walk alongside youth who are vulnerable, including those who struggle with mental health challenges. Our staff and volunteers have huge hearts of compassion for

youth in need across our vast city. And those hearts are often burdened and broken. In order to prepare and strengthen them for this calling, we seek to intentionally build supports around staff and volunteers. First, we provide training. This starts with intentional training.

1 Training

BONNIE

THE SHOP
YOUTH
WORKER



BEFORE

When we first introduced the Making Space Strategic Pathway in February 2019, our staff realized the importance of the Mental Health focus, but felt unequipped.

BONNIE WONG: I need to be better equipped to work with youth struggling with mental health. The youth we work with are facing major challenges and it can be emotionally draining to journey with them.

SAM

VICTORIA
VILLAGE
OUTREACH
WORKER



SAM MO: As we engage more in the area of mental health, I hope it starts (or continues) to encourage youth to come forward if they are suffering from mental health issues and that it becomes less taboo.

ANDREW

LAKESHORE
OUTREACH
WORKER



ANDREW IRONSIDE: I am encouraged by Youth Unlimited's decision to focus more specifically on mental health - there is such a great need for us to start talking about it. If I'm honest, I find mental health to be a very "weighty" topic, with many complexities and challenging realities for youth and youth workers alike. Personally, I feel quite inadequate when it comes to helping people struggling with mental health, and know I have a lot to learn.

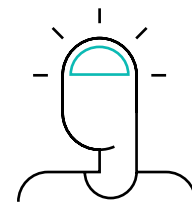
AFTER

In February 2020, every staff member participated in a 2-day Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training. The training was practical and provided the necessary skills to instill confidence in our staff to journey with youth struggling with mental health.

B: MHFA gave us the tools to identify some of the common signs and symptoms in individuals struggling with mental health. Non-judgmental listening and showing our support through validation are key in walking with these youth!

S: I respect our Leadership Team for equipping its staff through MHFA training. I am now able to recognize and catch signs in the youth I work with who may be struggling with mental health. I couldn't do this before. This is an invaluable skill to have in our ministries.

A: The MHFA training was significant for me and my role working with youth. Specifically, my confidence and comfort level with engaging in mental health conversations has grown immensely. This includes speaking to (and listening to) youth about their own journey with suicidal thoughts, anxiety, and self-harm. We learned that youth may feel ashamed or scared when facing these challenges, and that finding a trusted person who will listen well and speak directly to their situation can make a world of difference. Already, I find myself using the skills I have learned in this training.



So many of our youth and young adults struggle with mental health issues and our staff have the opportunity to be a safe, grassroots support - which is invaluable. While some youth will require professional help, I believe so many would simply benefit from caring, consistent adults in their lives. We can really make a difference here.

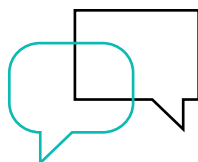
MELISSA WILLIAMS

2

Peer Consultants



Second, we have extended the role of two staff members whose education can support staff as they support youth.



MARIANNE

**YOUTH
OUTREACH
WORKER**

MARIANNE DEEKS: My role at YU will focus on providing education and support for our staff in regards to youth mental health. I provide an outlet for staff to talk through the issues they see in their youth concerning seeking further help or how to walk with these youth. I am able to offer free counselling to staff, as they navigate some of their own mental health issues. I facilitate training days on a variety of topics such as trauma, addictions and boundaries.



ANN

**COUNSELLING
AND COMMUNITY
CONSULTANT**

ANN STOCKER: My role supports staff and programs by working with community agencies to build a strong referral network for programs. Access to these supports will provide additional tools for staff, and create a broader foundation of care for the youth and families we serve. As staff are supported and resourced, youth and families will experience more support and feel resourced. These connections, referral networks and wrap around care will provide opportunities for new engagement with vulnerable youth, families, and community partners.

3

Inner Wellbeing



Thirdly, we prioritize the inner wellbeing of our workers. Regular meetings with Team Shepherds for soul care, group and solo prayer retreats, holding workers accountable to attend to their own whole-person wellbeing and periodic sabbaticals are all examples of our structures of care. We know we can only bring the Shalom of God to youth if we ourselves are abiding within it. 📖

Youth Unlimited staff updates.

We would like to welcome the following to our staff team:

- **MELAT HAILU**
Young Parents Associate Director
- **BEN HARTHOLT**
The Shop Program Assistant
- **ABI VANDERHEYDEN**
The Shop Receptionist
- **EMMA ANNESLEY**
Young Parents Program Lead
- **ELITA FUNG**
Assistant to the Personnel Director
- **KEVIN VERKAIK**
Stepping Stones Lead Hand
- **HUE FRANCIS**
DOXA Worship Arts Coordinator
- **PAUL BUCHAN**
Jane-Finch Outreach Worker

We also have 2 new Interns:

- **RAFAEL GONZALES**
Communications and Sports Outreach Intern
- **DAVID WILLIAMS**
BECC Intern

We're excited to have **DAVID ANNESLEY** join the Personnel Team as Project Assistant.

Staff on the move:

- **MARK EASTWOOD** has shifted to Durham Region Outreach Worker
- **KAREN BAST** has transferred from YFC Highlands to be a Light Patrol Outreach Worker
- **MARK EGGENGOR** has moved to a Staff role as Stepping Stones Manager

Congrats to **BECKY CRIPPS, FAYE EVANS** and **ANDREW IRONSIDE'S** South Central Etobicoke Ministry graduating from Frontiers to become its own ministry team!

During this current pandemic, we have had to place new interns and staff hiring on pause, an incredibly difficult decision. Please join us in praying for those who were in the process of joining our team—that God would sustain them in this waiting season. 📖