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To evaluate the effectiveness of an experiential learning intervention in improving adolescents' knowledge and understanding of self-esteem as a key component of mental health literacy

Background

Adolescence (ages 10–19), as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), is a critical developmental stage marked by identity formation, heightened emotional sensitivity, and increased vulnerability to mental health conditions. Globally, mental health disorders contribute to 16% of the burden of disease among adolescents, with depression ranked as the fourth leading cause of illness and suicide as the third leading cause of death among those aged 15–19 (World Health Organization, 2021). In Kenya, adolescent mental health challenges are increasingly prevalent but remain under-addressed due to stigma, low awareness, and limited access to mental health services. A 2020 report by Kenya's Ministry of Health indicates that nearly one in four adolescents experience significant symptoms of depression, anxiety, or psychological distress.

Low self-esteem, characterized by negative self-perception, feelings of inadequacy, and poor self-worth is a major risk factor that contributes to these challenges, often affecting academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and emotional resilience. Mental health literacy, defined as the knowledge and beliefs that enable recognition, management, or prevention of mental health disorders (Jorm, 2012), is critical for early intervention and adolescent well-being.

Objective

To evaluate the effectiveness of an experiential learning intervention in improving adolescents' knowledge and understanding of self-esteem as a key component of mental health literacy.

Methods

This study was conducted through DIP-CO, a purpose-driven social enterprise that equips children (3–12), teens (13–19), and young adults (20–24) with the emotional intelligence, life skills, and leadership capacity needed to thrive in a complex world. DIP-CO implements a dual-impact approach: youth-focused programs cultivate self-awareness and values-based decision-making, while parallel sessions support mindful parenting.

DIP-CO designed and implemented the Holiday Escapade program, a three-day experiential learning intervention delivered in churches and schools across Nairobi, Kenya. The program enrolled 87 adolescents aged 13–19. Activities included interactive workshops, storytelling, small-group reflections, and guided self-awareness exercises facilitated by trained DIP-CO mentors. A pre-intervention assessment consisting of four structured questions was used to establish baseline understanding of self-esteem, emotional regulation, and self-worth. On Day 3, post intervention data were gathered using attendance records and participant feedback questionnaires that captured shifts in knowledge, engagement levels, and reflections.

Results

Of the 87 adolescents enrolled, 71 attended Day 1, 77 attended Day 2, and all 87 completed Day 3. Pre-assessment data were collected from 71 participants, while all 87 completed post-assessments. Results indicated significant improvements in participants' understanding of self-esteem and its connection to emotional well-being. Feedback revealed recurring concerns around sexuality, adolescent pregnancy, parent-child relationships, emotional development, and romantic relationships. Many participants reported increased interest in personal growth, emotional intelligence, and improved communication. Key takeaways included the importance of self-worth, healthy friendships, and making value-based decisions.

Conclusion

Experiential learning programs like DIP-CO's Holiday Escapades present a promising, community-based model for enhancing mental health literacy among adolescents in urban African settings. By fostering early

self-awareness and emotional resilience, such interventions can play a pivotal role in supporting adolescent mental health, particularly in environments with limited access to formal mental health education and care services.

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