Health Systems Research Unit
& Office of AIDS and TB Research

# Research Briefs

## *"Girls get stressed due to the situation we are facing"*:
Multi level mental health stressors and resilience enablers among adolescent girls and young women in South Africa

### Authors

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## SUMMARY

- Poor mental health, including high levels of stress, is associated with increased risk behaviours resulting in negative sexual and reproductive health (SRH) outcomes amongst adolescent girls and young women (AGYW)

- We explored South African AGYW's narratives of stressors, coping strategies, and impacts of participating in an intervention on mental well-being.

- We found intersecting factors across individual, interpersonal, microlevel and structural levels that are salient mental health stressors experienced by AGYW

- Respondents who had participated in the Imagine Programme reported improved mental health and well-being due to increased access to psychosocial support.

### Implications:

Future interventions to support AGYW mental wellbeing should consider:

- Strengthening and bolstering resilience enabling resources available to AGYW

- Enhancing AGYW's competence and self-efficacy in accessing psychosocial support

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## THE ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

- Poor mental health, inclusive of depression, anxiety, trauma and stress, increases risk behaviours amongst adolescents and young people (AYP).

- Sexual risk behaviours can increase when mental health is poor, and are associated with negative SRH outcomes such as HIV infection, inconsistent use of contraceptives, early and unintended pregnancy, and unsafe abortion amongst AGYW

- An individual's mental health status during adolescence affects education, future health, wellbeing and opportunities

- Multiple situational, socio-economic, environmental and contextual factors impact mental well-being of AYP

- AYP who grow up in socio-economically restricted settings face mental health stressors including higher levels of food insecurity, violence, substance use, and limited psychosocial support

- Psychological distress – often a precursor to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation – is associated with non-communicable diseases and poor SRH outcomes

- Evidence suggests that levels of psychological distress amongst adolescents have been steadily increasing, particularly amongst adolescent girls

- Growing acknowledgement of need to integrate mental health components into broader SRH programming for AYP in South Africa

## THE INTERVENTION: THE IMAGINE PROGRAMME

- The Imagine Programme was implemented 2023-2025 in selected schools in two South African communities characterised by high rates of HIV, early pregnancy and school drop-out: Moretele in the North West province, and Newcastle in Kwa Zulu Natal province

- The Imagine Programme included mental health components such as screening for depression, suicide and grief – to guide individual psycho-social counselling and/or referral for specialized services as needed

# IMAGINE
SOCIAL OUTCOMES-BASED CONTRACT

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- Coaching included tools such as discussion cards and games to build rapport and assess AGYW needs and discuss emotions, mental health and goal setting

- Additional psycho-social support was provided for AGYW identified as in need by programme Social Workers, alternatively they were referred to affiliated community service providers

- Imagine Programme Safe Spaces provided AGYW with access to psychological services and were staffed by trained social workers and coaches who conducted assessments to determine if AGYW require individual or group counselling.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- **Socio-ecological perspective:** an individual adolescent's mental health can be understood as the product of multiple interacting and intersecting levels of influence

- Using this model to examine multilevel mental health stressors can help to ensure that mental health interventions for adolescents are responsive and relevant to contextual needs

- In contrast to the negative response to stressors that some individuals have, there has been growing interest in why other individuals, faced with the same stressors, manage to cope, and even thrive, despite adversity – referred to as '**resilience**'

  o Resilience is not an individual's invulnerability to stress, but rather their ability to cope with stressors

  o An individual's ability to cope with and respond to feelings of psychological distress is crucial in mitigating the negative effect of stressors on their mental health and well-being.

## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

- We used the social-ecological model as a framework to analyse qualitative data collected through interviews with AGYW

- A total of 51 AGYW aged 15-24 years were interviewed 2022-2023, both before and after implementation of the Imagine Programme started

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## WHAT WE FOUND

We found intersecting factors across individual, interpersonal, microlevel and structural levels that are salient mental health stressors experienced by AGYW:

- **Individual level stressors:** low self-esteem, negative self-worth, lack of ability to articulate feelings, non-heteronormative sexuality, lack of hope for future, academic stress, and early childbearing

- Early childbearing (being a young mother) was a key stressor for several reasons: self-perceived lack of skills and capacity to be a parent; feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope; challenges continuing education; and anxiety and stress caused by unexpected pregnancies.

- Unexpected and unplanned pregnancies and early childbearing can cause anxiety and stress, and negatively impact on education, and as a result, AGYW struggle to cope with life's challenges and pressures.

  o AGYW lack knowledge and information about mental health and where to access support, and they also lack the skills and language to talk about their feelings and needs.

  o As a result AGYW feel emotionally isolated and unsupported, which, in some cases, can result in depression and suicidality.

### Microsystem / Interpersonal level factors

- Interpersonal level stressors: perceived lack of psychosocial support, emotional isolation, communication barriers, peer pressure and bullying

- Microlevel stressors at family or household level: violence, conflict and substance use

- Respondents described mental health stressors within the family, home, and household.

- Lack of access to sources of psycho-social support: feeling of lacking trusted people to confide in, creating a sense of emotional isolation.

- Lack of trusted support mechanisms and specialised trained counselling.

- Communication barriers combined with a lack of connectedness to caring and supportive adults, such as teachers and parents, further prevent AGYW from accessing support.

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- Lacking psychosocial support during adolescence leaves AGYW more vulnerable to depression and unable to cope with life events and relationship stresses.

**Parents/caregivers:**

- Poor relationships with parents / caregivers, and communication gaps between AGYW and parents mean that AGYW do not get the support they need

- Absence of parental guidance was a significant source of stress as AGYW lack capacity to solve problems on their own.

- AGYW who experience parental neglect or abuse, and parents'/caregivers' alcoholism face high levels of mental health stressors.

- Situations of violence in the home, between parents, or having a parent as a victim of violence, enhanced mental health stressors experienced by AGYW.

**Peers / friends:**

- Conflictual relationships with peers in school environment and bullying, as well as receiving negative and body-shaming comments from boys.

- Peer pressure, and the desire to fit in and belong were a cause of stress and social anxiety.

## Macrosystem level

Structural level stressors: household food insecurity, economic hardship and gendered inequalities

- Circumstances of poverty, food insecurity, poor health, and neglect all impact negatively on mental health.

- Family financial situations are a key stressor.

- Gender inequities at the macro system level act as mental health stressors for AGYW:

- Burden of unpaid care work in households often falls on AGYW, who play key roles in caring for younger children, sick or elderly relatives, and undertaking domestic labour in the household- often at the expense of their education and mental health.

- Conflict with parents arises as a result of these gendered expectations and the burden of care that AGYW experience.

- Gender-based violence, domestic abuse, sexual violence, and a lack of personal safety for young women are also macrolevel stressors.

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## Coping strategies and resilience enablers

We found that some AGYW draw on internal individual resources and external interpersonal and contextual resources to increase resilience and promote coping:

### Individual level strategies/enablers:

- Self-esteem, positive thinking, and support-seeking were all individual level enablers

- Respondents described mental health self-care practices that they engaged in to cope with negative emotions.

- Making an effort to maintain a positive outlook and one's own emotional stability was described as a way of ensuring a calm and level outlook on life.
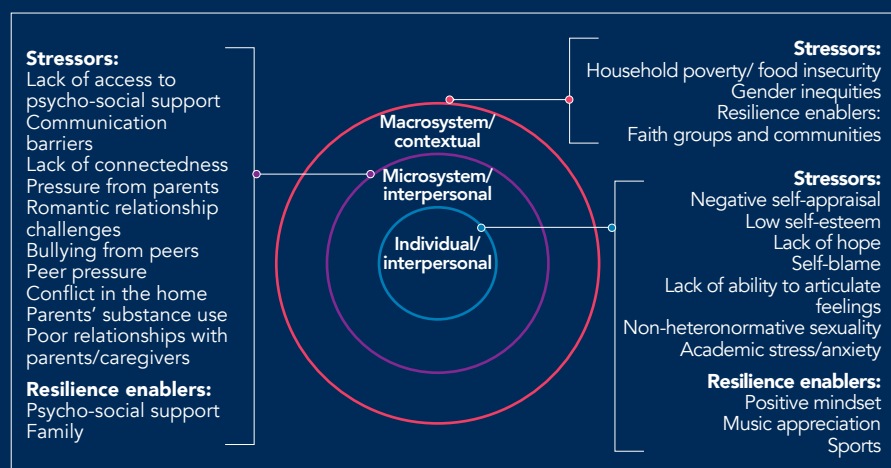
## Microsystem/interpersonal resilience strategies/enablers

- Seeking psychosocial and emotional support from family and community, and talking about feelings were interpersonal level enablers

- Resilient AGYW had trusting peers, family and broader community support with whom they could share with and seek guidance and support.

## Macrosystem/contextual resilience enablers

- In the broader community setting extending beyond family, respondents spoke about religious/faith groups and gatherings as a way of mitigating stressors and negative emotions.

- Social workers from the government's Department of Social Development were described as an important support mechanism.

### Stressors and resilience enabling resources presented by socio-ecological levels

**Stressors:**
Lack of access to psycho-social support
Communication barriers
Lack of connectedness
Pressure from parents
Romantic relationship challenges
Bullying from peers
Peer pressure
Conflict in the home
Parents' substance use
Poor relationships with parents/caregivers

**Resilience enablers:**
Psycho-social support
Family

Macrosystem/contextual

Microsystem/interpersonal

Individual/interpersonal

**Stressors:**
Household poverty/ food insecurity
Gender inequities
Resilience enablers:
Faith groups and communities

**Stressors:**
Negative self-appraisal
Low self-esteem
Lack of hope
Self-blame
Lack of ability to articulate feelings
Non-heteronormative sexuality
Academic stress/anxiety

**Resilience enablers:**
Positive mindset
Music appreciation
Sports

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AGYW perceptions of the mental health impacts of intervention participation

AGYW who had received Imagine programme services described positive impacts on their mental health:

- Mentorship and support provided by Imagine Programme staff helped build self-esteem.

- The perception of having access to Imagine Programme social workers to speak to made AGYW feel less emotionally isolated, happier and reduced stress levels.

- The feeling of knowing where to go for support and for reliable advice helped AGYW reduce levels of stress and worry.

- The perception of receiving psychosocial support through the Imagine Programme helped lighten burden of negative emotions.

> *Us girls have received assistance from this programme… girls like me, did not have people we can talk to about the challenges we're facing… So since there is Imagine, we're able to talk to the social worker and the coaches.*

> *To be honest I have never been so happy in my life… because I always worry or ask myself what is going to happen with me? Because it's noise at home, the stress they give to me, sometimes I even think why I'm I still on earth…I don't remember being happy. (But now) I'm happy.*

> *I was able to open up and share my story with my coach and that made me happy… I am a happy person, I'm free and I am enjoying the life I am living now.*

> *After that (counselling) session I felt more lighter, like I was able to move on… I vented out.*

> *I was helped by an Imagine social worker… it is easier now that there are people I can talk to if I encounter any challenges.*

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## CONCLUSIONS

- Adolescent girls and youth women in South Africa experience intersecting and multi-level mental health stressors.

- Although factors at the interpersonal level are one of the key domains of negative mental health stressors, some AGYW also manage to draw on interpersonal resources to increase resilience and promote coping.

- For young people in South Africa, interpersonal relationships are a key factor determining their ability to cope with stressors

- It is not only negative qualities in interpersonal relationships that are predictive of mental health outcomes, but also positive aspects that need to be capitalised upon.

- It is critical to consider the interconnectedness between mental health and SRH amongst South African AGYW and ensure that interventions are responsive to these intersections.

- Mentorship and support provided through interventions such as the Imagine Programme can be successful in building AGYW self-esteem and fostering hope.

- Respondents' narratives about the impact of participating in the Imagine Programme show that interventions to support adolescents' psychological well-being can help young people to develop a sense of agency and acquire strategies for regulating their emotions and coping with psychological distress through self-introspection and maintaining a sense of future purpose.

- Psychosocial components of combination interventions such as the Imagine Programme have the potential to positively impact AGYW mental health through increasing AGYW's access to psychosocial support, building AGYW's self-esteem and skills for articulating personal challenges and seeking support, and fostering hope.

- In turn this can positively impact AGYW's capacity to cope with stressors, enhance resilience, and improve mental health and well-being.

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# RESEARCH BRIEFS

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Low self-esteem and poor emotional regulation skills are associated with poor mental health amongst adolescent girls. Agency, hope, self-esteem and self-efficacy are critical elements of an adolescent's resilience and ability to enact coping mechanisms.

  > *Therefore interventions need to strengthen agency, emotional regulation and AGYW's ability to draw on resources to respond to stressors.*

- Perceived social support is a critical aspect of adolescents' capacity for coping with stressors.

  > *Therefore interventions should include components to build adolescents' self-efficacy, and teach skills and strategies for coping through learning to seek social support.*

- Family context, particularly parental neglect or rejection, is one of the most salient factors in negative mental health stressors for adolescents and is consistently linked to psychological distress.

  > *Therefore mental health interventions for AGYW should focus on fostering positive interpersonal relationships and strengthening both formal and informal family and community level support and resilience enabling resources available to AGYW.*

- Interpersonal mental health stressors for adolescents include conflict at the family level, social isolation, peer rejection, and experiences of abuse; positive interpersonal relationships are drivers of mental well-being amongst adolescents.

  > *Therefore interventions should include activities designed to facilitate social connection through mentoring, peer support groups and provide accessible psychosocial support.*

Mental health interventions for AGYW need to take a multi-level approach to enabling individual internal resilience by strengthening interpersonal, social, contextual and structural resilience resources available.

## FUNDING

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