

Normal – Mental Well-Being Project Summary

What do you want to achieve by implementing the project? What are the objectives of your project?

The "normal - mental well-being" project was born from our passion to help young people improve their mental well-being. As a group of young people from rural Ireland, who have all had our own troubles with mental health, we felt it our duty to do something to make a difference.

In trying to find ways we can truly make a difference, we came across the European Solidarity Corps common value of solidarity and in particular the EU's message behind dealing with current and future societal problems. Not only do we believe that mental well-being is a future challenge that requires intervention, we truly believe that it is a crippling epidemic that requires immediate response, particularly in young people as we have seen our peers, friends and family bottle their inner demons and struggle with their mental well-being, all the while feeling they're the odd ones out. This is far from the truth, in reality every single person is fighting a battle that the whole world knows nothing about, meaning everyone's mental struggles are in fact "normal" and being different isn't a bad thing, it's "normal", however young people are blinded to see it that way, which we feel we can change. Our primary objective is to get the young people of Ireland to understand that they are "normal" and that mental struggles are "normal". Understanding this and breaking off the shackles unlocks life's potential. Showing young people this will drastically increase their participation in democratic life.

Too many young people struggle on a daily basis with their mental health. From minor overthinking, to crippling anxiety, our mental health really can bring us to our knees. Stigma, poor health services, and misinformation can lead certain young people to believe that they are "damaged", "beyond repair", "odd", the list goes on. As a result, many young people bottle up their problems, hiding their struggles, leading to worsening conditions, poor quality of life and even suicide. This should never be the case and as stated in National Suicide Prevention Policy, communities need to feel empowered to improve their mental well-being and we believe we can make a solid contribution to that by carrying out this project, through engaging with young people and sharing the knowledge that this is normal and providing insights, experiences, thoughts and advice to people just like us, who need assistance with their mental well-being.

As we all come from rural backgrounds, we have seen the stigma and "small-town" mindset creep into our everyday lives, constantly approaching mental health as a taboo topic and affecting our peers and nation's young people in drastic ways. Having been in those shoes, we really want to help make a difference in rural areas. Everyone is often asked the question "what would you tell your younger self, if you could go back", but we feel this project literally gives us an opportunity to do that as we'll be helping those young people that we once were and still are. This means that this project also tackles the European youth goals of Moving Rural Youth Forward and Inclusive societies with particular emphasis on the youth goal of Mental Health & Wellbeing.

In a nutshell (and we want to quote our member Conor here, a short snippet he said in a national radio interview in 2020), we want to grab stigma by the throat, and show people that mental illness is not nothing to be ashamed of, that being open and vulnerable about your emotions does not make you weak or less of a person, and that there is a life beyond our dark moments. We have seen

too many people fall - friends, family, neighbours, colleagues. We have had friends cry on our shoulders, we have seen the despair that comes from the bottling up of problems. We want to show the young people of this country that talking about your problems can change a life, and maybe even save a life. We hope that every audience member who sees our talks, every viewer to our posts and every reader of our blogs feels impacted, refreshed and revitalised by our transparency, honest and our message as a whole. We will get the young people of this country talking about their mental health.

What activities do you plan to carry out?

We want to show young people that it really is "normal" to have mental-health struggles and to share our own experiences with them and offer advice and support to young people as we have learnt that this is a very effective way of getting through to young people on the importance of the topic and getting them to take control of how they're feeling and open up about what may be bothering them. This can transform a person's approach to life and may even save a life. That means that our service primarily revolves around talks that essentially have us open up to groups of young people providing anecdotes, stories and lessons and sprinkling nuggets of info on how to identify potential issues in peers and offering advice to young people on what to do and who can help and encouraging them to open up to each other.

Multiple studies have shown that peer learning and experience sharing amongst young people leads to more more beneficial outcomes for young people and can lead to far better healing processes for those who find relatability in shared experiences. Furthermore, we have found through past experience that the power of reliability shines through when you open up to peers about mental health struggles. By talking to peers and sharing past experiences, we are encouraging them to open up, which always improves mental well-being and in many cases saves lives.

With that, this project is specifically aimed at young people, peers in a sense, as we know from past experiences that honesty, authenticity and personal anecdotes from peers is truly inspiring and tackles deep rooted issues far greater than hearing about them from non-peer groups. This will happen in a non-formal way in educational institutions and youth service centres across the country. There is over 667k young people between 15-25 in Ireland and if we adopt our mantra of our service truly benefitting 1 in 100 (a very conservative target), that's over 6670 people who reap a true reward.

We aim to put talking on a pedestal. We promote the fact that conversations can change lives and save lives, and we are aiming at those young people, quietly in need of help, who may have previously gone unheard and unseen. We have seen how this work impacts our local community thus far. Our talks have sparked conversations among students and their friends and relatives regarding mental health that had never previously occurred. We are creating the safe space through our talks to allow these conversations to blossom and grow. Our own personal communities are local rural villages and towns and we feel our message can spark change in rural Ireland where young people feel okay to admit they have struggles and look to address them in a society that accepts it as "normal"

What results do you expect your project to have?

We expect to spark chats and conversations among young people and their friends regarding mental health that had never previously occurred. We expect to create safe spaces so to speak where these conversations are afforded space to blossom and grow.

Our own personal communities are local rural villages and towns and we hope our message can spark change in rural Ireland where young people feel okay to admit they have struggles and look to address them in a society that accepts it as "normal".

We expect young people to truly understand that it is "normal" to feel like the odd one out, to be different and it is okay to go down the path less travelled. We expect young people to finally begin to understand that mental struggles are evident in every person on earth and are "normal".

Ultimately, we hope that the findings from our project can be used to inform future policy on the young people's mental wellbeing and we can shift the narrative from mental health a taboo topic in local communities to being the norm.