

PROMOTING ONLINE POSITIVITY

By Arnie Draiman

The Israeli Council of Children and Youth Organizations, together with the Israeli Scouts (Tzofim) and Maccabi Tz'air Youth, is embarking on a project to make the internet, and social media in particular, a more positive place to be.

The project is quite simple: a national peer-to-peer program for youth helping youth online, using a sophisticated piece of software developed by an Israeli startup. As part of a select leadership program, high school-age teens will undergo intensive training to address online the issues other teens raise in posts and chats.

The program is based on a proven hybrid methodology, which includes in-person training and continuing supervision alongside the digital intervention activities.

The software was developed by MoodKnight and can detect mental distress online in real time in posts on social networks using artificial intelligence and natural language processing. It creates a distress ranking and helps program supervisors ensure that volunteer teens are only exposed to content classified 'mild', tailored to their cognitive and emotional capacity. (Those posts which are categorized as high risk are sent immediately to the owners of the website or social media platform so that they can refer the person in need to emergency services. And those labeled medium are referred to a mental health professional.)

As part of the pilot program in Bat Yam last year, 25 youth were trained to provide assistance online. Each one responded to an average of about 100 posts by teens in need, with a total of 2,500 low-risk calls for help being responded to publicly online. About 10,000 total youth viewed these publicly published responses.

The goals of the program include:

- Combining the digital and 'real' worlds since the program runs online but provides solutions for and impacts their real life.
- Using the existing infrastructure of local municipalities, youth movements, and organizations for finding the volunteers and providing them with ongoing professional guidance as part of this educational and values-based activity.
- Changing the digital culture of youth – empowering and giving a positive experience online while strengthening the legitimacy in requesting and receiving help.

- Responding online to mild distress – using the MoodKnight software to detect those posts for the youth to answer, while respecting personal boundaries. Early detection saves lives.
- Volunteering two hours a week online – accompanied by ongoing, in-person supervision.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, mental distress has become the number one health issue (according to WHO). Today, 1 in 5 teenagers suffer from mental distress. They avoid sharing their issues with the adults around them, rather they share their distress publicly online and expect help. When distress is shared online, sometimes no one answers. Or worse, sometimes the answers given are insensitive or even destructive.

Mild mental distress which is not addressed is likely to worsen and often becomes high risk. There are about 3,000 teen suicide attempts in Israel every year, with one Israeli teen committing suicide every three days.

If you want to be part of this project and bring about change, please be in touch. The Israeli government has already given significant grants and is willing to match additional funds.

***The Israeli Council of Children and Youth Organizations** is a registered non-profit and the umbrella organization of 20 youth organizations in Israel; and is supervised by the Ministry of Higher and Complementary Education.*

***MoodKnight** was developed by 4Girls, Ltd., a social-tech company promoting positive emotional growth of teens, through social media. It was developed with the assistance of the Israel Innovation Authority and Digital Israel.*

***Maccabi Tza'ir youth movement** is a Jewish, Zionist, national, nonpartisan, sporting youth organization founded in 1929. The movement strives to educate its members to creative service, take personal initiative, advocate "youth educating youth" as a way of empowerment and development for Israeli youth.*

***Tzofim (Israeli Scouts)** is a multicultural organization that educates Israel's youth to self-reliance, self-confidence, social responsibility, and leadership in the spirit of pluralistic society and Zionism. Tzofim encourages teens to act, engage and benefit their communities, while teaching them scouting life skills.*

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