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## Letters | How to help Hong Kong youth start building good mental health habits early on

Given many young people turn to substances as a way to cope with stress and confusing emotions, giving them the tools to cope with difficult emotions and creating a safe space for talking about them can be very helpful

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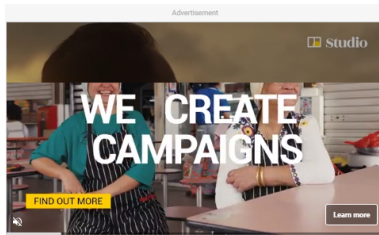
Helping young people take care of their mental health is important in reducing substance use. Photo: Getty Images

We marked World Mental Health Day this week. The term "mental health" has become increasingly common, but despite its prevalence in everyday conversation, there is still immense stigma and a lack of education around the topic.

KELY Support Group began 30 years ago in response to an uptick in drug use and overdose in young people across Hong Kong. In our years of working in drug and alcohol awareness, we learned that many young people turn to substances as a way to cope with stress and confusing emotions.

While we didn't have the language for it at the time, we found that helping young people take care of their mental health is important in reducing substance use.

We cannot prevent all mental health problems, but we can be proactive about improving young people's understanding of mental health and preventing a crisis. For young people, whose brains are still developing, building healthy habits can help to set the foundation for a healthy future, and prevent problems before it is too late.



This means equipping them with skills and tools to cope with difficult emotions in a healthy way and take care of their mental health. It also means getting educated on recognising early signs of poor mental health and intervening before things escalate.

As adults, we can also foster open and trusting relationships with young people in our lives. We can help destigmatise mental health by first being honest about our own struggles. Our vulnerability creates a safe space for young people to share and ask for help.

Additionally, we can support those at high risk of mental health problems. While mental health is shaped by many factors, we also know that social circumstances, such as discrimination, limited education and work opportunities, and problems at home, can lead to a higher risk of mental health issues. Knowing the risk factors means that we can dedicate additional resources to specific groups of young people.

Over the past few years, the number of primary and secondary school students suspected to have taken their lives in Hong Kong has steadily increased, reaching an eight-year high in the 2019-20 school year.

The good news is that we don't have to sit around hoping things will change. Prevention is possible. As a community, we have the knowledge, resources and opportunity to reverse this trend, we just have to commit to it.

Sky Siu, executive director, KELY Support Group

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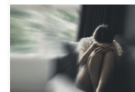
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