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## Hot Seat: Coolminds on Youth Mental Health Awareness

BY YANNIE CHAN | FEBRUARY 23, 2021



Cecilia Yiu (left) and Nanki Luthra (right) are project managers at Coolminds. (Image courtesy to Coolminds)

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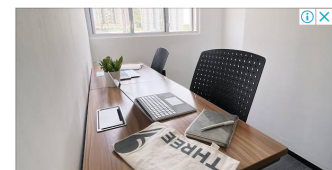
Coolminds is a joint initiative between Mind Hong Kong and KELY Support Group, promoting mental health awareness, support and understanding in Hong Kong's youth and those around them.

### A Little Background

Coolminds aims to normalize looking after and talking about one's mental health. Aside from hosting workshops for students, teachers and parents, the organization also develops resources on a variety of mental health topics, puts together conferences and encourage students to share stories of recovery, all in the hopes of changing the way mental health is perceived and talked about in Hong Kong.

Cecilia Yiu and Nanki Luthra are project managers at the Coolminds initiative. A registered social worker, Cecilia has a decade of experience working with children and youth services, and she saw for herself how mental health affects everyone and anyone. Nanki began her career in mental health nursing in Australia, and switched to the public health sector to focus on preventative care. At Coolminds, she's made it her goal to help young people understand what mental health is and that it's okay to have ups and downs in life.

### 5 Things You Should Know About Mental Health



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## Awareness

### 1. Mental health remains stigmatized in Hong Kong

**Nanki:** Hong Kong focuses a lot more on physical health than mental health. It's still stigmatized to go and tell your colleagues, "I am having a low day, and I can't make it to work." But it's completely normal to say, "I have a headache, and I can't make it to work." Hongkongers hesitate to say something like, "I have a severe anxiety disorder and I needed to be hospitalized," even if it's with their family or their friends. That's what we want to promote — making it normal to talk about mental health, just like how you would talk about physical health.

**Cecilia:** One of the things I remember particularly well is watching Chinese TV and movies growing up, and coming across this trope where mentally ill people are locked up in a special hospital in the New Territories. People with mental illness are always depicted as drooling, walking or talking funny.

### 2. Don't confuse mental health with mental illness — mental health is something we all have


**Nanki:** Many confuse mental health with mental illness. Mental health is something that we all have. It's another way of meaning "our general well being," just like how we all have physical health. When talking about mental health, people think of serious mental illnesses like anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, or stigmatizing words like psycho and nutcase.

In fact, mental health is normal! There's nothing wrong if your mental health is low at times. And when it's very low for a significant period of time, or when it's interrupting your daily life, it's okay to go out and ask for help. There isn't any shame in that.

### 3. Young people actually know more about mental health than we think — the hard part is seeking help

**Nanki:** Students are smart these days. They're aware of what mental health is, what anxiety is, what depression is. That's likely because you can check everything online. But then they keep quiet about it. For many students, our workshops is the first time they make the association between stigma and mental health, and how it affects help-seeking behavior. People think of seeking help as a sign of weakness. But we explain in the workshop that if something happened to you physically, you immediately go to the doctor. It should be the same with mental health. There should be no shame in seeking help for any mental health issues.

For many of them, it was the first time they realized how stigma embedded in society is preventing them from seeking help.



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One of the most memorable moments from a workshop was when students became noticeably more open to talking about mental health. They told me, "I should go and talk to my friend, who has been missing school. I didn't talk to them because I didn't want to interfere with their lives. But now I will go, just ask them how they're doing."

### 4. Covid-19 has helped open up the conversation around mental health

**Cecilia:** Covid-19 has affected our work in good ways and bad ways. It's made it harder for us to get in to schools at times, but it's also brought the issue of mental health into new light, where schools understand the need for a conversation around it.

**Nanki:** In Hong Kong, the number one important topic for schools is academics. They will always prioritize that over other things. A year ago, when Covid-19 happened, a lot of them cancelled bookings for our workshops. After a year of online learning, schools are realizing that, no, we need these mental health workshops. So we've started booking online workshops again. It did take a whole 10 months for schools to start looking at non-academic activities for online classes.

Something we noticed with online workshops is that young people are more willing to talk. They won't put their cameras on, of course. But they're more willing to type stuff in the chatbox and talk. Sometimes they'll private message you. Maybe doing online webinars is a good way to break the ice with young people.

### 5. The best thing adults can do for youths around them is improve their own knowledge of mental health

**Cecilia:** In our workshops, we tell adults that one of the best things you can do is make sure you yourself



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Occasionally in our workshops, we tell adults that one of the best things you can do is make sure you yourself improve your knowledge and awareness of mental health. That allows you to be comfortable talking to young people about mental health, allowing young people to then talk about the issue comfortably. When talking to young people, be open-minded. Really listen. Give them the chance to talk, before jumping in with, "you should do this, you should have done that." Be good listeners to the young people around you.

## Looking towards the future?

**Nanki:** Right now we only have one workshop, which is essentially an introduction to mental health. But because stigma is such a big topic, we are coming up with another workshop just focusing on stigma. We also have young people shooting videos for us. As opposed to having mental health professionals give you advice, you'll be talking directly to a fellow youth.

*Other than schools and educators, parents or caregivers can also book a mental health webinar for themselves. More details at <https://www.coolmindshk.com/en/workshops/>.*

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