



Mental Health Case Study

Malawi Flood Response: The MindSKILLZ Model for Displaced Youth

In response to a major flooding disaster in Malawi, the Ministry of Health asked Grassroot Soccer to be part of their emergency response and deliver its MindSKILLZ mental health promotion and prevention program for hundreds of displaced youth living in temporary camps. MindSKILLZ provided these young people with crucial trauma-informed support and a much-needed space for fun and recreation, which many had not experienced since the floods. This successful program adaptation demonstrates the potential of MindSKILLZ as an emergency response program, offering crucial support and promoting stability for young people until more comprehensive services become available.

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“The support rendered by Grassroot Soccer was timely and most needed as a response to the adolescents and youth in the affected areas.”

– Malawi Ministry of Health

Emergency Overview

Heavy Rains Bring Flooding to Nkhotakota and Karonga

In late February 2024, relentless downpours caused rivers in Malawi's Nkhotakota and Karonga districts to overflow, leading to widespread flooding. The disaster impacted over 157,000 people (almost 39,000 households). Nkhotakota bore the brunt of the floods with over 18,400 people left homeless, including 7,600 children and adolescents under the age of 18. Displaced residents sought refuge in makeshift internally displaced person (IDP) camps established by the Malawian Government across both districts. In March 2024 the President of Malawi officially declared the floods a national disaster.

Flooding Wreaks Havoc on Lives and Infrastructure

Homes, infrastructure, crops, and food supplies were all severely damaged by the flooding, resulting in a significant impact on various aspects of daily life:

- **Food Shortages:** Households lost their food stores and crops were destroyed.
- **Limited Access to Aid:** Significant damage to roads and transport networks hindered the delivery of essential supplies like food, medicine, and fuel.
- **Water and Sanitation Issues:** Water supply systems and sanitation facilities were heavily damaged.
- **Education Disruptions:** Children's education was interrupted because schools were either destroyed or used as shelters.
- **Loss and Injury:** Many people were either injured or killed during the flooding. As a result, some people lost loved ones and crucial social networks.

Assessing the Needs of People in Camps

At the camps, the Protection and Social Support Cluster, led by the Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW) and co-led by UNICEF, evaluated the living conditions and reported social and protection issues that immediately required support from partner organizations:

- Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Services: People were experiencing significant psychological trauma, with no access to MHPSS.
- Child Protection Concerns: Children were not attending school, lacked essential supplies, and were at risk of abuse or exploitation.
- Gender-Based Violence: Crowded conditions increased the risk of gender-based violence.
- Limited Access to Essential Services: Women and girls lacked access to hygiene products and family planning services, as well as safe spaces. People living with HIV reported not being able to take antiretroviral therapy (ART).

Care Gap - Mental Health Support for Adolescents and Young People:

The government and its partners developed a prioritized list of response objectives following the Malawi Country Office flood response plan. However, after a week of delivering aid, the Ministry of Health (MOH) identified a major gap in mental health support for adolescents and young people given the trauma and emotional distress they were experiencing.

During a follow-up emergency meeting, the MOH brought Grassroot Soccer (GRS) onto the National Emergency Response Task Force and requested its support leading MHPSS activities for young people in the camps. GRS has long played a leadership role in youth programming in Malawi and recently partnered with the MOH Clinical Services Division (MH/NCD) to contextualize and launch mental health promotion and prevention activities in Malawi.

The MindSKILLZ Solution

GRS quickly mobilized a team to adapt its signature MindSKILLZ program for use in camp settings. MindSKILLZ is a play-based mental health promotion and prevention intervention that uses soccer language, metaphors, and activities to draw connections to mental health, and is delivered by trained near-peer Coaches. Employing a positive approach to mental health, MindSKILLZ was designed with meaningful input from young people to improve the mental health of all young people: to help those who are currently struggling with their mental health, as well as preventing others from experiencing poor mental health in the future.

Of critical importance to an emergency setting, MindSKILLZ is designed around six key principles of trauma-informed mental health care:

- Safety: Coaches provide a physical and emotional safe space so that young people exposed to trauma do not feel under threat or in danger while participating in the program.
- Trustworthiness: Coaches are caring, trusted figures in the lives of participants. MindSKILLZ provides a reliable and consistent setting for young people to meet.
- Play: Playful activities help young people process trauma, relieving stress and building coping skills.
- Peer Support: MindSKILLZ fosters a supportive community and sense of belonging where young people connect and learn from each other.
- Empowerment: MindSKILLZ's strength-based approach to mental health focuses on helping young people develop a feeling of agency and voice. Coaches validate the experiences of young people and help them develop coping skills to navigate future obstacles in life.
- Collaboration: Programs are implemented in partnership with young people. From the very beginning of MindSKILLZ, the "SKILLZ Contract" is a set of agreements made between participants that cover key principles such as respect and privacy that all groups must discuss and sign onto before the program can begin.



GRS facilitated the following six MindSKILLZ activities (out of the program's typical 12 sessions) in the camps:

- **Intro/Join the Team:** Introduces mental health focus, builds safe space, and establishes group norms.
- **Juggling My Life:** Helps manage daily stress through coping skills discussions.
- **My Supporters:** Identifies peer and adult support networks.
- **Feelings Circle:** Explores positive and negative emotions, emphasizing communication.
- **Strengths:** Builds confidence and resilience by identifying and utilizing personal strengths.
- **Awareness:** Provides basic mental health information and challenges stigma.

The 60-minute structured activities, delivered by GRS's Global Partnerships Coordinator and two local GRS trainers, focused heavily on play, coping skills development, and creating psychological and physical safe spaces, given the camp environment.

GRS facilitators remained available after each session to provide one-on-one support to young people needing additional psychological assistance.



Results and Impact

Overall, GRS supported 212 young people (115 female, and 97 male) in the camps to complete the six MindSKILLZ sessions over a period of five days.

During and following the intervention, the team collected qualitative feedback from participants that highlighted several key areas in which the program provided critical support.

- 1. Grief Support:** A participant who lost his brother in the floods finally found a safe space where he could talk about his experience and receive emotional support for the first time. He was able to share his grief and cry, and in response he received comfort and support from the MindSKILLZ facilitators.
- 2. Trauma Support:** A participant bravely shared a personal story of her mother's suicide, a past trauma that had resurfaced due to the floods. The MindSKILLZ program offered a safe space for her to discuss this difficult experience for the first time and receive individual support from the facilitators, potentially aiding her healing process.
- 3. Accessing Care:** A young person living with HIV confidentially disclosed to the MindSKILLZ facilitators that the lack of privacy in the camps made it difficult for him to continue his essential HIV treatment. Feeling unheard, he found a platform to express his concerns through MindSKILLZ and received access to a caseworker for follow up support. This also led to camp leadership establishing a confidential space for people living with HIV to take medications.
- 4. Managing Academic Anxiety:** Several participants facing disrupted exam preparations due to the floods expressed their stress and worry. The program provided a platform for young people to voice these concerns and receive support, potentially alleviating their anxiety and helping them refocus on their studies.
- 5. Addressing Camp Conditions:** Many participants felt comfortable expressing concerns about the challenging camp conditions, including poor hygiene, limited food, inadequate sleeping arrangements, and disrespectful behavior from some elders. The MindSKILLZ program gave youth the confidence and agency to advocate for improvements in the camps and ensure a more positive environment for the young people.
- 6. Relieving Stress through Fun:** The MindSKILLZ program incorporated fun and engaging activities, including play-based games, free play soccer, songs, and dance. This combination of physical activity, play, and laughter helped many participants relax for the first time following the floods, relieve stress, and be a young person again.

Lessons Learned

As the first time the MindSKILLZ program has been deployed in an emergency context, the GRS team identified several key lessons to inform future mental health response activities:

MindSKILLZ Addresses Critical MHPSS Needs of Young People:

Young people in IDP camps have significant mental health concerns and require safe spaces to express their feelings and feel heard. While not designed specifically for an emergency environment, the MindSKILLZ program is trauma-informed and can fill a critical care gap as an emergency response program that supports and stabilizes young people until additional services become available.

Focus on Coping Skills and Play in Camp Settings:

Many of the young people in the camps were already under significant stress due to the floods and the shock of being displaced. MHPSS programs in this context should focus on play and basic coping skills that allow young people to have fun and feel like themselves again, offering a break from significant environmental stressors.

Enhanced Support for Sensitive Cases:

Some participants required immediate support for sensitive cases beyond the program's scope. Training for Child Protection Workers (CPWs) in handling serious mental health issues and establishing additional support structures within camps is critical.

Balancing Camp Leadership Involvement:

While camp leaders' support is valuable, their participation in activities can make some youth participants uncomfortable, and young people expressed numerous concerns about not feeling heard or supported by camp leaders. Clear boundaries for camp leaders' involvement in interventions need to be established.

Parental Engagement:

Some young people requested sessions for parents/guardians on the importance of open communication. Integrating such sessions into MindSKILLZ would be beneficial.

Enhanced Information Sharing:

Regular updates from the Ministry of Health and partners regarding potential risks in the camp area, such as contagious diseases, is essential in helping the team prepare more effectively for the situation on the ground.



Contact Information

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