

2022

Mental Health Impact Report



Grassroot Soccer, a global leader in adolescent health, is leveraging the power of soccer to equip young people with the support and skills for improved mental health throughout adolescence and into adulthood.

In partnership with leading institutions including USAID, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), Comic Relief, LVCT Health, and Ministries of Health in Mozambique and Kenya, in 2022 Grassroot Soccer launched a comprehensive mental health initiative to tackle the growing global adolescent mental health crisis.

This Impact Report outlines Grassroot Soccer's approach, shows what Grassroot Soccer achieved in 2022, and looks forward to the progress Grassroot Soccer will make in 2023 and beyond as it continues to evaluate, refine, and scale its mental health programs to meet the enormous global challenges in adolescent mental health.

The Context: Adolescent Mental Health Crisis

Poor mental health is the most critical health issue facing young people globally, with 1 in 4 young people experiencing a mental health condition. Mental health is integral to adolescents' overall health outcomes and affects other acute health issues including sexual and reproductive health (SRH), gender-based violence, and HIV. People with mental health challenges are 4-10x more at risk of acquiring HIV, for example, and depression is 2-3x more common in people living with HIV.

The outlook for young people in sub-Saharan Africa is even worse. The region has a higher prevalence of mental health conditions yet fewer resources for mental health care than other parts of the world. The result is that more than 90% of young people in need of mental health services will never receive them.

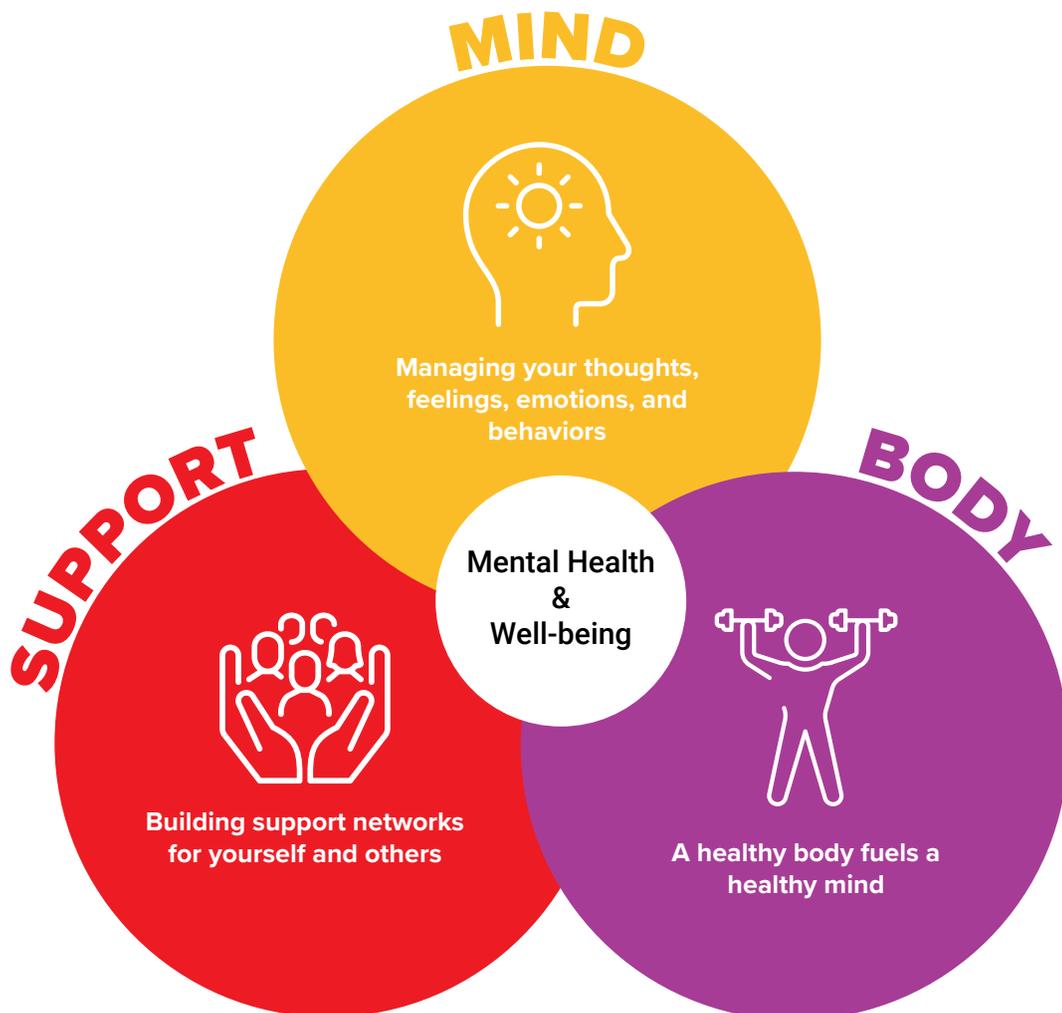
Adolescence represents the key window of opportunity to promote good mental health and treat disease, with 75% of adult mental health conditions surfacing by age 24. If left untreated, these conditions will get worse as they progress into adulthood and lead to more severe consequences.

People with mental health challenges are 4-10x more at risk of acquiring HIV, and depression is 2-3x more common in people living with HIV.



Grassroot Soccer's Mental Health Solution

Grassroot Soccer is working to improve the mental health and well-being of young people in communities at heightened risk of poor mental health and with limited access to information and services. Grassroot Soccer's model, based on input from world-leading mental health professionals and over 20 years of experience working with adolescents, improves young people's mental health and well-being through a **resilient mind, healthy body, and strong support network**.





Every individual has mental health, which can fluctuate for better and worse over a lifetime. Because of this, every young person needs the tools to help them when mental health challenges arise.

Since the organization's founding, Grassroot Soccer has used fun and innovative approaches to build adolescents' resiliency and engage them around their most pressing and interconnected health challenges, including HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive health and rights, COVID-19, gender-based violence, malaria, and mental health and well-being.

Grassroot Soccer's approach is built around its signature **3 C's model** for adolescent engagement: trained mentor **C**oaches equip young people with accurate and actionable health information through an activity-based **C**urriculum, connecting with and inspiring them in a fun and safe **C**ulture that is optimal for learning.

Building on its more than 20 years of experience reaching and engaging young people, Grassroot Soccer is employing the 3 C's to empower adolescents with a resilient mind, healthy body, and strong support network – three critical factors for improved mental health.



Resilient Mind

Grassroot Soccer programs equip young people with skills and knowledge to manage their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and behaviors. This helps participants develop a **resilient mind**, which is especially important during adolescence, a time of profound social, emotional, and physical change that can be stressful to navigate.



Healthy Body

Mental and physical health are closely interconnected. For example, mental health challenges can negatively affect sleep and nutrition, and vice versa. Grassroot Soccer programs take a holistic approach to adolescent health, equipping participants with critical knowledge to maintain a **healthy body** to fuel a healthy mind.



Strong Support Network

By providing young people with a mentor Coach and a cohort of peers in a safe environment, Grassroot Soccer helps participants build a **strong support network** that is there for them when challenges arise. Not only that, when young people learn about mental health concepts and skills, they can use that knowledge to become a key support for others in their life as well.

“As [adolescents] grow and experience changes in their bodies, it's important to be aware that it's ok to feel everything they are feeling, but they should be able to handle stress, make healthy choices, and relate well with others...[My role is] to guide adolescents with useful and practical information on managing their emotions and improving their relationships for better mental health.”

MindSKILLZ Coach
KENYA

2022 Highlights

Launched and tested MindSKILLZ

Grassroot Soccer's signature adolescent mental health promotion program

Secured strategic partnerships with the Ministries of Health in Mozambique and Kenya

to co-develop and scale MindSKILLZ through schools, communities, and health systems

Initiated mental health programs in 5 countries

(Kenya, Mozambique, Scotland, South Africa, and Zambia)

Achieved a 96% reduction in clinically significant depression symptoms

amongst youth living with HIV who completed Grassroot Soccer's Coach-led group therapy program in Zambia



“There are personal questions that I couldn't ask anyone; [MindSKILLZ] features not only questions but also solutions that have helped me overcome stress and suicidal thoughts[...] I was not comfortable talking to people about my situation. [MindSKILLZ] gave me the confidence to express myself.”

HIV-positive Adolescent Participant

Aligned with the World Health Organization

When it comes to adolescent mental health support, one size does not fit all. Every young person has mental health, but their needs and challenges, and the severity of those challenges, may differ and change over time. Because of this, Grassroot Soccer is tailoring its adolescent mental health work to meet the needs of different groups.

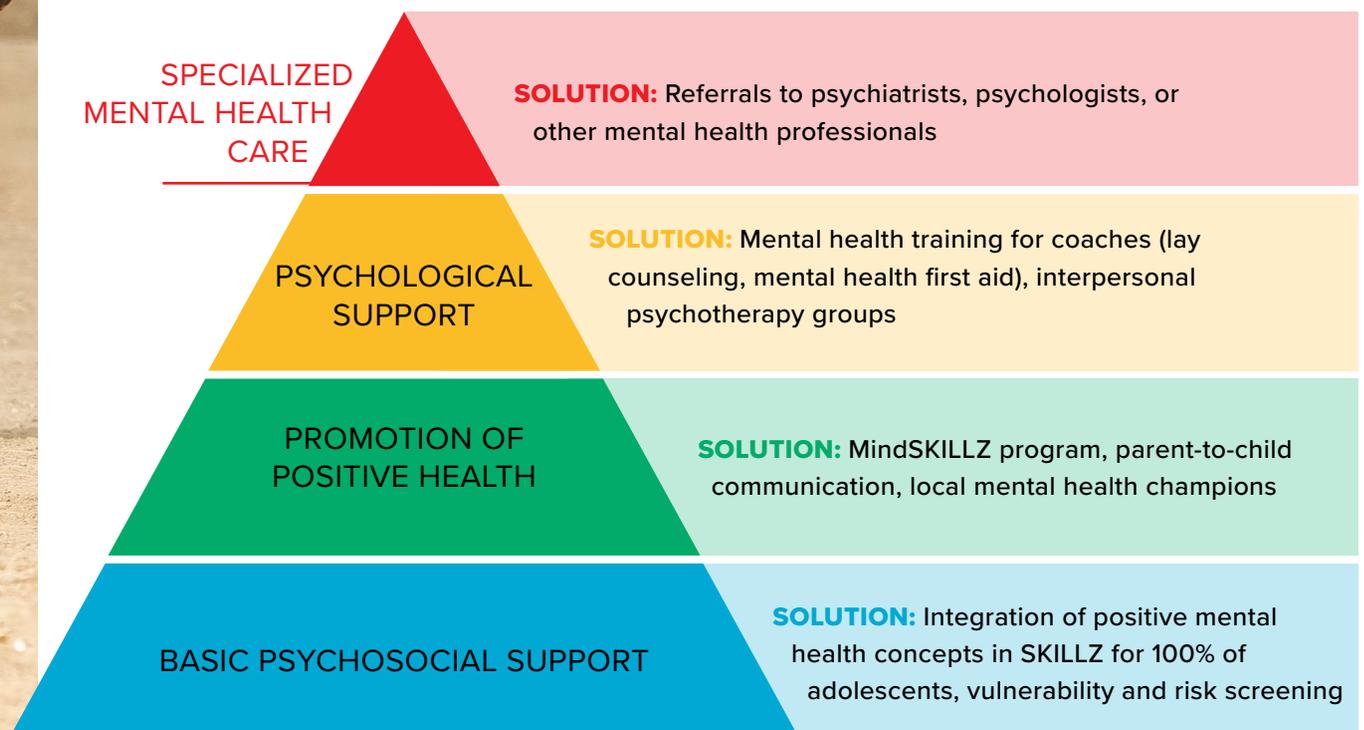
Grassroot Soccer’s programs are aligned with the **WHO’s Intervention Pyramid for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support**, the global gold standard framework for effective mental health programs. Ranging from basic psychosocial support for all that builds resiliency and healthy habits, to specialized care for individuals experiencing the most urgent and debilitating mental health challenges, the framework captures how different types of support can best support the needs of any individual.



World Health Organization

Grassroot Soccer’s mental health programming is aligned to the pyramid and provides support for young people at every level.

Image 1.1 – Grassroot Soccer’s programming is aligned with the WHO’s Intervention Pyramid.



% of adolescents requiring mental health support



1. BASIC PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Basic psychosocial support provides individuals with the key skills and information to protect their psychosocial well-being and build resilience to recover from challenges and disruptions to their lives. Since every young person has mental health, in 2022 Grassroot Soccer integrated basic mental health promotion content into its foundational adolescent health programs (SKILLZ). For example, SKILLZ practices include simple breathing exercises and use a discussion format that helps young people identify and name their emotions and reflect on the connections between their feelings, thoughts, and actions, encouraging them to learn to manage their emotional experiences healthily.

Integrating mental health across SKILLZ in this way is ensuring that all Grassroot Soccer participants have a baseline understanding of mental health concepts and are able to access safe spaces where they can openly discuss their own mental health challenges with peers and trained SKILLZ Coaches.

Integrating Mental Health and Sexual and Reproductive Health Education for Adolescent Girls in South Africa

Poor mental health and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) are inherently linked; mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression can result from concurrent or past SRH challenges, and vice versa. Equipping adolescents with tools to develop their knowledge, attitudes, and skills in both areas is key to improving and reinforcing overall physical and mental health.

In 2022, Grassroot Soccer modified its flagship SRH program for adolescent girls, **SKILLZ Girl**, by adding mental health content on stress management and emotional regulation, as well as ensuring participants were aware of local mental health and psychosocial support services. Grassroot Soccer piloted the program in Alexandra, Johannesburg, South Africa, with **161** adolescent girls and **nine** Coaches.

After the program, participants:

- **were able to identify local sources of support for challenges with mental health and alcohol (24% increase on a pre-to-post intervention questionnaire);**
- **gained confidence in their ability to deal with challenges they face in reaching their goals (23% increase on a pre-to-post intervention questionnaire);** and
- **could correctly identify common symptoms of depression (85% at endline, a 9% increase on a pre-to-post intervention questionnaire).**





2. PROMOTION OF POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health promotion interventions can go more in depth with young people on the skills and knowledge necessary for building a resilient mind and healthy body, as well as providing a safe and stigma-free space in which they can build their support network. These interventions are also cost-effective and can prevent the onset of mental health conditions, driving down the need for mental health care.

MindSKILLZ: Grassroot Soccer's dedicated mental health program and products

In 2022, Grassroot Soccer launched **MindSKILLZ**, a package of new mental health-dedicated programs and products that takes a deeper dive into building participants' mental health-related knowledge and coping skills.

MindSKILLZ is Grassroot Soccer's first SKILLZ program dedicated to mental health. Guided by global standards and principles in the [WHO's Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2030](#), [UNICEF's Global Multisectoral Framework](#), and [WHO-UNICEF's Helping Adolescents Thrive Toolkit](#), MindSKILLZ targets key determinants of positive mental health through simple strategies based on global evidence and Grassroot Soccer's own research. These determinants, which contribute to building a resilient mind, healthy body, and strong support network, include: mental health knowledge, substance use education, coping skills, self-esteem, social connection, safe spaces, and access to mental health care.

The MindSKILLZ package includes the following products:

- **MindSKILLZ Curriculum:** Face-to-face, activity-based 12-session youth mental health curriculum delivered by trained non-specialists in schools and communities. Adapted for Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kenya, and Mozambique and available in English and Swahili.
- **MindSKILLZ Training Manual:** 4-module youth mental health promotion training for frontline workers (coaches, community health workers, teachers) who facilitate the MindSKILLZ curriculum with young people.
- **MindSKILLZ Magazine:** 36-page soccer-themed and interactive mental health resource for at-home learning.



“Balance and Stress”



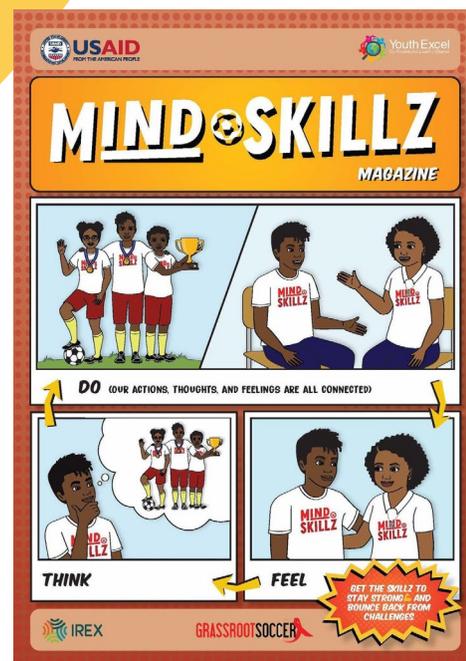
In “Balance and Stress”, one activity in the MindSKILLZ curriculum, participants learn about stress response and discuss activities in their lives that cause and alleviate stress. Participants try to keep up a ball representing a “healthy mind” while different “stressor” balls are introduced. The fun and play-based activity demonstrates that stress is a normal part of life, but too much stress (for too long) has consequences for participants’ mental health – stress makes it difficult to keep up the “healthy mind” ball. The activity ends with the message that everyone faces stress and we all need ways to cope with it, including talking to each other when we need support.

“I started reading [MindSKILLZ Magazine] last week. I have read it many times! When I am upset, I read what they wrote about taking a deep breath and closing your eyes. I easily get upset, so after I read the magazine, it helps me cool down.”

Grassroot Soccer Participant
LUSAKA, ZAMBIA

MindSKILLZ Magazine: Bringing Mental Health Promotion Home in Zambia

The MindSKILLZ Magazine is a low-tech solution that proves that take-home materials can fill a critical gap in mental health education and engage young people’s families in positive mental health promotion.



In 2022, with the support of the global [USAID Youth Excel project](#) and partner [IREX](#), Grassroot Soccer distributed **2,344** print MindSKILLZ Magazines to youth living with HIV (YLHIV) in Zambia. Findings from a mixed-methods evaluation and a review from five international experts showed that the Magazine **improved mental health knowledge and attitudes among young people.**

- Pre/post questionnaire results (n=269) showed an overall improvement in key mental health knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors, on top of high baseline values for many items resulting from prior exposure to mental health content through Grassroot Soccer’s SKILLZ Plus program.
- 93% of participants viewed the Magazine as a good tool for mental well-being promotion and many were willing to share it with family members and friends.
- Parents/caregivers observed the Magazine’s positive effects on adolescent participants.
- The international expert review praised the Magazine’s interactivenss, positive and strengths-based language, and youth-friendly and relatable approach.

Building Positive MINDSETs in Scotland

As sources of community, inspiration, and role models for youth, professional football clubs can play a key role in supporting the mental health of young people in their communities.

Grassroot Soccer and the [Aberdeen Football Club Community Trust](#) (AFCCT) partnered in 2019 to jointly develop MINDSET, a sport-based mental health promotion program for youth in the UK. In 2022, **17** teachers and **25** AFCCT staff were trained in MINDSET, and the program was delivered in 11 schools to **1,588** young people in Aberdeen County, Scotland. An independent [mixed-methods evaluation of MINDSET](#) found that the program contributed to developing essential skills for good mental health among participants, including emotional regulation skills and a sense of resiliency.

Participants, teachers, and coaches all reported that the program created an emotionally safe space for young people that reduces mental health stigma.

“*[The AFCCT Coach] makes the kids feel like they’re more somebody to go [to] and open up. They can have different conversations with them than they would with teaching staff.*”

**Primary School Teacher
ABERDEEN, SCOTLAND**





3. PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

A vital strategy to address the mental health treatment gap in sub-Saharan Africa is diversifying and scaling up care through non-specialist psychological counseling and integrating mental health into other health services. In Zambia, Grassroot Soccer is providing mental health training to Coaches to equip them with tools to provide lay counseling, mental health first aid, and group counseling to young people.

Strong Bodies, Strong Minds for Youth Living with HIV in Zambia

Mental health is a critical challenge for adolescents living with HIV. Depression is 2-3x more common in people living with HIV, for example, which can negatively affect adherence to life-saving antiretroviral treatment (ART). (Studies have found that the likelihood of achieving good ART adherence is nearly 50% lower among those with depressive symptoms compared to those without.) Mental health has to be proactively addressed to scale up effective HIV prevention and treatment; if it is not, these challenges can have far-reaching consequences for HIV-positive youth's mental and physical health and quality of life.

With support from Comic Relief and in partnership with [StrongMinds Zambia](#), Grassroot Soccer incorporated a WHO-recommended group therapeutic intervention into its SKILLZ Plus adherence model, already the standard of care for youth living with HIV (YLHIV) in Zambia's primary healthcare system. The group therapy is layered onto Grassroot Soccer's work with YLHIV experiencing moderate to severe depressive symptoms, creating a **3-step process** for providing critical support for participants.



STEP
1.

Comprehensive Support for Life-Saving Adherence



Facilitated by Grassroot Soccer Coaches openly living with HIV, the SKILLZ Plus program equips YLHIV with HIV, SRH, and mental health information and skills to achieve long-term retention in care and adherence to ART. **In 2022, Grassroot Soccer delivered SKILLZ Plus to more than 2,000 YLHIV.** Through routine monitoring, pre-post questionnaires (n=1,072) showed that HIV, SRH, and mental health information could be combined to improve participants' knowledge in each domain.

For example, after the program, participants **were more likely to accept themselves and their HIV status** (94% at the end of the intervention, a 16% increase from before the intervention). Participants were **more confident in making informed decisions about their sexual health** (19% increase on a pre-to-post intervention questionnaire), and more participants **rejected the idea that experiencing mental health problems were due to weakness or laziness** (9% increase on a pre-to-post intervention questionnaire).

STEP
2.

Identifying Participants in Need of Focused Support



SKILLZ Plus Coaches screen participants for depression using the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9)* – the most widely used self-administered depression scale, which indicates normal to severe depressive symptoms. Participants whose scores indicate depressive symptoms are invited to join group therapy sessions with peer YLHIV also experiencing depression.

STEP
3.

Group Therapy for Youth Living with HIV Experiencing Depressive Symptoms



After being screened, participants experiencing depressive symptoms join a program of 8-10 structured interpersonal group therapy (IPT-G) discussions, delivered by SKILLZ Plus Coaches, that help them identify the underlying triggers of their depression and examine how their current relationships and depression are linked. Together, SKILLZ Plus Coaches and participants strategize solutions to their problems, learn coping mechanisms, practice interpersonal skills, and identify support.

A midline qualitative evaluation found that YLHIV who participated in group therapy through the Strong Bodies, Strong Minds program reported improvements in their mental health, including **positive changes in their experiences of self-stigma, depression, and denial.**

**The Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) is the most widely used self-administered depression scale, with scores ranging from 0-27, indicating normal to severe depressive symptoms.*

Strong Bodies, Strong Minds Impact: 2022 Key Numbers

76

Coaches

trained to facilitate the SKILLZ Plus program

536

adolescents

with depression attended at least five IPT-G sessions (83% of those enrolled)

88%

of adolescents

attending therapy were 'depression-free' after completing the sessions, representing a score of 0-4 on the PHQ-9 scale*

96%

of adolescents

attending therapy lowered their PHQ-9 score by at least 5 points, a clinically significant reduction

"[My Coach] and the SKILLZ Plus group gave me a lot of confidence about living with HIV. I have friends and a Coach who are just like me and have shown me that I can live with the virus. I weighed the challenges I face, and with the help of my group, I came up with solutions to better cope with my condition and an adherence plan. Learning soccer made it fun and relatable."

SKILLZ Plus Participant
LUSAKA, ZAMBIA





4. SPECIALIZED MENTAL HEALTH CARE

While lay people like coaches, mentors, and teachers can play a significant role in supporting young people to build positive mental health, young people with acute and severe mental health needs require specialized care from mental health professionals and trained social workers.

To help these young people access the care they require, Grassroot Soccer is increasing its sensitivity to participants with mental health and psychosocial needs. Grassroot Soccer is working with staff, Coaches, and partners to provide them with key training (for example through the MindSKILLZ Training Guide) so that they can identify and respond to young people in severe distress with clear referral pathways to higher levels of care and support.

“MindSKILLZ doesn’t come from a place of suffering or adversity. The positive language promotes acceptance and an attitude that ‘...I can do something for my mental health...’”

Adolescent Clinical Social Worker



Looking Ahead 2023 and Beyond

In 2023, Grassroot Soccer will expand its mental health work geographically and programmatically, build its evidence base, and explore opportunities to support organizations and governments to incorporate effective adolescent mental health programming into their existing work.

- **Expansion:** Grassroot Soccer will expand its mental health work, launching new pilot projects in Nigeria and South Africa and exploring opportunities elsewhere as they arise.
- **Government-endorsed solutions:** Grassroot Soccer will partner with local governments and NGOs to create and implement scalable adolescent mental health education programs in Mozambique and Kenya, aligning with national mental health frameworks.
- **Building the evidence base:** In partnership with LVCT Health, Grassroot Soccer will complete an evaluation of MindSKILLZ in Kenya, assessing the effectiveness of the intervention in supporting good mental health and linking young people with mental health and psychosocial support needs to appropriate care. Grassroot Soccer will also evaluate its integrated mental health work with youth living with HIV in Zambia to explore further the relationship between depression, mental well-being, and adherence to ART.
- **Responding to the overlooked mental health needs of adolescent boys and young men:** There is a critical evidence gap in effective mental health promotion for adolescent boys and young men. Grassroot Soccer plans to design and launch a sport-based intervention for hard-to-reach adolescent boys and young men focused on the intersection of mental health, substance use, and violence.
- **Creating a supportive environment:** Grassroot Soccer plans to strengthen the support it provides young people by working with partners to ensure caregiver and community beliefs and practices support adolescent mental health.



As Featured In:

- [Qatar Foundation's Playing the Long Game Report](#)
- [Hundred Research Report on Social and Emotional Learning](#)
- [SPORTANDEV.ORG](#) What can Sport and Development do for Mental Health?

Supporters:



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For partnership inquiries or more information on Grassroot Soccer's adolescent mental health work, please contact:

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