

Drugs, Suicidal Tendencies, Alcohol, Prostitution, and Loneliness: This Is How a Common Day Looks Like at an ELEM Youth Center

An events log written by an ELEM Youth Center manager about a routine day at the organization reveals the considerable increase in inquiries from at-risk youths since COVID entered our lives. It also shows the worsening in their situations.

In collaboration with ELEM

In a city in central Israel, in the heart of a residential area, there is an ELEM youth center, where a so-called routine shift is taking place.

The door of the center, located at the entrance to a small, one-story building on a side street, does not indicate what is behind it—a door that will open to every boy and girl who wishes for it to open. Whoever enters must first pass through a corridor and then be greeted by a large and bright space with a pleasant appearance that makes you feel warm inside. In the large space, there are sofas and armchairs, a kitchenette, and next to it, a long table that looks like a bar and some tables and chairs that make the place feel like a café.

The walls are adorned with pictures from various activities at the center, signs and posters with empowering messages, multiple drawings by the boys and girls at the center, and more. A few doors at the end of the common space lead to smaller rooms - a music room, a room with beanbags, and even a room with mirrors and a make-up and grooming corner.

But the pleasant and bright place is not the main focus here. The focus is the boys and girls who come to this place, mainly after hearing about it through word of mouth, social media, or referrals from the various services and frameworks in the city.

Shift Log in an ELEM Youth Center

07:05 PM: A young transgender man who tried to commit suicide a few days prior makes contact with the center. He is hospitalized, and the volunteers arrange to visit him at the hospital. A few minutes later, two girls who did not visit the center for a few weeks show up with cuts on their hands.

07:25 PM: A 15-year-old boy enters. This is the second time he has come, this time to share about the depression that led him to a suicide attempt. A few minutes later, two 14-year-old girls come in. Each shares about the severe eating disorder they are experiencing. According to them, no one knows about it, and they have never been treated.

07:40 PM: A 15-year-old girl calls to confess about being addicted to pills and says she is unable to get the help she needs. On the other line, there's a 13-year-old girl with a heartbreaking story. She tells us about a severe sexual assault she experienced a few weeks ago by an older man in a different city.

08:00 PM: Two 16-year-old girls enter the center and share about the few days they spent with a "Sugar Daddy" in a villa in the north of the country. He paid for the drugs, alcohol, and meals, they say. One of them even says that she has a lot of sex and does not always use a

condom, and the other shares that she has experienced some assaults in the past and says she will share more later on.

08:45 PM: Another difficult phone call. This time it's a young man who has been using hard drugs heavily in the past year. He calls the center while experiencing a post-trauma attack while under the influence of mixed substances. These are heartbreaking moments. The young man cries bitterly, agitated; he wants to talk and get urgent help.

09:30 PM: Another girl who has not yet turned 18 arrives and tells us about the frequent use of heavy drugs and a great sense of dependence. Another boy and girl sit with one of the volunteers and make a long list of drugs and substances they experimented with during COVID. The two make it clear that they continue using drugs at least twice a week.

09:55 PM: A 16-year-old girl shared with a volunteer an exciting and humorous piece she wrote about her hospitalization experience in a psychiatric ward and coping with various mental difficulties.

10:25 PM: A conversation with a 19-year-old woman about the need for treatment for a recent sexual assault she experienced and has since significantly deteriorated mentally. Also, a young man who's about to be admitted to a rehab facility in a few days approaches each staff member to say goodbye. He loves to take pictures, so he is offered to do a photo exhibition here at ELEM's Center once he returns. The photos will express his emotional experiences and the rehab process. The shift is almost over.

11:05 PM: A group of boys and girls from the center sit on a nearby bench to "wait out the night."

11:59 PM: Another shift at ELEM ended.

All the cases are real, but the details have been obscured for obvious reasons. The sacred work done in the twenty-three ELEM youth centers scattered throughout the country has been going on every day, at all hours, for decades. But even ELEM veterans do not remember such a sharp increase in the number of referrals as in the past year. The cause is clear to everyone: the COVID crisis period that hit teenagers across the country the hardest. Boys and girls struggle to recover from the acute loneliness and changes in the familiar frameworks imposed on them for such a long time during the COVID lockdowns.

ELEM's youth centers operate on weekdays in the afternoons and evenings. Each center assists dozens of teens daily, young men and women aged 12-18. Each shift is led by ELEM workers and volunteers.

"The Youth Was Left Behind"

"We are currently in a post-COVID time where society is going back to normal, but at the same time, the youth is having a tough time going back to normal," explains Keren Naor, Head of ELEM's Youth Centers Field. "Unfortunately, teens who were completely normative before COVID are now in extreme situations of alcohol consumption, drug use, having a hard time returning to school, and they experience various social difficulties. This is the alarming reality we face daily in various youth centers around the country."

R. is a manager of an ELEM youth center. He has seen the increasing distress in front of his very eyes. He's also the one who clearly and painfully described the shift mentioned above. "Since the COVID crisis, the "risk pool" has greatly expanded," he says. "In fact, it would be very surprising for me to meet an average boy who is not currently at any risk. At the end of

the day, there was a great deal of neglect here. Boys and girls stayed at home for two years, and parents, even the best of them, could not keep working while also serving as some sort of at-home educators for young people, and those who pay the price are the youth. "

The youth have already returned to middle schools and high schools. Have they not overcome past difficulties?

"The fact that the frameworks are operating again does not mean that the youths have returned to how they were before COVID. Many of them do not come to classes and do not take exams, and as I see it, they will not complete their matriculation. We come across many youths that are in the process of dropping out.

What was the trigger for all the risk situations youth found themselves in?

"Undoubtedly, the social difficulty that accompanied the COVID crisis. Social relationships maybe essential to any human being, but they are extremely critical for youth, and social loneliness is a destructive thing for them. A middle school or high school kid who sits alone in a room all day finds themselves online, where they feel ugly and experience bullying. The hormones of adolescence, the problematic body image - all of these are intensified due to the lack of positive social reinforcements that cannot be obtained without social interaction."

"When the teens finally got back into the frameworks, they started doing everything to stand out socially, like smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, and using different substances. Kids really want to forget, which is why we also see a significant increase in inquiries to ELEM, because ELEM is a place where people are willing to hear these kids' stories, even if it is very difficult. "

What, in your opinion, can serve as a solution?

"The solution should start with parents and all the social and municipal organizations understanding that the children went through trauma and that the solutions offered were not enough. The fact that the education system is supposedly back on track does not mean that the youth are back on track. We must understand that, all of us, all adults, there is a real need for long-term programs and rehabilitative treatment for these youth. Among other things, we need to fill the frameworks with educational psychologists who will lend a hand to those boys and girls" .

What we do

ELEM's youth centers help thousands of teens every year who face situations of risk that have severely worsened in the past two years due to COVID, as described in the shift log at the beginning of the article .Youth face adversity such as drug use, depression, prostitution, severe violence, and suicide.

The organization's youth centers save the lives of hundreds of youths every year who try to harm themselves. Therefore ELEM sees great importance in the continued operation of all youth centers year-round.