

The Digital Dilemma: Insights from the Inaugural Global Summit on Youth Mental Health

September 2025

Overview

This youth-led report on key takeaways captures the main insights that emerged from the Inaugural Global Summit on Youth Mental Health on 22 September, 2025. Co-authored by young leaders from Brazil, Greece, and South Africa, it reflects the diverse lived experiences and shared priorities of youth shaping the present and the future of mental health. By documenting these takeaways, the report builds on the momentum of the Summit and serves as a call to action for global institutions, practitioners, and funders to work alongside youth in transforming mental health systems.

The Global Summit on Youth Mental Health was organized by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) Global Center for Child and Adolescent Mental Health at the Child Mind Institute and supported by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Initiative in Greece. Held at the Child Mind Institute headquarters in New York during the 80th United Nations General Assembly High-Level Week, the convening brought together young changemakers and global partners to address The Digital Dilemma: Bridging Science and Storytelling for Youth Mental Health. The goal of the summit was to elevate youth leadership, translate cutting-edge research into accessible solutions, and strengthen a cross-sectoral network of innovators in the mental health space who can reimagine digital spaces. Through panels, workshops, and dialogue, the event connected scientific evidence with lived experience to advance action on mental health worldwide.

Youth participants described the Summit as a moment to reframe the “digital dilemma” in mental health: technology can both harm and heal. Reflecting on the variety of sessions that happened, youth drew lessons from reclaiming online spaces, the power of authentic storytelling to shift stigma and influence policy, and the urgent need to translate research into practical, culturally adaptable tools. They also surfaced a deep desire to move beyond diagnosis and into shared, cross-border action.

We extend our deepest thanks to every young participant, to the many partner institutions and global experts who shared their time and expertise, and to the donors and allies whose belief in youth-driven change made this gathering possible. The exchange of knowledge during the summit will continue to guide and inspire collective action to make mental health systems more inclusive, innovative, and youth-led.

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Founding support for the SNF Global Center is provided by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) as part of its Global Health Initiative (GHI). (snfghi.org)

Core Takeaways

01

Technology's Double Edge — Harmful Algorithms and the Search for Safe Connection

Youth framed technology as both risk and refuge. Many shared experiences of harmful algorithms and online spaces where self-harm and anxiety spiral unchecked, but they also credited digital peer communities with fostering connection and breaking isolation.

Youth Perspective

- **Amplification of harm:** Social media algorithms reward extremes and appearance-based comparison; platforms struggle to intervene early when content becomes toxic.
- **Opportunities for safety:** Peer-run groups, culturally relevant influencers, and moderated communities can initiate a process of providing support where formal services are absent.
- **Implication:** The challenge is not abandoning digital life but reclaiming it — building platforms and norms that make protective information as viral as harmful material.



Naomi Grewan, Communications Manager and Podcast Producer, Radio Workshop

02

Storytelling as a Tool for Healing and Influence

Summit participants repeatedly returned to the emotional power of narrative.

Youth Perspective

- **Accessible language:** A session with Felipe Neto, Brazilian YouTuber and social media influencer, modeled how an influencer can break mental health silence online by speaking simply and directly. Youth noticed the effect of clear language: less fear, more engagement.
- **Lived experience:** Spotlight sessions where leaders in the mental health space shared their life story had the ability to mix personal vulnerability with systemic insight, making stigma conversations tangible.
- **Human context:** Proximate leaders used family and team photos to collapse distance between regions and made mental health struggles feel immediate and universal.
- **Lesson:** Facts and data alone rarely mobilize; human stories change hearts and help secure support from institutions and peers.

Core Takeaways

03

From Research to Real-World Tools

The launch of the Single Session Intervention (SSI) competition in Brazil highlights how science can become more accessible.

Youth Perspective

- **Low-barrier interventions:** Youth were intrigued that a single, app-based exercise can measurably reduce distress, serving as a potential resource for those without therapy access.
- **Localization challenge:** Without clear language and demonstration, the concept can feel abstract; participants wanted to further understand “what an SSI looks like” and how to adapt it culturally and linguistically.
- **Call to action:** A takeaway from the session is that communicating with youth requires researchers and implementers to show and not only tell: visuals, demos, simple definitions, and clear invitations to co-create and test tools in their own contexts.



João Pedro Schroder, Representative, Youth Council CAMHI-BR, and Anna Laura, Director of Operations, Young Peacebuilders

04

Global Youth Leadership Crossing Borders for Innovation

The Summit underscored that mental health challenges and digital dilemmas are global but experienced locally.

Youth Perspective

- **Context matters:** Brazilian youth emphasized how violence affects wellbeing in public schools; South African youth raised the challenge of dialogue with generations who are not used to talking about mental health; Greek participants discussed the role of trust in peer support groups.
- **Shared capacity:** Despite local differences, youth leaders found common operating principles, such as credibility from lived experience, trust networks, creativity in resource-scarce settings.
- **Mutual reinforcement:** Exposure to peers facing similar battles built morale and generated pragmatic ideas (e.g., adapting successful digital campaigns or advocacy models across countries).
- **Future vision:** A desire emerged for ongoing cross-country networks that keep exchanging strategies beyond knowledge sharing.

Core Takeaways

05

Turning Awareness into Action

The strongest youth expectation of next steps from the event is to move from conversation to change.

Youth Perspective

- **Implementation pathways:** Ideas included adapting single session intervention competitions to new languages and cultural contexts, securing funding that flows directly to grassroots youth groups, and creating clear on-ramps for youth to influence national and UN-level mental health policy.
- **Accountability:** Breakout dialogue sessions felt energizing because they ended with ideas, and youth want future convenings to register and publish these as commitments, making progress visible and shareable.
- **Momentum:** Alignment with the UN's Noncommunicable Disease (NCD) agenda was inspiring; participants felt global policy could amplify youth-designed solutions if they remain engaged and organized.

Final Message & Call to Action

The Summit reframed the “digital dilemma” from an unsolvable tension into an innovation challenge.

We leave this summit sharing that we can — and must — ensure protections for youth using technology, use storytelling to shift stigma, and translate research into tools our peers can use now. We see ourselves not as recipients but as designers, implementers, and bridge builders between science and lived experience across borders.

Organizations across sectors must work alongside us to understand our concerns and priorities in order to address the impact of digital technologies on mental health and wellbeing for ourselves and our peers.

We must be invited to share decision-making spaces to ensure efforts to solve this digital dilemma are inclusive and informed by the demographic they hope to serve — us.



Eduardo Vasconcelos, Former Director of Youth Engagement, SNF Global Center at CMI

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