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“A 14 years old boy asks his mom for a cigarette, and she gives it to him.”

Thousands of at-risk youth are left without support during the Coronavirus crisis. They're forced to stay with their parents 24/7, without an ability to go to where they can get support, or nurture social relationships. ELEM has been trying to confront the situation by transferring the field work to an on-line therapeutic space. “All of a sudden, while talking on Zoom, we see the youths in their most personal, private spaces.”

Written by Reut Uziel.

Youth has been spending a lot of time on the social media platforms as a mechanism to deal with the hardships brought upon by the Coronavirus crisis.

At a time when most formal and informal youth establishments have shut down, ELEM, the organization for at-risk youth, continues to serve the youth in accordance with the guideline set by the Ministry of Health. “This support, even if not given face-to-face, along with the high accessibility, have great impact on the youth,” says Irit Aloni, head of the Youth Centers Field at ELEM. “These two things are incredibly important factors when it comes to mentally assisting them.”

Alon (pseudonym), a 17-years old teen, grew up in a foster family with his two special needs younger brothers, after the three have been removed from their home by the welfare services. He started coming to the youth center when he was 13, and has been attending almost every day since. It's the place where he can take care of himself, and learn to trust others. Alon has been at home due to the crisis, with no ability to visit the center. According to him, he watches TV and play on his phone for hours. He feels lonely, and can't maintain social relationships.

These lengthy home-stays brings with them unique complexities. Many deal with hardships born out of their parents being laid-off, parents, who to begin with are under pressure and have little means. This escalates the problems in the family dynamic, while the youth is left without support systems. Some

experience emotional outbursts, physical and behavioral reactions, and sometime those turn into violence.

Nava Barak, President of ELEM Israel: “Thousands of at-risk youth, and young men and women, who lack family support, became more invisible than ever. If they deal with hardships during normal times, the reality during the Corona crisis brings with it new distress and challenges that are closing in on these youth every day. At this complicated time, they’re more likely to get hurt, more exposed to violence, abuse, and loneliness. While for most teens home is the safe space, for many at-risk youth home is a threatening place, a place where they often experience verbal, physical, and sometimes sexual violence. This is the reality in which all of us at ELEM work harder than ever in order to help them face this distress, and overcome these hardships.

The people of ELEM decided to transfer the field work to an on-line therapeutic space. They make sure to converse with the youth via Zoom. “All of a sudden, while talking on Zoom, we see the youths in their most personal, private spaces,” says Idan, one of the ELEM Outreach Vans supervisors. “For example, a 14-year old boy who’s lying down in a room full of mattresses and peeling walls. His mom walks in, she yells, he yells right back. He asks for a cigarette, and she gives it to him.”

Roy Homri, head of the Street Work Field at ELEM adds: “‘Home’ is a word that most of us associate with positive things, like warmth, love, food, and a safe place to sleep. But home isn’t always a safe place. For the thousands of youth ELEM works with, home is more dangerous than any virus. Home doesn’t carry those positive associations, on the contrary. Our youth become invisible in this setting, or reverse back to being the punching bag of their parents. This leaves them with two options: to turn as quickly as possible to alcohol, food , and drugs, or to turn to the streets, run away and look for excitement there.”