

Introduction to the study of youth risky behaviors in South Africa

Risky behavior is defined as a reckless behavior and or way of living that has the possibility of something terribly wrong happening to one's life or health.

It is very important for the teenager or young adults of South Africa and elsewhere in the continent to investigate and be more knowledgeable about all kinds of risky behaviors that are out there because they are the ones who are more likely to be involved in them unwittingly. If young adults are made aware of all risky behaviors they will be more likely to avoid getting involved in them because they will be more aware of all the negative consequences that they will have to face if they engage in the risky behaviors. There are multiple kinds of risky behaviors. Following are few of them that the young adults of today can relate more to.

Six types of risky behaviors:

- **Sexual risky behavior:** More teenagers find themselves in risky sexual behavior because most of them are not being taught of the dangers of engaging in unprotected sex. Even though the education system makes it a point to teach learners about sex and how to practice it safely, many still don't pay much attention to the lessons they are being taught in the class rooms and at their varied homes. Most would rather go out and experiment with it on their own and they end up being sick with either HIV/AIDS, any other sexually transmitted diseases and or unwanted pregnancies.
- **Drug abuse:** In this age of technological over-stimulation, teenagers find themselves bombarded with content that promotes using drugs and showing it to them as something 'cool' to use. The kinds of music and movies they make nowadays show drug abuse as glamorous that everyone can benefit positively from. There is a significant rise in the usage of drugs by young people of South Africa. The Nyaope drug, Crystal Meth, and the Cough Syrup mixed with cold drink is the order of the day for many young people in the country.
- **Alcohol abuse:** As soon as young adults reach a certain age most of them feel compelled to experiment with alcohol because when advertised on either television or radio, the legal age of someone who alcohol can be sold to is 18 years. When they have reached this age, and sometimes even when they have not, they always feel old enough to drink it irresponsibly contrary to what the alcohol industry always preaches to them that they should enjoy and drink it responsibly.
- **Irresponsible road use:** Many teenagers, more especially nowadays in the age of so many technological advancements, are found at the streets listening to music on their phones with headsets while texting. This kind of risky behavior has claimed so many young lives because as they are staring at their phones and their ears tightly shut, they don't pay any attention to what is happening around them and then they end up knocked off by cars they were not in the look-out for.

- Impulsive behavior: Each and every culture in every society has teenagers that are reckless and impulsive by nature. However, in most African societies and cultures these very same impulsive behaviors has more fatal consequences. For example; some of our African brothers and sisters feel compelled to either go to the bogus initiation schools even when their individual cultural backgrounds don't allow them to do so, but because their age-mates and some of their friends go there. Bogus initiation schools are not the only places teenagers feel impulsive about though... there are so many other places they are made to feel they should go to. I am using it as an example because that's where most young lives are destroyed either through death or the negative transformation teenagers usually experience when/if they come back.
- Gang affiliation: Another risky behavior many teenagers, males especially, find themselves drawn to is the life of crime because of various reasons the main one being that of the dire socio-economic environment they live in. In their desperate attempts to make their lives livable and more bearable they join criminal gangs that promises to make their lives easier by providing them with financial stability.

One factor causing risky behaviors amongst young adults:

There are many factors causing risky behaviors amongst young adults but nowadays in the 21st century and the Fourth Industrial Revolution closer at hand, what contributes the most to young adults engaging in risky behaviors is the invention of Social Media and its over-stimulation, because nowadays everyone can impose their negative opinions on others just as easily.

Since young people are the ones that uses these social media platforms, they are the ones who are more aware of the current affairs going on all around the world.

For many young adults it is not enough to just know of the new trendy stuff, they want to experience them for themselves and to appear 'cooler' than their counterparts who only know of the 'cool' trendy new habit, attitude and lifestyle.

Many teenagers feel pressure to be cool. Some of their friends may not use the word 'cool' some even uses words like 'phat', 'sharp' or 'hot'. These words all mean the same thing: acting in the way that they and their friends think is right. Most teenagers want to fit in with others.

Sometimes being in a group makes people act differently. For example, teenagers in a group may bully another teenager. But if they were alone they would not tease anyone. Sometimes they don't want others to think they are weak, so they show off.

Teenagers may want to have a certain reputation. So they do things in front of others to create or keep that reputation. A reputation needs an audience and most often than not, negative or bad reputations has so many audiences hence all the bad habits and risky behaviors are so widely publicized and glorified so much in both the traditional and social media platforms.

The impact of risk behaviors: As told by few interviewed young people anonymously.

First young adult:

Question: Have you ever been bullied, pressured into doing something you don't want or engaged in any sort of risky behavior in your life?

Answer: "I have never been bullied in my life but I have bullied someone. See, there is a girl in my class who everyone makes fun of. People are always trying to make her cry. One day I came up behind her and pushed her into a big puddle. She had mud all over her. A lot of our school mates saw me do this and pointed and laughed at her. I felt pretty good, until I saw the look on her face. She was trying not to cry, but she was totally embarrassed. I felt so ashamed of myself and what I had done to that poor girl. I didn't even know her. I only picked on her because everyone else in our class did. She had never done anything bad to me, in fact she had never done anything bad to anyone. I don't even know why everyone hates her so much" – Anonymous. .

Second young adult:

Question: Have you ever been faced with any kind of risky behavior in your life?

Answer: "Honestly speaking I almost gave in to the peer pressure once in my life. It has always been a dream of mine to do as best as I can in school because I want to be a doctor someday. I need to study hard and get a bursary to go study at the university. My mom tries to her best to encourage me, but my friends think that homework is a waste of time. They don't care about school. They are more interested in boys and partying. They all thought I was stupid for working so hard in my studies. They told me to have fun and that I am 'missing out'. A couple of them have left school because they fell pregnant. It seems as though they've just given up. But I don't want to give up. I get really depressed, though. Sometimes I look at them and I wonder why I think I can be any different" – Anonymous.

Third young adult:

Question: Do you think peer pressure is one of the factors that causes teenagers to engage in risky sexual behaviors?

Answer: "No, frankly speaking I don't think so. Peer pressure is just an excuse for people to behave badly... but there is a lot of pressure from boys who ask us: 'what if we don't get married?', when we tell them that we need to be married before we could have sex. Some girls don't know how to handle such pressure from their boyfriends, but I think we all have a choice to either allow or not allow to cave in to such pressures" –Anonymous.

Fourth young adult:

Question: Can anyone of your friends pressure you into doing something you don't want to do? For example make you drink alcohol or smoke if you don't want to?

Answer: "Personally, no, I don't think so. But there is a lot of peer pressure we all get from our friends, such as drinking, smoking and fighting. I personally don't know any teenagers who don't drink. I think it is up to a person to be strong, but it is hard... boys fight over stupid things, wanting to prove they are the top gun... At house parties parents don't always seem to have control... I know a lot of teenagers my age whose parents don't mind them drinking. At some parties there are 100 teenagers and a lot of them are drinking...the youth are trying to become old as fast as they can" –Anonymous.

Summary of the findings:

- **Social:** Teenagers nowadays find themselves engaging in risky behaviors because of the kinds of friends they keep. They don't want to appear boring or uptight if they don't do the things that their friends do. However, not all peer pressures are wrong or negative. Some friends may encourage their friends to do well in school or to learn new skills such as first aid or participating in a community project.
- **Emotional:** Some teenagers end up being depressed because they don't have friends who are willing to accept them as they are. Sometimes peer pressure causes teenagers to be cruel to others. Everyone may make fun of a particular learner at school. Other learners who do not even know the person, may still join in when their class mates makes fun of the other learner whom they believe to be 'uncool' or a weirdo.
- **Physical:** Experts say that one reason why so many teenagers are having sex is because of peer pressure. Part of being an adolescent is an increased sexual awareness, but this often comes with some very serious risks. Teenagers who choose to have sex risk getting HIV. And infection with HIV leads to Aids. This is when the person's immune system is so damaged and weak that it can no longer fight off any infections. The person starts getting ill more often, and even diseases that are normally not life threatening, such as tuberculosis and flu, can be fatal. The most common way of getting HIV is having unprotected sex, which means having sex without using a condom.
- **Spiritual:** Risky behaviors have serious consequences on one's spiritual life. For instance as a Christian I believe that sex before marriage is a sin but because of my girlfriend who insists to have sex with me before getting married, it might be easier to ignore my spiritual teachings and do what she wants us to do. Having sex is a serious decision to make- even though it looks easy on TV and in the movies. Movies don't show relationship problems that sex sometimes causes, the impact of early sex on one's body and the unplanned consequences, such as pregnancy.

Evaluation of the impact of risky behavior in my personal expectations in relation to the career I want to follow:

Risky behavior of any kind would have a lot of negative impact on the career I want to pursue in life. As a graduate of Public Relations and communications, part of my prospective job title is being a custodian of reputations, my own reputation and that of the company I would be employed in. As an aspiring academic and writer it wouldn't serve me or my career well to indulge in any kind of risky behavior mainly because, I believe wholeheartedly that at some point in my life a lot of youth of South Africa and elsewhere in the world will look up to me as their role model and so I need to teach them very well by my own example. Engaging in any form of risky behavior will reflect negatively on the person I am and would reduce my chances of being hired as a government employee in any department not just being an aspiring writer and academic. Whatever employment I will end up in, I would also be required to be both physically and mentally fit to take on any kind of RESPONSIBILITY. Engaging in risky behavior, sexually for instance, would have negative effects on my physical health which would ultimately render me mentally unfit because of the depression I would have caused myself with unhealthy lifestyle choices.

Changes in youth Risk behavior:

In recent years there has been a slight reduction in the number of youths who engage in risky behaviors, I believe that these changes are due to the fact that the research conducted on the school children in recent years convinced them that risky behaviors have fatal consequence on them that could claim their lives or put their health at risk. When showed the previous statistics school children/ teenagers saw that engaging in risky behaviors doesn't serve them but instead put their lives at risk. Teenagers need reassurance that their behaviors have either positive or negative consequences, as soon as they had seen the statistics and were taught of the impacts of their risky behaviors they were left with no other choice but to refrain from them.

Recommendations:

Practical solution:

Peer pressure can be very stressful. A lot of pressure may even make people physically sick. It may also cause emotional pain. It can be hard to feel good about oneself when others put them down all the time. One may begin to accept their peers' unkind opinions of him/her. In South Africa, experts agree that peer pressure and the need to have a beautiful body, to have good academic results at school, and to hang out with the right crowd, contribute to depression among teenagers. With so much pressure, they say it is quiet common for teenagers to consider

suicide. Depressed teenagers may feel as if their parents don't understand them, and this pushes them over the edge to commit suicide. Teenagers should try to remember that if they don't want to talk to their parents about their feelings, they can talk to their friends or teachers. What works for me personally, however, is literature. I find comfort and solace in between the pages of books because through books I am able to make sense of so many things happening in the world that may seem senseless to other none reading majority of youth. I am a literacy activist because I know and understand the positive benefits that can be gained through reading hence I always recommend it to many of the youth I come in contact with.

The value of having positive role models on one's behavior:

I believe that it is very important for teenagers and other young people to have good role models so that they can measure their behaviors accordingly. For instance if a young person looks up to figures such as Thomas Sankara, Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, Marcus Garvey and many other black leaders they will have good frame of reference they can base their lives. Sometimes young people don't have any person they aspire to be like in their immediate surroundings and varied communities that seem to have accepted the negative status quo as nothing but a norm. Reading conscious African books can offer young people good role models they can emulate. As a writer in my own right, I draw my inspiration and motivation from ordinary people doing extraordinary things, revolutionary leaders that make positive changes possible in their respective countries and literary icons whose ideas and stories illuminates the minds of people and endures long after they are gone. This is the kind of legacy I want to leave behind as well, I want people to remember me for the positive changes I brought in their lives with my words of encouragement. I am Setjhaba Ernest Moleko and I believe wholeheartedly that reading edifies the mind and makes a man unfit to be a slave.

Bibliography:

- The internet
- Individual interviews
- A book called 'Understanding peer pressure'