



Anusha: Hi, and welcome to DigiHealth Talks, a podcast created and hosted by the Brown-Lifespan Center for Digital Health in Providence, Rhode Island. I'm your host, Anusha Rahman. Join us as we meet some of the masterminds behind the field of digital health, leveraging the innovative technology around us to help the public improve their well-being. Today, we are interviewing Francesca Raelison, a student at Brown and the founder of Omena, a global youth-led nonprofit promoting social and emotional learning. Their goal is to scale in Madagascar and ultimately in other emerging countries. **Before we dive in, I want to offer a trigger warning. This episode will talk about abuse. So please take care of yourself if you choose to continue listening.** Thank you so much for joining us, Francesca. So exciting to have you here.

Francesca: Thank you so much for having me today, Anusha. It's a pleasure for me to be here, and hello to everybody else tuning in right now.

A: Before we begin, can you just tell us a little bit about your educational background and what you currently study?

F: So I am originally from Madagascar. I came to the US seven years ago. I am a non-traditional student. So before transferring to Brown, I went to Community College in Virginia and I majored in psychology, and currently at Brown, I am concentrating in sociology and entrepreneurship.

A: And then you created Omena, a program to promote social and emotional learning. What inspired you to start this project?

F: It's a long story. I would say that it came from a very personal experience of learning, first of all, about what emotional abuse was, and I discovered that when I was a sexual assault peer educator at my previous college, and it was through a training that I learned about all the forms of abuse, especially emotional abuse, and that was the first time I could put a name on it and recognize it. I didn't even know the signs. I knew that the signs were detrimental and the consequences were detrimental, but I think I didn't have the name to properly say what it was, so once I knew what it was and knew the consequences that that type of abuse could have on people's sense of identity, dignity, self-esteem, and especially mental health, and even with more research, I found out that it could even have an impact on society and the country at large. I started to question myself and I just became fascinated by the subject, and I also saw that some research actually talked about how preventing emotional abuse to happen in the first place could potentially prevent it to escalating to physical or sexual abuse. And that for me was an eye opener, and that led me to not only raise awareness around what emotional abuse is, but also find a potential solution that would address the root cause of what emotional abuse is.

A: And what is emotional abuse?

F: Yes. So emotional abuse is usually known as psychological abuse. Some people even talk about it as an emotional and verbal abuse, where we are using “emotional abuse” because of the solution that we are promoting, which is emotional intelligence. So emotional abuse is any type of abuse that is not physical, and it is done repeatedly, and it consists of belittlement, criticism, insults, humiliation, put downs. It can even be very subtle jokes or sarcasm sometimes, and people are always surprised when we do say that. It can also be repetitive intimidation, guilt tripping, manipulation, or control. Those are the signs of emotional abuse. And when it comes to understanding the root cause of emotional abuse, what we found was that whenever there is this power imbalance, so wherever there is a system of oppression in place, that's where emotional abuse can be the most pervasive. And in Madagascar, for example, the systems of oppressions in place, that have been in place, such as colonialism as well as patriarchy, have been the reason why emotional abuse has been an inter-generational problem that has been passed down from generation to generation and has created this cycle of violence. And yeah, I think it is crucial to understand why it's happening, so that we can find a better way to find the solution as well.

A: And so your app, Omena, is trying to really target survivors of emotional abuse?

F: So, what we actually, what we realized, and that was based on a video that I shared on social media where I talk about what emotional abuse is and how pervasive and very subtle it could be. I shared the video to see if people could relate to the problem and the next day, the video went viral not just in my country, but also in other countries. And when they reached out, they started saying that they experienced it or they were perpetrators without knowing that they were. So really the movement of awareness that we are starting is for everybody to know that this is a form of abuse that should be talked about and the solution is more targeted towards the survivors.

A: And so what does your app do?

F: So right now we're still in this stage of creating the app. What we have focused on was really creating the personal experience with the community. And it's based on, first of all, training, so training people who have gone through emotional abuse to first learn about it, learn what the definition is, why it's important to break the cycle. They also learn about what Omena does because they are ambassadors and they're gonna help us really spread the message and the awareness. And then, once they are trained, they go through what we call a community of practice where they get to learn from each other, to exchange best practices based on the tools that we provided them with. And then after that, they go into the community and start raising awareness and then promoting social emotional learning in the different schools that we are partnering with. And then based on that model, that's what we are bringing into the application as well. And it's really in co-collaboration with the community that they are serving based on their needs, and we are still really tweaking it and then making sure that it's the right solution.

A: Sure, it's a pretty new program, you want to make sure that it's effective and it's actually working. For those of us who are not familiar, would you mind telling us what social and emotional learning actually is?

F: In very simple words, it's emotional intelligence. It's emotional literacy. It's learning about our emotions, naming them, understanding them, seeing them in ourselves first, understanding them for us, and then also seeing how it works with others and building empathy and also being able to interact with others in a more healthier way, basically. And what we have seen from research is that once we promote emotional and social, emotional intelligence for the person and social intelligence for the other people, then we've seen that it fuels healthier relationships, better decision-making, as well as increasing the capacity for children to be more empathetic, vulnerable, and honest as well. And we've seen that it also helps with gender equality. And then once all of that is in place, it disrupts the pattern of violence, and then, yeah, it promotes healthier relationships overall and then healthier people, well-being in communities and countries at large.

A: How did you create this solution? Who did you work with to get here?

F: It all started with so many assumptions based on my personal experience. I saw that because we didn't have the name for emotional abuse in the first place, we couldn't see it when it was happening around us and also – so, first of all, not knowing what it was and all of the different signs, and then second of all, we had this distorted view of what a healthy relationship looks like. Sometimes we think that it's based on possessiveness, on control and belittlement, like it's so normalized that we think that that's the norm. And once that happens, we cannot see the opposite, or when the opposite, which is healthy relationship, happens, we don't see it as it. And based on those assumptions, that's where we created the solution. So what I would say is very specific and unique to Omena the training that we have created with the team, who are all survivors, and we have this global team of youth and young professionals, all Fulbright scholars, and we also have Rhodes Scholars, and we created this really based on our experiences, but also on all our, what is it called, specificities, our majors basically, on sociology, psychology, international development, and entrepreneurship, and then that is very specific to us. And then the other one, which is the curriculum that is based on social emotional learning. That one has been designed with the help of other organizations, actually authors of children's books from Educate to Empower publisher. And they provided us with their books that are based solely on emotional intelligence for kids and children. And then we also worked with The Institute of Social Emotional Learning in California and then the last one is the One Love Foundation, that is promoting healthy relationships. So combining all of that and creating a curriculum that was not only culturally appropriate – we translated it – but also we did pilot it to make sure that it was the right fit for the people. And we decided to go from there because not only is social emotional learning is pretty new, but it was already created, so we didn't want to start from scratch because it was already out there. We just wanted to make sure that it worked for us. But the training that we created, though, we didn't see anywhere else. So I think that one was very specific to us and really tailored to the needs of the people that were serving.

A: So you really took a bunch of different expertise together and you created this program that would work for your country that was culturally sensitive, aware, things like that.

F: Yes. And I think what's awesome with what we provide is that emotions are universal and the way we are approaching it has been, people have been very responsive towards what we offer and not only in Madagascar. The one in Madagascar, making sure that it was in French and Malagasy has been crucial when it came to providing that same training to other people outside, which was our ambassadors, who are in 13 different countries now. We did have the same approach and we actually saw that they could relate to what we were talking about. But I think the approach in terms of, depending on their culture and how they would take in the information could be different and could be improved.

A: And to take a step back but also continue in this realm of community, I want to talk a little bit about the impact of this app on the community and talk a little bit more about the implementation of the program. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages to using this kind of train-the-trainer program that you have created?

F: First of all, I think that the peer-to-peer model in itself, the fact that we have been able to create this program by youth for youth, has helped us really be successful in the way we have approached the problem and the solution as well. We have seen that youth are more comfortable, they have been very responsive, and we've been able to create these safe spaces for them to be themselves in these spaces. So I would say the representation having the youth lead these sessions have been tremendously helpful. Now in terms of the approach in itself, making sure that what we have – the videos, the different workshops – they are super interactive. And also because we've been able to work with established organizations on the ground, meaning that the peer-to-peer model was successful as well. We also found that the model that we're using is very cost effective because by training an educator, we're able to have them reach at least 50, either students or people in the community. And so far we've been able to train over 150 community educators. So in the next year we are hoping to impact over 7000 people in the community and students. So I would say that that has been super beneficial for us, and now that we would be moving most of our programming online, I think the impact is gonna even triple because of the accessibility and having people access this information on a virtual platform. In terms of, I would say downside of the model, in countries like Madagascar, especially doing this work on a nonprofit basis, it's hard to get youth motivated without some financial support or stipend, because as much as they are excited about the cause, the reality is that everyday people are trying to make ends meet and finding money to be able to even go to the school. The reality is they don't have that money sometimes, so as an early stage non-profit organization wanting to grow and make an impact, that burden of not having enough funding and being able to provide a stipend to these youth has been one of the barriers for us. Also, the type of program that we have is another barrier, I would say, or something that we need to make sure we are looking at, is that we are most likely attracting also potential predators because we're working with children and youth. We need to make sure that our screening and the people that we bring on are people who are not, I would say, the perpetrators. So making sure of that and the quality control and all of the compliance, we need to make sure that we

learn we are compliant when it comes to having these people on board. So that can be also a problem in the model that we are using right now, but making sure right now that those are taken care of.

A: I really appreciate the honesty in that reflection there. Would you also say that it's a challenge implementing the program in Madagascar, even though you are here in Providence?

F: Again, I think it comes down to the funding. We started Omena as a remote work because I was here already when it all started, and it all started with that video that was shared online. And that's where actually I saw the strength of being able to use technology to make impact in the world. And it's funny, because before we started, I mean when we started, that was before COVID, people were telling us you are so far away, what are you doing? This work is so, so far away from you. And for me, it was a matter of having the right people, being able to train them. And then having them motivated to do the work, and part of the motivation is that economic empowerment, I would say, to be able to provide that financial support to the people. So I think that that has been that has been the barrier for us to be able to do the work. But I'm still here right now. The work is continuing in Madagascar and because we actually just got the chance to succeed in our first crowdsourcing, we got the financials to be able to continue work right now, as we're speaking.

A: Congratulations on that!

F: Thank you. It's just the beginning, we still need so much support and yeah, we're working on it.

A: Very cool. And a final question for you. How do you see digital health innovations impacting emerging nations, say 20 or 30 years from now?

F: In the next 20 or 30 years, I really see digital innovation as being a breakthrough innovation for emerging countries, and it might take some time, but once that would happen, it will tremendously change the lives of people because ultimately that would lead to economic growth and also well-being of the population. But I think before that, there is so much work to do still in terms of educating the population around how to even use those types of platforms, and before that, even providing people with access to Internet, because in reality, so many people still don't have access and the luxury to even use that. So, I would say as long as they have access to that, the education to be able to navigate these types of platforms, the information, and then also having good law and governance environment in place to make sure that people's data and privacy are protected. So much work still, but I really see this as a breakthrough in emerging countries in the next years.

A: The work you're doing is very impactful and if people want to learn more and support Omena, where can they go?

F: Yes. So we are on all social platforms, mainly we are on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and the handle is @omenamovement. And then our website is omenamovement.org and you can reach out to us via email to omenamadagascar@gmail.com.

A: Thank you so, so much, Francesca. I learned a lot and I'm really excited and proud of the work you're doing.

F: Thank you so much. It was a pleasure to be here. And I'm so glad that you're helping us amplify our message and then help us just spread the word. Thank you.

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