

PLANNING REPORT | EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Supporting the Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being of Youngish Adults

January - April 2021



Jewish Federation
OF ST. LOUIS

For our community - now and in the future

Jewish Federation of St. Louis

Young Adult Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being Roundtable

This report documents a collaborative process incorporating contributions from many people. Thank you!

Prepared by

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Thank you to **Lori Kabrun-Berry** and **Emily Bornstein** for their support on this project.

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Interview and feedback participants

(all names are pseudonyms)

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Sam

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Wonder

Antonio

Adam

Talia

Deb

Joe

Samantha

Project Framing

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, people around the world have struggled with their mental health. Isolation, fear, and rapid change have all impacted the ability for individuals to cope with both existing and newly emerging stressors.

One group that has particularly struggled in the United States is youngish adults between 22 and 40 years old. This group has the highest rates of reporting symptoms of anxiety disorders and depression (Societal Experts Action Network, 2020). In addition, the Building Resilient Communities Study conducted by Brandeis University researchers in May 2020 found that youngish adults in the St. Louis Jewish community had more trouble coping with the psychological effects of the pandemic.

To explore the needs of members of this group and identify opportunities to better support their mental health, the Jewish Federation of St. Louis convened a Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Roundtable, consisting of leaders and stakeholders from across the Jewish community. These stakeholders included a mix of youngish adults, people who work with youngish adults, and people with professional mental healthcare expertise.

These stakeholders participated in a design thinking process, centering the experiences and stories of youngish adults to generate concepts and then refine ideas that could positively impact the long-term mental health and well-being of youngish adults in the region.

Responding with Design Thinking

Design thinking is a rigorous and structured approach to finding innovative solutions to complex problems. It is different from other generative and decision-making processes in that it:

Starts with people and stories. Design thinking focuses on the people most impacted by a situation. It is rooted in stories and narratives to help understand people's experiences, behaviors, motivations, and hopes, from their perspectives.

Is nuanced, specific, and contextual. This process draws from the specific context of Jewish youngish adults in the St. Louis region, and it gathers and emphasizes nuance of experiences. This nuance is translated into specificity within design decisions, so the strategies are tailored to their audiences and their context.

Draws wisdom and ideas from diverse groups. The process leverages different types of expertise, including youngish adults, roundtable participants, and implementation partners.

Focuses on patterns of experience to generate unexpected strategies. Proposed strategies are inspired by commonalities across diverse people's lives and informed by broadly exploring different ways to address challenges.

Allows for flexibility and iteration. The structure of the process is responsive, shifting based on what we learn from participants, focusing on new relevant questions as they arise, and improving on ideas through cycles of feedback.

Creates visual frameworks to help understand experiences. To complement nuanced stories, abstracted visual frameworks make foundational learnings tangible, becoming shared communication tools for collaborators.

Process



Roundtable participants **shared stories** of youngish adults' challenges and successes, drawn from their own experiences and observations, in order to hone our focus and understanding.



Two **in-depth interviews** were conducted to learn directly from youngish adults who were living alone and/or with little family support, adding nuance and detail to enrich the understanding from the first workshop.



Roundtable participants **brainstormed** ideas, drawing inspiration from research stories, areas of opportunity, and existing practices. A prioritization survey identified the 9 highest potential ideas to continue into testing.



Created prototypes to make the ideas tangible and **gathered detailed feedback** from an additional 9 youngish adults, representing diverse experiences in the Jewish community.



Roundtable participants **refined the ideas**, exploring considerations raised by feedback as well as the potential for implementation.

Reframing: Supports for Resilience

While this project was initially framed specifically around mental health and emotional well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic, conversations with youngish adults and stories of their experiences made it clear that the issues they were facing went beyond the immediate isolation, disconnection, and fear of living through a pandemic.

The wider context of societal challenges—including racism, climate change, political tensions, and other massive upheavals—weighed heavily on youngish adults and hindered their overarching capacity to maintain resilience.

To respond, the Roundtable broadened its approach to focus on supports for resilience. With this reframing, the intention of the work extends beyond the current COVID-19 pandemic to many future challenges.



Reframing: Beyond Youngish Adults

This project was also initially focused solely on youngish adults, but it became clear during conversations with them that their experiences are entwined within broader community challenges. Older generations' perceptions of youngish adults shape not only what resources are available in the community, but also how youngish adults perceive themselves.

There's an opportunity for a community-wide shift in perception about the experiences of youngish adults. Some proposed strategies can be taken on by youngish adults themselves, but others must be taken on by the whole community. Youngish adults must be taken seriously as adults, and their experiences should be listened to, valued, and understood within their broader context.

“To me the biggest thing for youngish adults is being taken seriously as adults...The reality of this broadly defined group of people, our ‘generation’ cohort, is distinct from what people older than us have experienced, [particularly the] economic and social situation that we have inherited. Don’t treat it as if we have not done something ‘the right way.’ We’re doing things in response to our environment.”

- Adam

“The more it's out there in the community, the better — parents and grandparents would benefit from seeing that mental health is important.” - Talia

Framework: Supports for Resilience

Through stories representing a wide range of stories and experiences, we learned from youngish adults that the ways they sought or found support for their mental health and well-being during the pandemic fit into these four broad categories: Confiding, Connecting, Coping, and Consuming.

This framework set the foundation for the brainstorming and idea refinement in this project, and it has the potential to inform additional work in other areas as well. The following pages detail these categories and the opportunities they point to.



Strategies to Support Resilience

The following sections describe a set of ideas informed and refined by youngish adults and Roundtable participants.

This documentation is intended to help prompt and guide continued conversations about potential implementation. **These ideas aren't "final" but rather ready for the next set of stakeholders—implementation partners—to continue refining and developing them.**

High-Level Outcomes

As a result of these strategies, youngish adults will be supported to cultivate long-term resilience for their mental health and emotional well-being, by having healthy coping mechanisms, access to confiding resources, and robust connections to supportive community relationships.

Strategies to Support Resilience

Seeking help from others

Confiding Strategies

Make professional mental healthcare more accessible
Host facilitated affinity groups for processing and reflection

Connecting Strategies

Create options and systems for collective volunteering
Train and incentivize new leaders and hosts
Create events to welcome and facilitate connection with Jewish networks.
Provide experiences to create, make, and learn about Jewish culture together
Create venues for sharing and adapting Jewish traditions to build community connection

The strategies in **Connecting** and **Confiding** address direct, specific opportunities to impact the resilience of youngish adults in the St. Louis region, both in the immediate term and through longer-term community building.

Activities that are about the individual

Coping Strategies

Share messages that educate about and normalize mental healthcare

Consuming Strategies

Foster meaningful connection in community spaces and events

Activities that are about the group

The strategies in **Coping** and **Consuming** are critical to successful execution of the Connecting and Confiding strategies, supporting the development of a resilient community overall.

Helping yourself

Make professional mental healthcare more accessible

Access to professional mental healthcare, such as therapists and counselors, is a key part of confiding for youngish adults. However, finding the right therapist and having regular access to appointments can be barriers. In addition, youngish adults do not consistently think of the Jewish community as being a resource for mental health care, and they are particularly concerned about privacy when it comes to accessing resources in the community. Consider the following actions to make professional mental healthcare more accessible.

Outcomes

Youngish adults know confiding resources are available through the Jewish community, and they are able to consistently and easily connect with professionals who are the best fit for their needs.

Actions

Make accessibility a top priority: conveniently located services and virtual therapy resources.

Create a centralized resource and message to communicate what's available in the community.

Support finding a therapist who is a good fit.

Offer a variety of services and resources.

Build on the resources already available in the community.

Impressions from youngish adults

"The really big organizations are supporting our most vulnerable or needy community members. I have a hard time feeling like I'm one of those people." - Talia

"I'm cautious about connecting with rabbis or community leaders. If I go to a community leader, my parents might find out." - Deb

Key partnerships

Jewish Family Services

Rabbis and Clergy

Youngish adult focused organizations

Host facilitated affinity groups for processing and reflection

Building connections through small, facilitated groups is appealing to youngish adults but should include differing levels of commitment depending on the engagement. This strategy also has the opportunity to evolve in several directions: practicing mental health skills, connecting with people of like identities, and processing ongoing events in the world. Each of these directions would require careful facilitation and support to build trust.

Outcomes

Youngish adults have spaces that are designed for them to process their experiences and connect with others.

Actions

Build trust through groups with commonalities.

Offer different levels of commitment.

Support thoughtful and caring facilitation.

Incorporate practice of mental health and self-care skills.

Impressions from youngish adults

“I think it’s important to have a topic, to help frame conversations. Or to process particular events or to process a book or movie.” - Adam

“If it’s with strangers, there needs to be strong facilitation to break down the walls people put up to get to a deeper topic.” - Joe

“There are things I’m not going to say around folks with kids [unlike me] or who work in vastly different industries than I do.” - Sam

Key partnerships

Groups that serve youngish adults

Create options and systems for collective volunteering

For youngish adults, connecting with others through meaningful experiences is central to being part of a community. Completing helpful tasks and being of service to others also directly contributes positively to mental health and emotional well-being.

While participating in the community through service and giving back is rewarding, the barriers to getting started can be difficult to surmount, and service opportunities are not always designed to build connections and relationships. The following actions would support implementing a system for community involvement and activation to engage youngish adults and build or deepen community connections.

Outcomes

Youngish adults can easily find opportunities to meaningfully participate in community and build connections with people across the St. Louis region. Those interactions support a feeling of fulfillment and satisfaction, and a sense of purpose.

Actions

Provide easy options for participation.

Create cohorts for connection.

Design intentional experiences for relationship-building.

Make it worthwhile to recipients and organizations.

Connect to shared Jewish values.

Impressions from youngish adults

“Doing good for others makes you feel good!” - Antonio

*“I would find it so fulfilling to participate in something like this, and to support someone else. It makes me feel accomplished and connected to others.”
- Talia*

Key partnerships

Jewish Federation of St. Louis

Synagogues

Organizations outside the Jewish community

Groups that serve youngish adults, including YPD, Moishe House, JGrads, NextDor

Train and incentivize new leaders and hosts

Creating community takes a lot of work, and is a skill that must be honed over time. Cultivating a cohort of youngish adults who feel confident and empowered to host and create community spaces supports not only these individuals and their guests, but also the long-term resilience of the Jewish community. Cultivating new leaders and hosts should include a blend of training on the technicalities, confidence building, and incentives to support future convenings. The following actions outline these steps.

Outcomes

Youngish adults have the confidence and tools to develop and host events that connect youngish adults across the Jewish community with each other.

Actions

Support and partner with existing organizations.

Build confidence and capacity for leadership.

Provide technical and logistical support.

Create different levels of engagement for hosts and leaders.

Impressions from youngish adults

"I would want to take this on in a way that isn't burdensome, and is still fun. Fostering connections, meeting new people, are positive for my mental health." - Deb

"I love hosting — it makes me feel good, and really fills me up." - Talia

"We desperately need this. We are going to need a fill a leadership vacuum [as people age]. Leadership isn't distributed evenly across ages." - Sam

Key partnerships

Groups that serve youngish adults, including YPD, Moishe House, JGrads, NextDor

Create events to welcome and facilitate connection with Jewish networks.

Programming that invites and welcomes youngish adults into Jewish community spaces is appealing to youngish adults who are seeking ways to find their place and connect with others. It is particularly helpful as a way for youngish adults to feel explicitly invited to integrate into the rich network of organizations and leaders in the Jewish community. This strategy emphasizes the resilience that comes from strong connections built gradually over time (in comparison to other strategies that have both short and long-term benefits).

Existing programming, such as Shabbat Shalom STL, provides a model to build on. Participants saw an opportunity to extend beyond synagogues into the broader set of community organizations.

Outcomes

Youngish adults understand the community resources and groups available to them, and build connections and relationships with those groups.

Actions

Choose times and locations that are accessible for people with a range of Jewish practices.

Make it easy to meaningfully connect with others.

Connect with a variety of organizations and sites.

Impressions from youngish adults

“I’ve been attending a queer Friday night happy hour at a synagogue in another city. It’s nice to have Shabbat dinner with someone.” - Sam

“I could see a variety of organizations (NextDor, Moishe House, synagogues, etc) putting their own spin on this.” - Deb

“I didn’t have any context with the Jewish community here. I didn’t have any friends who were from St. Louis and actively involved to have a foothold. I knew it was something I wanted.” - Adam

Key partnerships

Groups that serve youngish adults

Synagogues

Other Jewish community organizations

Provide experiences to create, make, and learn about Jewish culture together

During the pandemic, experiences where people have been consuming new information virtually have sometimes left them feeling more disconnected than before. Sharing experiences to create, make, and learn provide venues for deeper connection to both the Jewish community and to other people. By hosting events, both virtual and in-person, that connect with Jewish traditions and experiences, youngish adults can come together around a shared topic and build relationships through a shared experience. This strategy emphasizes the resilience that comes from strong connections built gradually over time (in comparison to other strategies that have both short and long-term benefits).

Outcomes

Youngish adults connect with each other through active, creation experiences, rooted in Jewish culture.

Actions

Foster intimate spaces for connection.

Balance learning and connection.

Connect with Jewish traditions, experiences, and calendar.

Provide opportunities for a range of interests.

Make execution easy for participants and organizers.

Impressions from youngish adults

“When you’re producing something, whether it’s a success or a flop, it’s great to have a small group to commiserate with.” - Deb

“I have been doing this during the pandemic. Food is Jewish culture! I bake with my mom on FaceTime. I also took a babka making class.” - Talia

“Things that are are building or handy might attract people who don’t see themselves as artsy.” - Joe

Key partnerships

Groups that serve youngish adults

Organizations already hosting collaborative programming in the community

Create venues for sharing and adapting traditions to build connection

Connecting to tradition is important to feeling connected to family, friends, and culture, and can impact mental health. Working with others and engaging with traditions, particularly those that help make sense of a complicated world, is beneficial.

However, the idea of adapting and sharing traditions had a mixed response from youngish adults. In some practices, there is resistance to the idea of adapting or changing traditions. For others, youngish adults may not feel confident in their own practice of Judaism to feel comfortable sharing with others. Due to these complexities, this idea may be best applied in the context of other strategies, including *creating and making together* and *training new hosts*.

Outcomes

Youngish adults feel empowered to access and rely on Jewish traditions, and build connections with others in learning about and expanding their practice.

Actions

Develop resources to connect Jewish traditions to the current moment.

Create experiences for different forms of practice.

Allow for learning and exposure to other ways of being Jewish.

Impressions from youngish adults

"I'm not somebody who doesn't want Judaism to ever change or evolve, but I'm further along the traditional end that I'm not going to do a ton of reinventing" - Sam

"I am very reform, and I don't feel like I know enough. Do I know the prayers? Do I know what you're talking about? I had a bat mitzvah and I am very culturally Jewish, but I don't feel Jewish enough." - Deb

"I get really anxious and depressed when I can't be with my family for the holidays. It was really hard for me to know my family was having seder without me, so I sent them chocolate bars so we would feel connected."- Talia

Key partnerships

Groups that serve youngish adults

Share messages that educate about and normalize mental healthcare

Communication channels, particularly social media, are an important part of reaching youngish adults. Any coordinated efforts to advance supports for resilience should include communication and the messaging. These messages should normalize mental healthcare and encourage prioritizing emotional well-being.

Youngish adults want to see campaigns that speak not only to them, but to the broader community. These messages must be authentic, applicable, and should engage directly with people. It's also important to recognize that social media can be an emotionally challenging space for some youngish adults, and can't be the only communication channel.

Outcomes

Communication to the Jewish community consistently normalizes mental healthcare and provides authentic messages and skills that support mental and emotional health.

Actions

Reach the wider community, not just youngish adults.

Share authentic messages & teach skills.

Engage, don't just broadcast.

Impressions from youngish adults

"The more it's out there in the community, the better — parents and grandparents would benefit from seeing that mental health is important." - Talia

"I wonder how much of the [social media campaign] is a reminder of the care versus having access to the care." - Adam

"If someone says 'exercise helps', I want to see examples for different lifestyles and conditions. What's that like if you live in a high rise?" - Deb

Key partnerships

Groups across the Jewish community, including those that serve youngish adults

Foster meaningful connection in community spaces and events

Youngish adults want to start and deepen relationships with others, but simply being together in larger groups isn't enough to feel the benefits of connection. Within existing group spaces and events, there's an opportunity to intentionally foster relationship building through structured, personal sharing in smaller groups or pairs. Through curated conversation prompts and simple guidance for facilitation, event organizers can make every shared space a place for deeper relationship building.

Outcomes

Community events provide opportunities for people to consistently make meaningful connections with each other.

Actions

Build upon existing tools

Fit within structures of existing events

Support inclusion through facilitation

Impressions from youngish adults

"I am hesitant because some people will dominate these conversations. A good moderator can make people of diverse backgrounds feel welcome." - Sam

"It feels like this needs to deal with big issues, like racism within the Jewish community. You need space to work through it and talk it out." - Talia

"This could be built into another public event, like an author's talk, to support schmoozing." - Deb

Key partnerships

All organizations that host events