

## A Helping Hand When Young People Need It Most An Interview with Counselling Psychologist Dr Rhoda Yuen

Project Change was founded with a clear purpose: to provide counselling and support to young people who had been arrested, as well as to their loved ones. The experience of arrest, trial and imprisonment can take a heavy toll on the mental well-being of both young people and their families. Providing timely counselling and a helping hand at such a difficult time is therefore an essential part of our work.

Counselling psychologist Dr Rhoda Yuen, Founding Associate Director of Project Change, has been providing psychological counselling to the young people and families supported by the organisation. Over the past six years, she has witnessed young people grow and mature through long and difficult journeys, while also seeing parents support and encourage one another through times of adversity.

In this interview, Dr Yuen reflects on what she has witnessed, learned and experienced over the past six years.

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**Q: Project Change was founded in 2020 and is now in its sixth year. Looking back, what has stayed with you most, or what have you found most meaningful about the work?**

**Dr Yuen:** In the early days, I worked on a case where I met with a young person and subsequently prepared a report. The court reached its decision quite quickly. I still remember his



Dr Rhoda Yuen

mother calling me afterwards and saying, “We did it! He was given a bind-over order!” She was overjoyed, and so was I. It was the moment I realised that we really could make a difference in a young person’s life. I found that incredibly encouraging.

For a young person, being arrested can be an enormous burden. Some feel there is no way forward and no hope for the future. This can be particularly difficult when their families do not understand or support them. They may feel completely lost, unable to see how they can possibly get through what lies ahead. Some have even had thoughts of suicide.

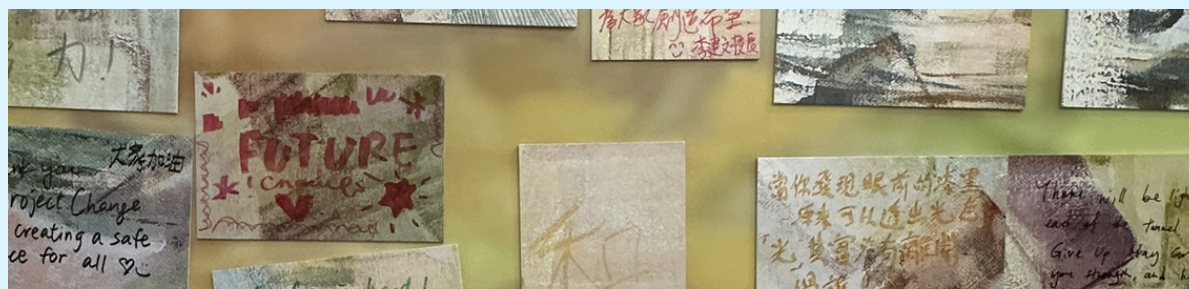
Project Change does not take a political position, and I believe this makes it easier for us to connect with these young people and earn their trust. They feel able to open up to us about some of the darker thoughts they have been carrying.

For young people in such circumstances, I believe timely support is crucial. Once they allow us into their inner world and begin to share what they are going through, their emotions often become much more settled. It can help prevent their thoughts from spiralling further into a place where everything seems hopeless.

#### **Q: How do you encourage them to open up?**

**Dr Yuen:** They already have a certain level of trust in Project Change when they come to us. When I meet them, I don’t question why they did this or that at the time. Instead, we talk about the difficulties they are facing now and how they can cope with them. They then feel that they don’t have to explain or justify themselves.

I don’t tell them things like, “You must cherish your life,” either. I simply give them the space to talk about how they are feeling at that moment, and let them see that we are willing to accept them as they are.



While they are waiting, it can feel as though they are constantly drifting at sea, never knowing today what tomorrow will bring. Many are afraid to commit to a permanent job and end up taking one casual job after another. Some are reluctant to commit to a relationship; some have broken up with their girlfriends. Others feel guilty about what they have put their families through and wonder how much longer their loved ones will have to worry about them. I think that uncertainty can be even more torturous than imprisonment itself.

They tell me that before there is a final outcome, the fear and uncertainty are harder to bear than anything else. What frightens them most is the thought of the police knocking on their door early in the morning. When they hear that this has happened to one of their friends, they start worrying about when someone might come knocking on their own door. They are constantly on edge, and the psychological pressure is immense. If someone is already dealing with a degree of psychological trauma, adding this persistent fear can make their life extremely unstable.

Once they are sentenced, it is as though they can finally see the shore. Even if the sentence is three or four years in prison, some find it less distressing than the uncertainty that came before. That may sound difficult to understand at first, but psychologically, it makes perfect sense.

**Q: What do you think led these young people to reach that point?**

**Dr Yuen:** I think the social atmosphere at the time, together with the influence of their peers, played an important part. They felt they needed to speak up for their society. Their original intention was to help rebuild society, but once they became involved, they were also caught up in the atmosphere. There was a strong sense that, whatever happened, they should do something together, without fully considering what the consequences might be.

**Q: What do you think led these young people to reach that point?**

**Dr Yuen:** I don't think there was a strong connection. Some of the young people were born in mainland China, with parents who had also come from the mainland, while some others came from well-established, affluent families. The young people I have worked with come from a very wide range of family backgrounds, and their families were not necessarily dissatisfied with society. So I don't think we can generalise.

## **The Longer the Wait, the Greater the Impact on Mental Health**

**Q: How significant is the impact of arrest on young people's mental health?**

**Dr Yuen:** It can be very significant. Amid the chaos at the time, some were chased or assaulted, while others had to go into hiding. In some cases, even their families had no idea what had happened and went from place to place looking for them. There were young people who could not be found for a day or even two.

Experiences like these left many of them traumatised, with symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Some suffered from nightmares or prolonged insomnia and lived in a constant state of fear. At times, they could suddenly feel disoriented, as though they were under an overwhelming threat. If these emotional and psychological difficulties are not addressed in time, severe cases can affect a person's mental health for ten years, or even decades. That is why we need to help them acknowledge what they are going through and learn, gradually, how to work through it.

Many of them are afraid to talk about their difficulties. But prolonged insomnia, for example, inevitably affects their daily lives. Their routines may already have been completely disrupted. Some can no longer attend school, while others are only able to take on casual work. Helping them recognise their emotional difficulties and learn how to manage them is therefore very important. I believe this can make a real difference to their recovery.

**Q: You have said before that one of the most difficult periods for these young people is waiting to be sentenced. Does a longer wait have a greater impact on their mental health?**

**Dr Yuen:** Yes. I have had opportunities to work with them at different stages: after their arrest, before their hearings, during the court proceedings, and later as some prepared to go to prison. They have all said something similar: "At least now I know my sentence. However long it is, I know what comes next."

**Q: What can help them relax when they feel overwhelmed?**

**Dr Yuen:** There are many techniques they can use, such as relaxation exercises, focusing on their breathing and practising mindfulness. When they are suddenly overwhelmed by fear or their thoughts become confused, these basic techniques can first help them calm down. From there, they can begin to remind themselves that what happened in the past is not happening to them now. At the very least, this helps them realise that there are things they can do to help themselves, giving them a greater sense of control.

**Q: Can these difficult emotions return after some time?**

**Dr Yuen:** Yes. Even when they have begun to understand and manage what they are experiencing, those emotions can easily be triggered again. It might be something they read in the news, a particular scene that suddenly appears on television, something in their surroundings, or simply a memory or image that unexpectedly comes back to them. That is why it is important to understand what is likely to trigger these emotional responses, and to help young people recognise the effects of their trauma and learn how to work through them.

## **Acceptance from Parents Matters Most**

**Q:** Project Change recognises that when a young person is arrested, the impact is felt by the whole family. That is why we also provide counselling and other forms of support to parents and partners. To date, more than 200 families have received support through our various services. To complement our work with individual families, we also established a Parent Support Group, bringing together parents with similar experiences so that they can draw on one another's strengths, connections and resources as they navigate this difficult period together. This family-centred approach remains relatively uncommon. How many parents have taken part in the group?

**Dr Yuen:** The number varies from session to session. Usually, around six families attend, although we have had as many as ten at one time. Altogether, more than 20 parents have taken part over the years. Some join the group after being referred to us by their children, while others hear about Project Change themselves.

Even if their child is not receiving support from us, we welcome parents who feel they would benefit from joining the group.

**Q: What was the purpose of setting up the Parent Support Group, and what have you learned from it?**

**Dr Yuen:** Initially, we wanted to create a space where parents could be among people who truly understood what they were going through. They could share not only their feelings, but also practical experiences, such as how far they had to travel to visit their children, or whether certain items they wanted to bring would meet Correctional Services Department requirements. They could exchange useful tips, such as completing registration online beforehand.

We also wanted them to be able to support one another. Many felt unable to talk about what they were going through with friends or relatives. In the group, however, they share something in common and have been through similar experiences, so they can speak very openly with one another.

What has struck me is how positive they are despite everything they have been through. They understand that they have to find a positive way forward. I remember one parent saying, “We have to remind ourselves: how can we turn something bad into something good?” The other parents agreed: “Yes. We can’t let things keep getting worse. We’ve already been through so much.”

So they began brainstorming together about how something positive might come out of the experience. One thing they strongly agreed on was that, as their children grew older, they had gradually talked less and less. Whether their children were at university or already working, there was very little communication between them. As one parent put it, “Once they grow up, they barely want to talk to you!”

Yet after everything that happened, many found themselves communicating with their children more. However demanding their jobs were, and even if they had to take time off work, they made the effort to visit them. At the same time, they would remind one another not to take up the entire visiting period themselves, but to leave some time for their children’s friends as well.

**Their children could see how much their parents cared. Before, parents and children had largely been caught up in their own separate lives. But the experience opened up communication between them. Their children became more willing to tell their parents what was happening in their lives. In letters, some began sharing more of their thoughts and feelings and talking about what they were going through. They also became more concerned about their parents, reminding them to look after their health.**

**One parent said, “In a way, I’ve gained something I never expected. My children are already grown up, and I never imagined we could still share moments of warmth like these.”**

**Sometimes their children would ask them to contact one friend or another. One parent told us, “Only now do I realise how many friends my child has. They never used to tell me any of this.” You could say that the children had begun to let their parents into their world.**

**So I see the group as a place parents can trust, a place where they can support one another and, together, find something positive even in very difficult circumstances. Of course, they still face many challenges. But being able to recognise that something positive can emerge from the experience is, I think, tremendously important.**

**Q: That in itself is a source of strength.**

**Dr Yuen: It is. They care about one another’s children and keep track of when they are due to be released. They also remind one another, “Give them a little more space. Don’t immediately start telling them they need to do this or that.” There is a lot of this kind of mutual advice and encouragement among the parents.**

**They are also very open about their own needs and circumstances. For example, once a parent’s child has been released, they might tell the others, “I’ll come another couple of times, and then I probably won’t need to come anymore.” Or they might simply say that they cannot attend because they are visiting relatives in mainland China. They are very honest with one another about what is happening in their lives, and they are genuinely engaged in the group. There really isn’t another space like this available to them elsewhere, where they can talk freely about their circumstances without feeling constrained.**

**Q: How significant is the emotional and psychological impact on parents when their child is arrested?**

**Dr Yuen:** It can be very significant. For many, their first reaction is a sense of shame, and because of that, they do not tell other people what has happened. Some parents may already have had a difficult relationship with their child, and then suddenly a neighbour tells them, “Quick, turn on the television, your son has been arrested!” For a parent, that can be an extremely painful experience. They can feel a profound sense of shame.

Many parents do not necessarily agree with what their children did. They may disagree with their actions and they themselves would never have done the same. But in the end, they tell us, “We don’t want to judge them. I just want to stand by my son or daughter and help them get through this difficult time. This is something the whole family has to face.”

I have also heard some parents say that they themselves wanted to speak up, but they had jobs and family responsibilities to consider. Their child went out and was subsequently arrested, and now they feel they have to stand by them.

So although many of the parents may not agree with what their children did, those who choose to join the Parent Support Group are committed to supporting them. They know that while their son or daughter is still in prison, they need to keep visiting them, but they also have to carry on with their own lives. The whole family has to continue caring for one another and get through this period together. For some, the prison sentence may be as long as three or four years. But throughout that time, they hold on to the hope that, once it is over, the family can be together again.

**Q: In 2019, differences in political views led to a great deal of conflict within some families.**

**Dr Yuen:** Yes. I heard about young people whose families strongly disapproved of what they had done and would not visit them. I felt deeply sorry for those young people. They did not even have those 15 minutes of visiting time to look forward to, or the hope of wondering when their family might next come to see them. I think that must have felt like one blow on top of another.

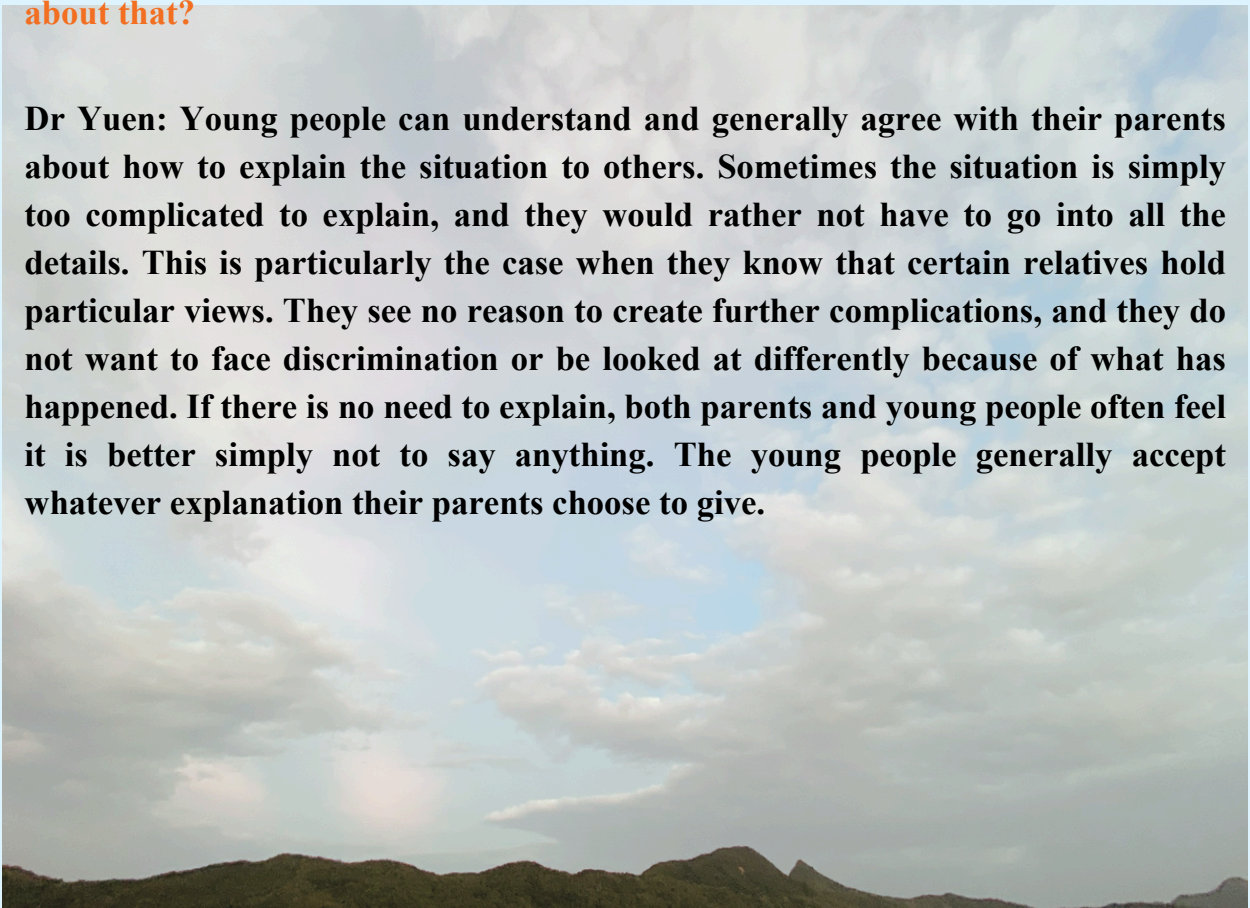
**Q: How much difference can a family's attitude make to a young person who has been arrested?**

**Dr Yuen:** If parents are constantly scolding them or remain unable to accept that their child has been arrested, their attitude can leave the young person feeling increasingly alone. From the moment they are arrested, through the wait for a hearing and having to report to the police station, they are already beginning to follow a different path from those around them. Then come the court hearings and, for some, imprisonment. Their path takes them further and further away from the lives of everyone around them. That sense of separation can weigh very heavily on them. If they have no one to help them through it, they can feel completely alone and without support.

Through the Parent Support Group, I have seen how much effort and care parents put into supporting their children. They do not judge them; they simply continue to care for them. That can be an enormous source of strength for a young person.

**Q: Some parents tell other people that their child has gone abroad to study rather than explain what has actually happened. How do the young people feel about that?**

**Dr Yuen:** Young people can understand and generally agree with their parents about how to explain the situation to others. Sometimes the situation is simply too complicated to explain, and they would rather not have to go into all the details. This is particularly the case when they know that certain relatives hold particular views. They see no reason to create further complications, and they do not want to face discrimination or be looked at differently because of what has happened. If there is no need to explain, both parents and young people often feel it is better simply not to say anything. The young people generally accept whatever explanation their parents choose to give.



## Facing the Future Begins with Accepting Yourself

**Q: What is the greatest challenge when supporting the parents of young people who have been arrested?**

**Dr Yuen:** Parents who are willing to join the Parent Support Group are already taking a positive step. The more difficult cases are often the parents we cannot easily reach, so our contact may instead be with the young person. When parents find it difficult to accept what has happened, we can only remind the young person: “Even if your parents disagree with you or cannot accept what happened, that does not mean they don’t love you. You simply see things differently.”

Their parents may disagree with them or struggle to understand them. But as they watch their child move forward step by step, remain grounded and work towards a future for themselves, I believe they can come to appreciate what they see. They may begin to understand that their child is not simply immature or following whatever other people tell them to do, but is capable of thinking for themselves.

If we cannot change the parents’ views, there is no point forcing it. The young person can focus instead on themselves by getting on with their life, taking things one step at a time and continuing to move forward. Their parents will see that for themselves. Of course, there are also some parents you simply can’t get through to. They won’t change and just keep scolding their children.

**Q: Having a criminal record can create further challenges for young people as they look to the future, particularly for those who had hoped to enter or return to a profession. What advice would you give them as they consider the way forward?**

**Dr Yuen:** Project Change will help them in whatever ways we can. Of course, they can still hold on to their interests, but I encourage them not to become too fixed on one particular path. They may once have thought, “I have to do this particular job,” but within any field there are different kinds of roles, and there may still be others that suit them.

**I often encourage them to allow themselves to broaden their horizons. Some may feel strongly about educating the next generation; others may want to help people, while some may have hoped to work in healthcare. I encourage them to explore the possibilities and be more flexible about the kind of work they pursue, while still finding ways to stay true to their interests and the goals that matter to them.**

**Otherwise, if they keep pushing against the same closed door, it can be an exhausting and painful experience.**

**Q: How can families and society support these young people?**

**Dr Yuen: Through acceptance. Some young people have told me that it does not matter whether their families agree with what they did. They do not need their families to tell them, “What you did was right.” They simply hope they can understand as much as they are able to. Most importantly, they want their families to accept that, at that moment in their lives, this was what they chose to do.**

**I often remind young people not to let other people’s labels determine their sense of self-worth or their identity. People are complex. We are constantly changing and growing, and this experience is only one part of their lives. Of course, they have paid a heavy price for what they did at the time, but that experience is not the whole of their life, nor does it define who they are. They should not allow themselves to be defined by that label, but learn to move beyond it.**

**Q: It is not easy to move beyond how others see you and carry on with your life.**

**Dr Yuen: You need to understand who you really are, like what your strengths and weaknesses are, and what you believe in. Your beliefs may not be shared by many other people, but it is important to know yourself, stay true to yourself and also learn to accept yourself: “These are my beliefs, and this is what I have been through.” I believe the first step is to accept yourself.**

**Q: Is support from the wider community important as well?**

**Dr Yuen: Even if they do not feel accepted by much of society, what matters most is knowing that their families still care about them and that the people closest to them are willing to accept them.**

**Q: People often ask whether the young people who were arrested have reflected on what happened. Have they?**

**Dr Yuen:** Very much so. In prison, they have more time to read and reflect. Of course, each of them has been through a very difficult experience, but I have seen many young people grow considerably through the challenges they have faced.

One young person told me that he had simply happened to be passing by at the time and felt he should do something, without imagining that he would be arrested. Looking back, some realise that when they became involved, they had only seen part of the picture.

Another was still a secondary school student at the time. He had not originally intended to take part at all. His classmates suggested going to have a look and, as his mother happened to be away from home, he went with them to the protest scene. Looking back, he felt he had acted impulsively and should have listened to his mother when she told him not to go. He had never imagined that one impulsive decision could have such far-reaching consequences.

Of course, there were also young people who had thought carefully about their decision before taking part.

There were claims at the time that these young people were being organised or supported by others behind the scenes. That is not something I personally encountered. From what I saw, the young people simply wanted to do something for their society.

**Q: How would you sum up the work of Project Change over the past six years?**

**Dr Yuen:** Project Change was an NGO with no established background or resources to draw on. You could say we started with almost nothing. But it came into being at exactly the right time. At a time when many young people felt alone and without support, Project Change was there when they needed it.

We do not decide whether to help a young person based on their political views. When I provide psychological counselling, for example, I do not need to know what position they take, or even a great deal about their background. Whether they

were “blue” or “yellow” did not matter. What mattered was that something they had been through was causing them distress and affecting their emotional well-being. That was when Project Change stepped in to offer support.

Our support has included psychological counselling and reports to the court where needed. These reports provide a fuller picture of the young person, such as their personal background, the circumstances that led to what happened, and other relevant factors. We hope that by giving the court this more detailed, three-dimensional picture, the young person can be seen more fully and fairly, rather than being judged solely on the basis of one act.

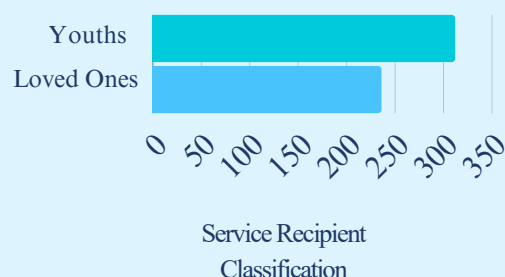
Project Change also has a mentoring programme, which I think is very valuable. It gives young people someone who can offer guidance from time to time, whether that means giving them advice, helping them with their English, or simply being there as a mentor as they find their way forward in life.

We are only a very small organisation. But when a young person feels as though they are drifting at sea, being able to reach out at the right moment and give them something to hold on to can make a real difference. It lets them know that someone understands what they are going through at that moment and immediately makes them feel less alone. I think that is tremendously important.

## Our Work

### Number of Services

Up to now, we have provided 548 service sessions to young people, as well as their parents and loved ones. Among the young people who received services, about 131 used counselling services, and about 157 participated in the “Reintegration Programme”. Some young people received both services.



## DONATION & SPONSORSHIP

**Project Change is a HK-based initiative focused on counselling and supporting HK youths arrested from involvement in the 2019 protests. Our politically neutral and non-partisan program offers holistic psychosocial counselling, legal referral support and reintegration services to youths aged 25 or under. We would be very grateful if you would consider making a contribution to support our work.**

**Below are two convenient options for making your contribution:**

### **1. Bank Deposit**

Please deposit your donation in Citizen Action Design Limited's Bank of China (HK) Limited Account (Bank No.: 012; A/C No.: 885-2-022737-5) and email the donation receipt to the Project Change Manager [info@projectchange.hk](mailto:info@projectchange.hk) or Prof. Yun Wing SUNG [ywsung@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:ywsung@cuhk.edu.hk).

### **2. Crossed Cheque**

Please send a crossed cheque payable to "Citizen Action Design Limited" to Room 521A, 5/F, Strand 50, 50 Bonham Strand, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong. Please write your name, contact number on the back of your cheque and indicate "Citizen Action Design Limited (Project Change)" on the envelope.

**We are a registered charitable organisation under Section 88. For donations of HK\$100 or above, we will issue a receipt as requested for your tax deduction purposes.**

For detail, you could visit our website: <https://projectchange.hk/>

