

YouHEALTH

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MODULE 1: UNDERSTANDING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

INTRODUCTION

Youth mental health is a crucial aspect of well-being, influencing young people's ability to navigate challenges, build resilience, and thrive in their personal and social lives. This module focuses on equipping youth workers and similar professionals with the skills to support young people—especially those with fewer opportunities—who experience mental distress. It provides a theoretical background on mental health, along with strategies, tools, and exercises for identifying and addressing mental health challenges.

Particular attention is given to the impact of health crises and natural disasters, which can significantly heighten stress, anxiety, and other mental health struggles among young people. These situations require youth workers to be especially attentive, offering early intervention, initial support, and guidance toward appropriate services. By fostering resilience and strengthening protective factors, youth workers can play a vital role in promoting young people's mental well-being, both in everyday life and during times of crisis.

Learning objectives:

- Objective 1: Understand the definition of mental health and mental distress in young people.
- Objective 2: Differentiate between common developmental challenges and significant mental distress in young people.
- Objective 3: Recognise the signs, symptoms, and risk factors of mental distress in young people.
- Objective 4: Understand the importance of early identification and the role of protective factors in mental health.
- Objective 5: Develop the skills to provide initial support and refer to appropriate services.
- Objective 6: Understand how health crises and natural disasters affect the mental health of young people, and learn how to recognise and respond to mental distress in these contexts.

THEORY: KEY COMPONENTS OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

Who are young people in mental distress and how can they be recognised?

Understanding young people's mental distress begins with defining **mental health**. The World Health Organization describes mental health as »a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.«¹ Young people's mental health is more than the absence of mental illness and disorders. It enables them to be active and creative, experience their lives as meaningful and accept themselves and their feelings. Good mental health in young people is characterised by the presence of experiences, perceptions and emotions such as happiness, satisfaction, self-esteem, relationships with others, daily activity, the ability to manage one's life and to cope successfully with challenges and problems.²

Young people may experience distress as a normal part of their lives, which is particularly accentuated by major events such as changes in relationships and environments, the loss or death of a loved one, accidents, illnesses and other problems. If not recognised and resolved in time, distress can lead to changes in mood and behaviour and mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, intense stress, substance abuse, suicidal behaviour, etc.³

Mental or psychological distress thus refers to a range of mental health challenges that affect how a young person thinks, feels, and interacts with others. It is often described as »a state of emotional suffering associated with stressors and demands that are difficult to cope with in daily life.«⁴ Psychological distress among young people can negatively affect their academic performance, their ability to participate fully in the community and their relationships with family and friends.

¹ World Health Organization, "Mental Health," *WHO Fact Sheets*, accessed 29 November 2024, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>.

² Nacionalni inštitut za javno zdravje (NIJZ), "Duševno zdravje," accessed 29 November 2024, <https://nijz.si/zivljenjski-slog/dusevno-zdravje/>.

³ Vita Poštuvan, *Pogovor o samomoru: praktični priročnik za pogovor o najtežjih življenjskih vprašanjih* (Koper: Založba Univerze na Primorskem, 2020), 7.

⁴ Tina Arvidsdotter et al., "Understanding persons with psychological distress in primary health care," *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences* 30, no. 4 (2016), 687, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/scs.12289>.

It is therefore important to identify and address problems in mental health early to support young people's mental health and well-being and empower them for a successful transition through this important development period. Especially in young people, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish when distress is a common and expected part of development and when it indicates that the person is experiencing psychological distress that could affect their mental health and well-being. The diagram below shows some signs that can help to recognise psychological distress in a young person:⁵

Noticeable mood changes:	Sudden changes in behaviour:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signs of anxiety, including increased restlessness • Sensitivity and depressive mood • Expressing feelings of despair • Expressing feelings of entrapment and helplessness • Low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness • Frequent mood swings • Cognitive difficulties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawal from social interactions with friends and family (feelings of being a burden, feelings of alienation) • Unusual expressions of anger, inexplicable anger, aggression, cynicism, impulsivity, and irritability • Abandoning activities that the young person previously enjoyed • Lack of motivation and goals • Poor concentration and cognitive difficulties • Increased substance abuse (alcohol and drugs)



Source: created using ChatGPT, 2025

⁵ Vita Poštuvan, *Pogovor o samoruru: praktični priručnik za pogovor o najtežjih življenjskih vprašanjih*, 9.

The following table describes in more detail the signs and symptoms of mental health problems that young people often experience:⁶

Anxiety:	Phobias:	A panic attack:	Depressive mood:
Anxiety can manifest through various symptoms such as a racing heartbeat, a sense of choking, changes in eating habits, nervousness, restlessness, agitation, muscle tension, exhaustion, persistent fatigue, excessive worry, fear, and indecisiveness. In stressful situations, young people may display extreme shyness, avoid their usual activities, or resist trying new experiences. Alternatively, to suppress or deny their anxieties, they might engage in risky behaviours, experiment with drugs, or act impulsively in sexual situations.	Phobias involve an intense and persistent fear that is disproportionate to the actual threat and is triggered by specific objects or situations. This fear may be accompanied by physical symptoms such as shortness of breath, dizziness, trembling, a rapid or pounding heartbeat, and a fear of losing control.	Panic attacks are characterised by sudden and overwhelming feelings of terror, often accompanied by physical symptoms like a racing or irregular heartbeat, dizziness, shortness of breath, shaking, a sense of detachment from reality, and a fear of dying, losing control, or going insane.	Depression in young people may present as persistent sadness, frequent crying without an apparent cause, frustration, anger over minor issues, feelings of hopelessness or emptiness, irritability, and a lack of interest or enjoyment in daily activities. It can sometimes be challenging to distinguish between common teenage mood swings and signs of depression. Consider whether the individual appears to handle difficult emotions effectively or if life feels overwhelming for them. Pay attention to signs of self-harm or suicidal thoughts.

Why are young people in mental distress?

The period of adolescence and young adulthood is marked by a number of physical, emotional and social changes that can make young people more vulnerable to mental distress or the development of mental health problems. According to the WHO, factors such as exposure to adversity, identity exploration, peer pressure to conform, media influence and gender norms contribute to stress and distress during this period. The quality of the home environment and peer relationships, exposure to violence and socio-economic conditions are also important. Some young people are at particular risk of mental health problems due to their living conditions, discrimination, stigma, social exclusion or lack of access to quality support and services. These groups include, for example, those living in difficult socio-economic

⁶ "Psychological First Aid in Youth Work," *Coyote Magazine*, accessed 29 November 2024, <https://pjp-ue.coe.int/en/web/coyote-magazine/psychological-first-aid-in-youth-work>.

circumstances and unstable environments, young people experiencing chronic illness, and young people belonging to ethnic or sexual minorities or other discriminated groups.⁷

Promoting young people's well-being, strengthening protective factors that can help them cope with various adversities, and protecting them from risk factors are important for their successful development and for coping with the challenges of this period. The table below shows in more detail some of the individual, social and environmental protective and risk factors:⁸

Type of factor	Risk factors	Protective factors
Individual Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certain temperament traits (e.g., inflexibility) • Chronic illness • Poor social skills • Impulsiveness • Emotional immaturity • Poor communication skills • Loneliness, grieving • Low self-esteem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certain temperament traits (e.g., adaptability) • Balanced diet • Good physical health • Well-developed social and communication skills • Internal control • Well-developed problem-solving skills • Effective coping strategies • Optimistic attitude • Self-care habits • Positive self-esteem
Social and Environmental Factors (factors related to family, school, community, society)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socio-economic disadvantage, poverty • Exposure to violence • Academic failure, school difficulties • Exposure to discrimination • Wars, disasters, crises • Lack of support services • Social injustice • Social inequality, gender inequality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic security • Safe family environment • Sense of connection and belonging • Good academic performance • Strong social networks • Access to support services • Social justice and tolerance • Social equality, gender equality

Youth Mental Health in the Context of Health Crises and Natural Disasters

Among the social and environmental factors contributing to distress are various crises, such as pandemics and natural disasters—including floods, earthquakes, and wildfires. These events often result in a range of traumatic experiences, including:

⁷ World Health Organization, “Adolescent Mental Health,” *WHO Fact Sheets*, accessed 29 November 2024, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>.

⁸ Helena Jeriček Klanšček et al., *Duševno zdravje otrok in mladostnikov v Sloveniji* (Ljubljana: Nacionalni inštitut za javno zdravje, 2018), 22.

- Fear for personal and family safety
- Loss of homes, schools, or loved ones
- Disruptions to daily routines, education, and social relationships
- Financial hardship for families and communities
- Long-term uncertainty about the future

Emergencies and experiences of this nature can profoundly impact the emotional and psychological well-being of young people, frequently leading to heightened anxiety, emotional distress, and sleep disturbances.⁹ Research across different contexts has highlighted several common psychological effects of natural disasters on children, adolescents, and young adults, including:¹⁰

- Acute stress reactions (such as shock, confusion, and intense fear)
- Post-traumatic stress symptoms (nightmares, avoidance, hypervigilance)
- Increased anxiety and depression
- Sleep problems and somatic complaints (headaches, stomach-aches)
- Behavioural changes (aggression, withdrawal, regression)
- Difficulties with concentration and disengagement from school
- Long-term emotional distress, especially with repeated exposure

Similarly, research and experiences from various countries have shown that during the COVID-19 public health crisis, there was a clear deterioration in mental health among children, adolescents, and young adults. For example, these groups reported increased feelings of fear, depression, anxiety and loneliness.¹¹ The COVID-19 crisis has further emphasised the need for

⁹ World Health Organisation, *Guidelines on Mental Health Promotive and Preventive Interventions for Adolescents: Helping Adolescents Thrive* (Geneva: WHO, 2020), <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/mental-health/guidelines-on-mental-health-promotive-and-preventive-interventions-for-adolescents-hat.pdf>.

¹⁰ Selin Cetinkaya et al., "Psychiatric Effects of Earthquakes on Children and Adolescents," *Journal of Pediatric Research*, (2023), <https://jpedres.org/articles/psychiatric-effects-of-earthquakes-on-children-and-adolescents/jpr.galenos.2023.70456>; Md Shahedul Islam et al., "Prevalence and Determinants of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among Children and Adolescents after Natural Disasters: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *PLoS ONE* 18, no. 2 (2023), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9898883/>; Senay Zeytinoglu et al., "Psychological Outcomes of Children and Adolescents after Disasters: A Systematic Review," *Social Science & Medicine* 282, (2021), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277953621001830>.

¹¹ Türkan Akkaya-Kalayci et al., "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health and Psychological Well-Being of Young People Living in Austria and Turkey: A Multicenter Study," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 23 (2020), <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/17/23/9111>; Ada Hočevar

youth workers and other professionals working with young people to be attentive to their emotions and challenges during crises and to find ways to address them.¹²

What is the role of youth workers and other professionals in recognising and addressing young people's mental distress?

Youth workers and other professionals who work with young people (e.g. teachers, trainers, adult educators, social workers, etc.) play a crucial role in identifying and addressing mental health challenges among youth. These professionals often build close relationships with vulnerable groups of young people, which places them in a position to support them by encouraging open discussions about their struggles and creating safe spaces for these conversations—whether in person or online.

To fulfil this role effectively, professionals need the knowledge and skills to recognise, intervene early, and provide initial support to young people in distress. It is important that they:

- Distinguish between developmental crises, which are a common part of growing up, and deeper mental health challenges.
- Provide initial mental health support to young people before referring them, if necessary, to more specialised professionals.
- Incorporate mental health topics into existing or planned (youth) programs.
- Find appropriate methods and formats for addressing different mental health topics, considering whether a physical or digital setting is more suitable for a specific topic and individual.
- Focus on strengthening young people's resilience, which includes both internal strengths (such as self-confidence, problem-solving abilities, and positive thinking) and supportive networks (such as warm, empathetic relationships and friendships).¹³

The tasks of youth workers, adult educators, teachers, social workers and other similar professionals could therefore be divided into:

Grom et al., *Pandemija covid-19 v Sloveniji: Izsledki panelne spletne raziskave o vplivu pandemije na življenje (SI-PANDA)* (Ljubljana: Nacionalni inštitut za javno zdravje, 28 January 2021), 15.

¹² "Mental Health in Youth Workers' Agenda," *Coyote Magazine*, accessed 29 November 2024, <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/coyote-magazine/mental-health-in-youth-worker-s-agenda->.

¹³ Ibid.

- promoting young people's well-being and preventive action in the field of mental health;
- early identification of distress that may lead to mental health problems in a young person;
- providing »first aid« to a young person already experiencing mental distress.

When offering initial support to a young individual experiencing mental distress, professionals in youth centres, non-governmental organisations, educational institutions, and similar settings must acknowledge their limitations and know when to refer the individual to more qualified experts or specialised forms of psychological support.



Source: created using ChatGPT, 2025

The Role of Youth Workers in the Context of Health Crises and Natural Disasters

During emergencies, such as health crises or natural disasters, the role of youth workers and similar professionals in supporting young people's mental health becomes even more important. Their involvement is crucial, not only in the immediate aftermath of a crisis but also throughout the recovery process.

In disaster situations, youth workers contribute to young people's well-being by:

- Providing psychological first aid – offering a calm, supportive presence and listening with empathy

- Creating safe spaces, both physical and digital, where young people feel comfortable expressing their feelings
- Restoring structure and normalcy through planned activities and consistent routines
- Facilitating peer support and group dialogue to promote mutual understanding and healing
- Supporting parents and caregivers in understanding and responding to the needs of children and adolescents
- Engaging young people in community rebuilding efforts, such as volunteer or creative projects, to strengthen their sense of agency and resilience
- Identifying and referring young people who may need specialised mental health services

TOOLS AND EXERCISES

“MAP” OF THE SUPPORT SERVICES AVAILABLE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN MENTAL DISTRESS IN EACH COUNTRY

Young people experiencing mental distress have access to various forms of specialised support, where professionals with appropriate psychological expertise provide assistance in addressing mental health challenges. These services typically include specialised centres and clinics for youth mental health and helplines or immediate (online) support services for mental health crises. Since psychological support services vary from country to country, below is a list of key services available to young people in Slovenia, Austria, Germany, and Turkey. Youth workers in individual countries can use this list to assist in working with young people experiencing mental distress. During natural disasters and health crises, various online or telephone forms of support are particularly relevant.

SLOVENIA:

Psychological Support Services/Organisations:

- Assistance from a personal doctor/pediatrician; psychiatric hospitals and clinics across Slovenia; outpatient psychotherapy.
- Centri za duševno zdravje otrok in mladostnikov, Centri za duševno zdravje odraslih (Centres for Mental Health of Children and Adolescents, Centres for Mental Health of

Adults): Operate within health centres across Slovenia to provide rapid and comprehensive responses to mental health challenges faced by children, adolescents, and adults, as well as promote their mental well-being.

Website: <https://www.zadusevnozdravje.si/kam-po-pomoc/centri-za-dusevno-zdravje/>

- Center za psihološko svetovanje Posvet (Psychological Counselling Centre Posvet): The counselling program offers free individual sessions for individuals, couples, and families who are experiencing emotional distress that they can no longer manage on their own and require professional assistance.

Website: <https://posvet.org/>

Phone number: 031 704 707 (available on weekdays from 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM).

- Svetovalni centri za otroke, mladostnike in starše (Counselling Centres for Children, Adolescents and Parents): Assist children, adolescents, and parents in addressing learning, emotional, educational, behavioural, psychosocial, and psychiatric disorders and challenges. There are several counselling centres across Slovenia.

Example – website of the centre in Ljubljana: <https://www.scoms-lj.si/>

Helplines:

- TOM Telefon – Phone Line for Children and Adolescents in distress: A confidential helpline offering counselling for children and young people.

Phone number: 116 111 (available every day from 12:00 PM to 8:00 PM; free)

Website: <https://www.e-tom.si/>

- Phone Lines Samarijan and Sopotnik: A general confidential helplines for people in distress.

Phone number: 116 123 (24/7; free)

Website: <http://www.telefon-samarijan.si/>

Online Resources:

- #tosemjaz: A web portal for children and adolescents facing different challenges.

Website: www.tosemjaz.net

- TOM Chatroom: An online chat room for counselling children and adolescents in distress.

Website: <https://www.e-tom.si/>

- NeBojSe: A web portal of the Društvo DAM – Depression and Anxiety Disorder Support Association.

Website: www.nebojse.si

- Živ? Živ!: An online platform for understanding suicide and the available help.

Website: www.zivziv.si

- OMRA: An innovative program offering answers about stress-related disorders and mood disorders, including depression, anxiety disorders, and bipolar disorder.

Website: <https://www.omra.si/>

AUSTRIA:

Psychological Support Services/Organisations:

- Psychiatric hospitals and clinics across Austria; outpatient psychotherapy.
- Pro Mente Austria: An umbrella organisation of different associations and societies offering psychological counselling and support for people, including young people experiencing mental health challenges.

Website: <https://www.promenteaustria.at/>

Helplines:

- Rat auf Draht: A confidential helpline offering counselling for children and young people.
Phone number: 147 (24/7; free)

Website: <https://www.rataufdraht.at/>

- Kindernotruf: A children's emergency helpline.

Phone number: 0800 567 567 (24/7; free)

- Telefonseelsorge Austria: A general confidential helpline for people in mental distress.

Phone number: 142 (24/7; free)

Website: <https://www.telefonseelsorge.at/>

Online Resources:

- Feel Ok Austria: An online platform providing information on mental health, coping strategies, and local resources for young people.

Website: https://www.feel-ok.at/de_AT/jugendliche/jugendliche.cfm

- Rat auf Draht – Chat Beratung: Chat consultation available from Monday to Friday from 6 PM to 8 PM.

Website: <https://www.rataufdraht.at/chatberatung>

- Bitte Lebe: A suicide prevention platform offering advice on recognising warning signs and tips for handling conversations about suicide.

Website: <https://www.bittelebe.at/>

- Suizidprävention Austria (SUPRA): Offers guidance and resources for suicide prevention.

Website: <https://www.gesundheit.gv.at/leben/suizidpraevention.html>

GERMANY:

Psychological Support Services/Organisations:

- Psychiatric hospitals and clinics across Germany; outpatient psychotherapy.
- Krisendienste (Crisis Service): Available in various regions across Germany, offering immediate telephone or in-person professional psychological support for people experiencing acute mental health crises, including emotional distress, suicidal thoughts, or psychiatric emergencies.

Example – website of Berliner Krisendienst: <https://www.berliner-krisendienst.de/>

Helplines:

- TelefonSeelsorge: A confidential helpline for anyone in distress.

Phone number: 0800 111 0 111 or 0800 111 0 222 (24/7; free)

Website: <https://www.telefonseelsorge.de/>

- Nummer gegen Kummer: A confidential helpline for children, young people and parents.

Phone number: 116 111 (for children and young people), 0800 111 0550 (for parents)

Website: <https://www.nummergegenkummer.de/>

Online Resources:

- Krisenchat: Chat-based counselling for children and young people (up to 25 years old) in acute crises.

Website: <https://krisenchat.de/>

- Nummer gegen Kummer – Online-Beratung: An online platform for children, young people and parents seeking help with personal problems or distress.

Website: <https://www.nummergegenkummer.de/onlineberatung/#/>

- JugendNotmail: Offers confidential, free online counselling to children and young people (up to 19 years old) in emotional distress.

Website: <https://jugendnotmail.de/>

- bke-Jugendberatung: An online platform that offers confidential, free counselling to young people (between 14 and 21 years old) facing emotional, psychological, or personal challenges.

Website: <https://www.bke-beratung.de/jugendberatung/willkommen>

- U25: Provides free, confidential support via email for young people (up to 25 years old) dealing with thoughts of self-harm or suicide. Support is offered by trained peer counsellors.

Website: <https://www.u25-deutschland.de/>

TURKEY:

Psychological Support Services/Organisations:

- Psychiatric hospitals and clinics across Turkey.
- Sağlıklı Hayat Merkezi (SHM) (Healthy Life Centres): Operate in various provinces across Turkey and offer mental health counselling, including counselling for children and adolescents.

Website: <https://shm.saglik.gov.tr/index.php>

- Maya Vakfi: Foundation that provides psychosocial support services to children and youth between the ages of 5 and 24 who have suffered from trauma due to natural disasters, pandemics, migration, family loss, and bullying.

Website: <https://mayavakfi.org/ana-sayfa-tr/>

Helplines:

- Alo 183 Social Support Line: A confidential helpline offering psychological counselling and support for anyone in distress.

Phone number: 183 (24/7; free)

- Gençlik Destek Hattı (Turkey Youth Support Line): A confidential helpline for children and young people experiencing mental distress or challenges.

Phone number: 0850 455 00 70 (24/7, free)

Online Resources:

- Yan Yanayız: An online platform offering free psychological counselling, especially targeting individuals affected by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters like earthquakes.

Website: <https://yanyanayiz.com.tr/>

»FIRST AID« FOR A YOUNG PERSON IN DISTRESS – PRACTICAL TIPS FOR YOUTH WORKERS ON HOW TO REACT

Steps to address distress:

1) Recognise the issue

Identify when someone is showing signs of distress or anxiety.

2) Pause and reflect

Manage your own emotions first. Consider asking a colleague for help and assess how to proceed.

3) Listen without judgment

Offer a supportive, non-judgmental ear so the young person feels heard and understood. Here you can help yourself with the empathic listening skills, which are described in more detail below.

4) Evaluate the situation

Decide if immediate action is required or if you have time to plan a thoughtful intervention.

If immediate action is required (e.g., during an anxiety attack):

1) Take charge

Now you are in charge, take control. If you need more help, find it.

2) Create an emotionally safe space

If working in a group, provide the young person with a calmer environment, but do not leave the group unsupervised (working in a team is recommended).

3) Use simple instructions

Provide clear, simple instructions. Being present and caring is a good way to help.

4) Focus on breathing

Guide the young person to focus on their breathing. Help them shift attention away from anxious thoughts by grounding them in the present moment (e.g., identifying and describing objects in the room). See some calming techniques below.

5) Reflect and discuss

Once the young person feels calmer, discuss what happened. Explore potential causes and ask for their permission to involve the team, if necessary. Encourage their participation in decision-making.

6) Develop long-term solutions

Work together with the individual or the group to find long-term solutions.

If there is time to plan:

1) Analyse and collaborate

Talk about the situation with the young person. Identify possible causes and ask for young person's consent before sharing their challenges with the team.

2) Seek Expert Help

If the situation is beyond your knowledge and skills, consider involving more competent professionals, such as clinical psychologists.

3) Develop long-term solutions

Work together with the individual or the group to find long-term solutions.

Take care of yourself

After addressing these situations, prioritise your own well-being. Avoid internalising the stress, as this is neither healthy nor productive.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR YOUTH WORKERS IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

In the broader context of health emergencies and natural disasters, you can help young people by:

- 1) Listening actively and validating their feelings — let them know it's normal to feel fear, sadness, or anger.
- 2) Providing honest, age-appropriate information about what has happened and what is being done.
- 3) Helping them identify coping strategies and support networks.
- 4) Teaching and modelling calming techniques such as breathing exercises or visualisation (see below).
- 5) Watching for warning signs of serious distress (like talk of self-harm) and connecting them to professional help.
- 6) Using creative methods — art, music, storytelling, movement — to help them process experiences and feel safe again.
- 7) Advocating for mental health to be part of all disaster responses and involving young people in community rebuilding to strengthen their resilience.

For more detailed guidance, see the following practical manuals and support tools:

- [Psihosocialna pomoč ob nesrečah – priročnik \(Slovenia\)](#)
- [WHO: Psychological First Aid – Guide for Field Workers](#)

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network: PFA Field Operations Guide

EMPATHIC LISTENING

Empathic listening is a communication technique that involves listening to another person's perspective with empathy and understanding. It is a technique that can be very useful when working with young people in mental distress. Youth workers can use it by following these tips:

1) Create a safe space for conversation

It is important that the person is in a safe environment where they will not be disturbed and can talk about their problems. Encourage the person you are speaking with, especially when they are discussing difficult topics. Let them know you believe them, express concern, and show a genuine desire to help. Use a calm and reassuring tone of voice throughout the conversation.

2) Focus on the speaker

Maintain eye contact, avoid distractions, and give your full attention. Be present at all times and take an interest in what the person is telling you.

3) Acknowledge emotions

Validate feelings by reflecting them back. For example, »I understand this is hard for you« or »It sounds like you're feeling frustrated«. Keep your input to a minimum and don't interrupt the person.

4) Use non-verbal communication

Nod, maintain an open posture, and use facial expressions to show understanding.

5) Ask open-ended questions, but also leave space for silence

Encourage elaboration with prompts like, »Can you tell me more about that?«. On the other hand, leave room for silence, which is crucial for empathic listening. Silence gives the listener a chance to reflect on what has been said and the speaker a chance to think deeply about their problems.

6) Avoid judgment or advice

Focus on understanding rather than immediately offering solutions. If the person asks at the end, »What do you think?«, you can express your opinion. Otherwise, it is best to just listen, and express acceptance and understanding.

7) Conclude the conversation appropriately

Check with the person if there is anything else they would like to add. You can also thank them for sharing their problems with you.



Source: created using ChatGPT, 2025

DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

When a young person is experiencing distress, it is important that the youth worker knows how to help them relax and calm down. One technique that can be used is diaphragmatic breathing. The youth worker can guide the young person through the following steps:

1) Choose a comfortable position

Practice the exercise sitting or lying down. Make sure you feel relaxed.

2) Close your eyes

If this isn't comfortable, focus on a point in the distance. Breathe through your nose.

3) Place your hands

Put one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest. The goal is to keep the hand on your chest still, while the hand on your stomach moves. When you inhale, your stomach should rise, and when you exhale, it should fall.

4) Slow down your breathing

Count to 4 as you inhale (or 3 or 5, depending on what feels right). Hold your breath for a moment, then count to 4 again as you exhale. Find a rhythm that feels comfortable.

5) Count in your mind

If it helps, you can mentally repeat: »Inhale, one, two, three, four... hold... exhale, one, two, three, four...«.

6) Focus on the exhale

Make sure your exhale is smooth, calm, and relaxed.

Here is a video that demonstrates the practical use of the diaphragmatic breathing technique:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jpchJcKivk&t=72s>

VISUALISATION TECHNIQUE

Another relaxation technique that youth workers can use when working with a young person in mental distress is the visualisation technique, which involves following the steps below:

1) Choose a comfortable position

Practice the exercise sitting or lying down. Make sure you feel relaxed.

2) Close your eyes

If this isn't comfortable, focus on a point in the distance. Begin to breathe slowly and deeply.

3) Imagine a calming place

Think about a peaceful place where you feel safe and relaxed. This could be a real place you've been to or a place that you imagine. Picture it in as much detail as possible – the sights, sounds, and smells.

4) Engage all your senses

As you imagine this place, try to use all your senses. What do you see around you? Is there a particular sound, like waves or birds? How does the air feel on your skin? What smells do you notice? This helps make the visualisation feel more real and calming.

5) Focus on the positive feelings

As you imagine this peaceful place, focus on the feelings of safety, calm, and comfort. Let yourself fully experience the sense of relaxation this place gives you.

6) Return slowly to the present

After spending a few minutes in your peaceful place, gradually bring your focus back to the present moment. Take a few deep breaths, and when you're ready, slowly open your eyes. Notice how your body feels more relaxed and at ease.

Youth workers can also use existing examples of guided visualization. For example:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTdALc6KsQY>

EXERCISE - QUIZ: RECOGNISING AND ADDRESSING MENTAL DISTRESS IN YOUNG PEOPLE

Scenario: Meet Alex

Alex is a 16-year-old student who recently started withdrawing from social interactions. Their friends have noticed that Alex no longer enjoys playing basketball, an activity they previously loved. Alex often appears tired, irritable, and expresses feelings of helplessness in conversations. Recently, Alex mentioned feeling overwhelmed by school and life in general.

Part 1: Recognising Signs of Mental Distress

Question 1:

What signs of mental distress can you identify in Alex based on the scenario?

(Select all that apply)

- A. Maintaining social interactions
- B. Reduced interest in hobbies
- C. Expressing feelings of helplessness
- D. Showing signs of restlessness and irritability

Correct Answers: B, C, D

Explanation: Withdrawal from social interactions and activities that the young person previously enjoyed, helplessness, restlessness and irritability are all signs of mental distress.

Question 2:

How can you differentiate between common teenage mood swings and signs of more serious mental distress in Alex?

(Select all that apply)

- A. Observe if mood changes are persistent over time
- B. Look for withdrawal from activities they previously enjoyed
- C. Notice if Alex bounces back quickly from feeling sad
- D. Assess whether Alex expresses feelings of worthlessness or helplessness

Correct Answers: A, B, D

Explanation: Persistent mood changes, withdrawal, and feelings of worthlessness are signs of more serious mental distress. Quick recovery from sadness is more typical of common mood swings.

Question 3:

Which of the following behaviours might suggest Alex is experiencing a panic attack?

(Select all that apply)

- A. Sudden feeling of terror or fear
- B. Detachment from reality or surroundings
- C. Shaking, dizziness, and difficulty breathing
- D. Uncontrollable crying without physical symptoms

Correct Answers: A, B, C

Explanation: Panic attacks are characterised by sudden and intense feelings of terror and fear, physical symptoms, like a racing or irregular heartbeat, dizziness, shortness of breath, shaking, and detachment. Crying alone without other symptoms is not characteristic of a panic attack.

Part 2: Understanding Risk and Protective Factors

Question 4:

Which of the following might be risk factors contributing to Alex's mental distress?

(Select all that apply)

- A. Socio-economic disadvantage
- B. Positive relationships with peers
- C. Academic pressures and failure
- D. Exposure to discrimination

Correct Answers: A, C, D

Explanation: Socio-economic struggles, academic pressure and failure, and discrimination are risk factors. Positive peer relationships are a protective factor.

Question 5:

Which protective factors could help Alex build resilience?

(Select all that apply)

- A. A supportive family environment
- B. Developing effective problem-solving skills
- C. Exposure to a highly competitive environment
- D. Access to mental health services

Correct Answers: A, B, D

Explanation: Supportive environments, effective problem-solving skills, and access to support services foster resilience and promote mental well-being. A highly competitive environment could increase stress.

Part 3: Addressing Mental Distress

Question 6:

How can you encourage Alex to open up about their feelings?

(Select all that apply)

- A. Create a safe, judgment-free space for conversation
- B. Use open-ended questions to explore their emotions
- C. Offer advice immediately, even if Alex hasn't asked for it
- D. Validate their feelings and show empathy

Correct Answers: A, B, D

Explanation: Safe spaces, open-ended questions, and empathy foster communication. Unsolicited advice may shut down the conversation.

Question 7:

If Alex shows signs of self-harm, what are the most appropriate steps to take?

(Select all that apply)

- A. Stay calm and express concern in a non-judgmental way
- B. Wait to address the issue until Alex brings it up directly
- C. Encourage conversation while making it clear that self-harm is unacceptable
- D. Help Alex seek professional help

Correct Answers: A and D

Explanation: Calmly expressing concern and creating a safe space for dialogue is the first step. Ignoring the signs may lead to further distress and prevent Alex from getting needed support. While encouraging conversation is important, framing self-harm as simply unacceptable can create feelings of shame and discourage open discussion. The next step is to support young person in seeking professional, specialised help.

Part 4: Promoting Well-being

Question 8:

What activities could help Alex improve their mental well-being?

(Select all that apply)

- A. Encouraging Alex to explore hobbies they enjoy
- B. Introducing relaxation techniques
- C. Helping Alex connect with supportive peer groups
- D. Encouraging isolation to "clear their mind"

Correct Answers: A, B, C

Explanation: Engaging in hobbies, practising relaxation techniques, and maintaining social connections promote well-being. Isolation may worsen mental health.

Question 9:

How can you integrate mental health awareness into your programs for young people?

(Select all that apply)

- A. Organise workshops on emotional coping skills
- B. Promote discussions about mental health stigma
- C. Avoid mentioning mental health to prevent distress
- D. Provide resources for accessing professional help

Correct Answers: A, B, D

Explanation: Workshops, open discussions, and providing resources for mental health support are valuable ways to integrate mental health awareness into programs for young people. Avoiding the topic perpetuates stigma.

Part 5: Youth Mental Health in the Context of Health Crises and Natural Disasters

Recently, Alex's community experienced a severe flood, which damaged homes, disrupted local schools, and left many families facing financial hardship. Alex's family had to leave their house temporarily, and Alex has been worried about their safety and the uncertainty of the future. This added stress from the natural disaster may be compounding Alex's feelings of helplessness, withdrawal, and anxiety.

Question 10:

How might you, as a youth worker, support Alex and others affected by the flood?

(Select all that apply)

- A. Provide a calm, empathetic presence and listen without judgment
- B. Encourage them to suppress their fears to "stay strong"
- C. Help restore a sense of normalcy with structured activities
- D. Engage them in community rebuilding efforts to foster resilience

Correct Answers: A, C, D

Explanation: Listening with empathy, restoring structure, and involving young people in meaningful rebuilding all promote resilience. Encouraging suppression of fears can lead to greater distress later.

Question 11:

What signs might indicate that Alex or another young person needs specialised mental health support following the disaster?

(Select all that apply)

- A. Persistent nightmares and sleep problems
- B. Difficulty concentrating or disengaging from school
- C. Occasional worry about future floods
- D. Expressions of hopelessness or thoughts of self-harm

Correct Answers: A, B, D

Explanation: Persistent sleep issues, school disengagement, and especially hopelessness or self-harm thoughts are warning signs needing professional support. Some worry is normal, but ongoing severe symptoms are concerning.

CASE STUDIES

An example of good practice is presented, which can help youth workers and other professionals in planning activities to strengthen the mental health of young people, especially those who are more vulnerable to experiencing mental distress due to various risk factors (academic failure, school difficulties, social exclusion etc.).

PARK project

Name of good practice	PARK project
Year of good practice	1 January 2022 – 1 January 2023
Organisation	Jarše Youth Home Production school (Produkcijška šola Mladinskega doma Jarše)
Target group	<p>The project targeted young people with fewer opportunities who have dropped out of secondary education and are looking for a way back into the school system or into the labour market (NEET). These are young people with experiences of school failure, exclusion etc. that have led them to mental health problems. The project also involved four mentors from the Production school and young people still in the school system.</p> <p>The project was initiated by young people, who redesigned the garden, which is part of the Jarše Youth Home and which they can use for their purposes (mainly for socialising and organising various social events).</p>
Objectives	<p>The project objectives were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - quality leisure time, - socialising in the fresh air, - learning to work together in a group, - learning new skills, - physical activity, - and connecting with the local community. <p>Special attention was given to physical activity, which has a positive impact on mood and reduces mental health problems. It helps in reducing stress, preventing depression and anxiety, increasing self-esteem, and improving sleep. Additionally, the project aimed to create opportunities for young people to succeed</p>

	and showcase their success in the local community. The life skills acquired through participation in the project's various activities are valuable for building self-esteem and a sense of achievement.
Main activities	<p>The activities were organised in cooperation with all the young people involved. In the first phase, several workshops were held to prepare for the creation of the park, to discuss and explore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a workshop on organisation and planning, - a computer workshop (to learn about the programs needed to plan the park), - workshops on cooperation and learning through social games, - a workshop on learning how to organise a trip. <p>This was followed by more practical workshops on the safe use of tools and woodworking and visits to gardens. The main part of the project was the activities aimed at creating the park – making and setting up the finished objects such as high beds, stage, etc. Finally, the young people organised the opening of the park, to which various stakeholders from the local environment were invited. In this way, the young people presented themselves to the local community and showed the general public that they can do something good for the community.</p>
Main achievements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creation of a quality social space (park). - Strengthening of protective factors important for young people's mental health. - The acquisition of certain knowledge and skills that can help young people in their future education and work.
Website of the good practice	https://www.mdj.si/2022/10/09/park/ .

CONCLUSION

Understanding youth mental health is essential for youth workers and professionals who support young people in distress, especially in times of health crises or natural disasters. This module has provided insight into key concepts, risk and protective factors, early identification of distress, and practical tools for intervention. By fostering resilience, promoting well-being, and recognising professional limitations, youth workers can play a crucial role in creating safe spaces and ensuring timely support for young people. Equipping professionals with these skills enhances their ability to provide meaningful assistance and refer individuals to appropriate mental health services when needed.



GLOSSARY

Mental Health: A state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.

Mental Distress: A state of emotional suffering associated with stressors and demands that are difficult to cope with in daily life.

Resilience: The process and outcome of effectively navigating and adapting to challenging or difficult life experiences. It involves the ability to maintain mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility while responding to both internal and external demands.

Protective Factors: Individual, social, and environmental factors that reduce the likelihood of mental health problems and promote well-being. Examples include supportive relationships and good coping strategies.

Risk Factors: Individual, social, and environmental factors that increase the likelihood of mental health problems. Examples include poverty, violence, discrimination, and poor social skills.

Developmental Crises: Common, temporary difficulties experienced by young people as part of their development, including challenges related to identity, relationships, and life transitions.

First Aid in Mental Health: Initial support provided to a person in mental distress before they are referred to specialized services.

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MODULE 2

CULTURAL COMPETENCE



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2. Introduction

In this module, we will address different aspects of cultural competence, focusing especially on the key aspects, challenges and strategies to overcome the issues that might affect the mental health of young population. Cultural competence refers to the ability of individuals to understand, appreciate, and effectively interact with people from different cultures, backgrounds, and belief systems, which is crucial when treating mental issues and psychological affairs. **It is important to understand cultural differences in dealing with natural disasters in order to be able to provide effective psychological aid.** It involves developing behaviors, attitudes, and policies for productive cross-cultural interactions.

The main objectives that will be addressed in this module are:

- Support the individual cultural competence to improve mental health for young people during and **after public health and natural disasters.**
- Provide teachers and educators with the cultural knowledge and resources they need to teach students about health emergencies effectively
- Raise awareness of the importance of promoting strong cultural understanding to support mental well-being among communities during and after public health emergencies.



2.1. Key components of cultural competence to understand mental health

Cultural competence requires a deep and layered approach involving attitudes, knowledge, skills, and advocacy. It is not just a static skill set but an ongoing process of learning and adapting.

A. Awareness and attitudes

Self-awareness: Professionals working with young people need to continually reflect on their own biases and cultural backgrounds. This self-reflection helps them identify any preconceived notions or attitudes that may interfere with providing objective and empathetic work.

Cultural sensitivity: Professionals should approach all cultural practices with respect and curiosity, fostering an environment where youngsters feel seen and understood.

Non-judgmental attitude and fair treatment: Professionals should work without discrimination, appreciating and respecting cultural differences. This can help to cope better with natural disasters because people are more likely to open up if their cultural backgrounds are understood and respected. They should engage young people and ensure that all interactions promote dignity.

Embracing diversity: cultivating an attitude that appreciates the strengths that different cultures bring can make youth work more effective and relatable.

B. Knowledge

Cultural frameworks: Professionals should understand various cultural frameworks, such as collectivist vs. individualist societies. In collectivist cultures, family and community might play a more significant role in decision-making, while individualist cultures emphasize personal autonomy.

Cultural beliefs about mental health: Some cultures may interpret mental health issues through spiritual or holistic lenses. For example, certain Indigenous groups might view mental health concerns as imbalances in spiritual or communal harmony rather than individual pathology.

Intersectionality: Recognizing how overlapping identities (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status) impact an individual's experience of mental health is critical. A young individual from a minority background may face unique layers of discrimination and stress.

C. Skills

Training and skill development: Ongoing training in cultural competence is vital for professionals working with young people. This training focuses on understanding diverse perspectives and avoiding stereotypes that could affect service quality.

Effective communication: Culturally competent communication involves being aware of nonverbal cues, indirect speech, and culturally specific expressions. This includes understanding that eye contact, gestures, and personal space may have different meanings across cultures.

Language proficiency or use of interpreters: When language barriers exist, professional interpreters trained in mental health are vital to ensure accurate communication and maintain confidentiality.

D. Advocacy

Policy advocacy: Professionals should work to influence policies that expand access to culturally tailored care. This includes advocating for funding that supports training for culturally competent services.

Community engagement: Building relationships with community leaders and cultural organizations can help establish trust and extend mental health resources in culturally meaningful ways.

Education and outreach: Providing culturally relevant educational materials and workshops to youth and their families can demystify mental health services and encourage proactive engagement.



Photo by Metehan Ceylan

In practical terms, cultural competence allows people to engage empathetically and appropriately with individuals from various cultural backgrounds, enhancing understanding and reducing potential conflicts or misunderstandings. It is important to ensure clear communication and emotional stability during natural disasters. This concept is especially critical in fields like education and youth work, where effective communication and trust-building are essential for success.

2.2 Challenges faced by youth in the context of mental health

Professionals working with young people should be aware that the mental health landscape for youth, especially those from diverse backgrounds, presents unique challenges that must be addressed with a culturally competent approach.

A. Identity and belonging

Bicultural stress: Youth who grow up in families with strong cultural ties while navigating a different cultural environment outside the home can experience bicultural stress. This stress arises from the push and pull between adhering to familial traditions and integrating into the broader society.

Cultural mismatch in therapy: When the cultural backgrounds of a therapist and a young client differ significantly, there can be a mismatch in understanding cultural values, which may hinder the therapy process.

B. Stigma and misunderstanding

Family perceptions of mental health: In some cultures, mental health is heavily stigmatized, viewed as a personal or familial failure. This can discourage youth from speaking out or seeking help due to fear of shaming their families.

Lack of mental health vocabulary: Certain cultures do not have direct translations for mental health terms like "depression" or "anxiety," making it challenging to discuss symptoms and treatments accurately. This helps to avoid culturally induced misunderstandings in natural disasters, especially in the initial psychological contact.

Misinterpretation of symptoms: Cultural differences in emotional expression can lead to misdiagnosis. For example, some cultures may somatize psychological distress, where emotional pain manifests as physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, fatigue).



Photo by Mariela Mendieta

C. Discrimination and racism

Impact of racial trauma: Youth who experience racial trauma may show symptoms similar to hypervigilance, anxiety, and mistrust of authorities. This trauma can be exacerbated by systemic racism in schools, neighborhoods, and even healthcare settings.

Subtleracism (microaggressions): Repeated exposure to microaggressions, such as being told they are "articulate" for their race or experiencing stereotypes, can lead to feelings of inadequacy and increased anxiety.

Internalized racism: Young people may absorb societal biases, leading to negative self-perception and poor mental health outcomes.

D. Access and communication barriers

Language barriers: For youth from different linguistic backgrounds, there may be significant barriers to accessing mental health resources due to the lack of available translation services or bilingual mental health professionals. That is why it is important to use culturally sensitive communication in natural disasters, especially with people under psychological stress.

Cultural relevance of services: Services that do not consider cultural norms may feel irrelevant or uncomfortable, deterring young people from participating. Youth may feel that therapy approaches fail to incorporate familial or cultural values.

Underrepresentation of culturally competent therapists: The shortage of therapists who reflect the racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds of diverse youth can result in feelings of disconnect and mistrust during therapy.

E. Family and societal expectations

Balancing traditional roles and modern expectations: Youth may face expectations to conform to traditional family roles while balancing the need to express themselves in ways that align with broader societal norms, creating internal conflict.

Parental understanding: Parents who adhere to traditional beliefs may not understand or support Western concepts of mental health treatment. This lack of support can result in tension within families and prevent youth from accessing necessary care.

Pressure to succeed: in many cultures, academic success and family honor are paramount. These pressures can lead to anxiety, perfectionism, and fear of failure.

F. Economic barriers

Socioeconomic challenges: Youth in lower-income households often face heightened stress due to financial instability, limited resources, and potentially unsafe living conditions. This can exacerbate mental health struggles.

Insurance and affordability: High costs and limited insurance coverage for culturally competent mental health services can prevent families from seeking help.

Transportation and time constraints: Practical barriers like lack of reliable transportation or inflexible work schedules for parents can hinder youth access to consistent mental health services.

2.3. Strategies for addressing cultural issues in young population (professionals)

Addressing cultural issues is crucial for creating an inclusive environment, whether in the workplace, in communities, or in global interactions. Here are some detailed strategies that support the education and awareness of professionals working with young people:

- Cultural competency training: Implement training programs that educate employees or community members about different cultures, traditions, and practices.
- Workshops and seminars: Regularly organize workshops and seminars led by cultural experts to raise awareness and foster understanding.
- Educational materials: Provide access to books, articles, and online courses about cultural diversity and sensitivity.
- Open communication: Encourage open dialogues and communication about cultural issues and provide safe spaces for people to express their concerns and experiences.
- Celebration of diversity: Professionals working with young people can promote cultural events that celebrate various cultures, such as festivals, food fairs, and cultural exhibitions.



Photo: Ana Leal

Addressing cultural issues requires a multifaceted approach that involves education, strategic communication, and continuous improvement of cultural competence training. By implementing these strategies, professionals working with young people can create a more inclusive and harmonious environment.

2.4 Tools and exercises for professionals working with young people

Interactive tools and games designed to foster cultural competence among young people with fewer opportunities are essential for teaching them how to appreciate and navigate cultural diversity, a key aspect in handling stressful situations after a natural disaster. These

tools help build awareness, empathy, and communication skills in a fun and engaging way. Here are examples of such tools:

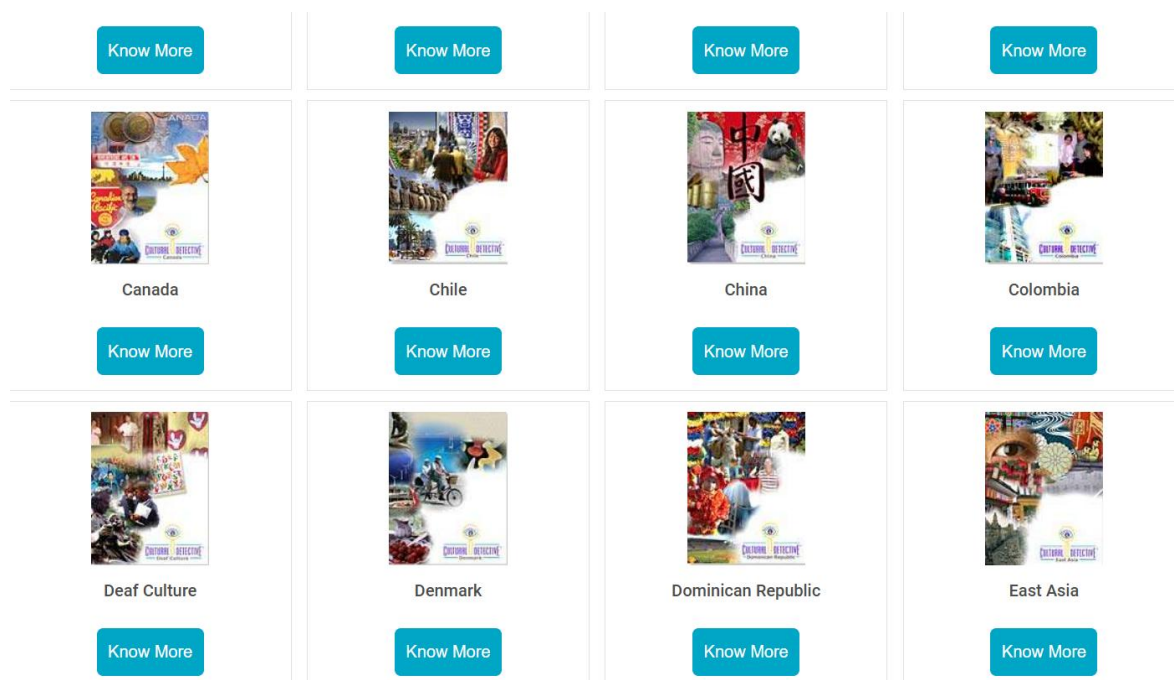
- Cultural awareness games for professionals working with youngsters

“bafa bafa”: A classic cross-cultural simulation game where participants are divided into two groups, each with its own unique cultural norms and rules. The groups then interact and try to learn about each other's cultures through observation and engagement. This game teaches participants to understand cultural differences and develop empathy.

- Online platforms and interactive apps for professionals

Cultural detective® online: This interactive app is great for professionals working with young people. This collaborative tool focuses on critical incidents and case studies to develop skills in recognizing cultural influences on behavior. This platform encourages teamwork and promotes discussion on cultural perspectives and problem-solving.

<https://www.culturaldetective.com/what/series-content.html>



- Mobile apps for young people (Cultural learning)

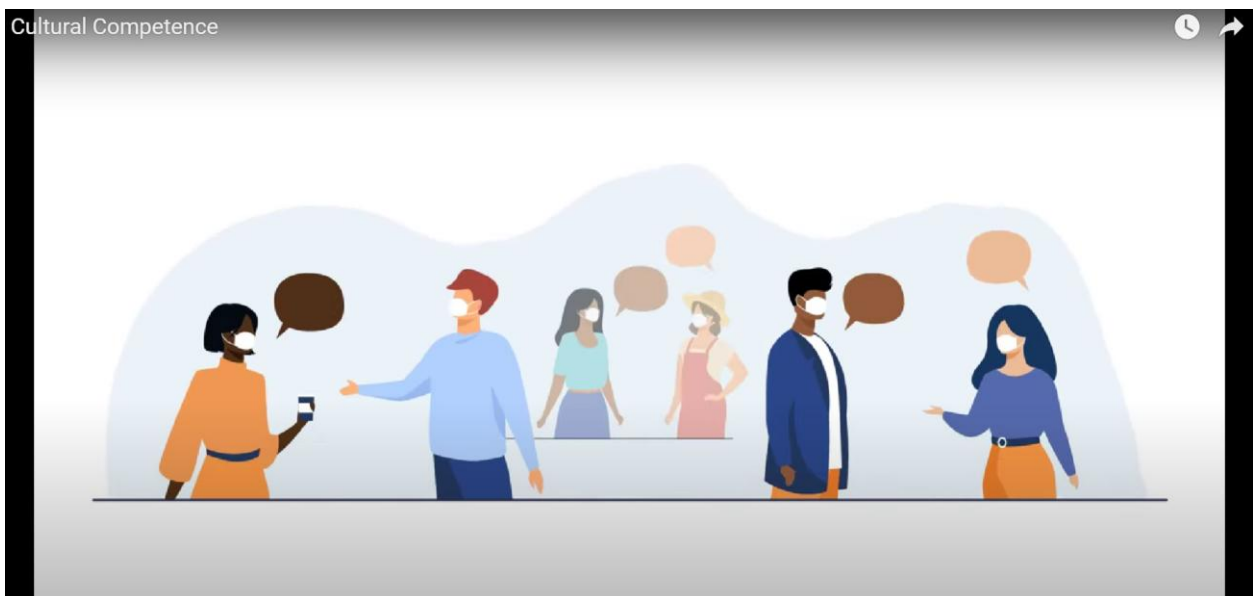
“Duolingo” with cultural notes: While primarily known for language learning, duolingo includes cultural tidbits related to the languages it teaches. These help users gain insight into the culture behind the language.

“Quizlet” with cultural competence sets: Educators and students can create or use existing flashcards and quizzes focused on cultural competence, covering topics like key terms, practices, and case studies.

- Interactive videos for professionals working with young people

These tools are helpful for professionals to engage young people in cultural learning through interactive experiences, promoting skills like empathy, communication, and critical thinking while encouraging an open-minded approach to cultural differences.

[Interactive video- cultural competence](#)



5. Multiple Choice Exercise: Cultural Competence in Youth Work

Instructions:

Read each question carefully and choose the best answer. The correct answers are marked with (✓).

1. Why is cultural competence important when working with young people from diverse backgrounds?

- A) It helps professionals avoid misunderstandings and build trust. (✓)
- B) It ensures that all young people adopt the same cultural values.
- C) It allows professionals to ignore cultural differences to treat everyone equally.
- D) It helps professionals impose their own beliefs on young people.

2. When a young person expresses values or beliefs that differ from yours, what is the most culturally competent response?

- A) Correct them and explain why your perspective is better.
- B) Ignore their views to avoid conflict.
- C) Listen actively, show respect, and seek to understand their perspective. (✓)
- D) Tell them their culture is not relevant in your setting.

3. A culturally competent professional should do all of the following EXCEPT:

- A) Learn about different cultural backgrounds.
- B) Challenge their own bases and assumptions.
- C) Expect young people to adapt fully to the dominant culture. (✓)
- D) Adapt their communication style to be inclusive and respectful.

4. What is an effective way to promote inclusivity in youth programs?

- A) Encouraging only the majority culture to be represented in activities.
- B) Creating spaces where young people can share their cultural experiences. (✓)
- C) Avoiding discussions about cultural differences.
- D) Making assumptions about a young person's culture based on appearance.

5. Which of the following is an example of cultural humility in practice?

- A) Assuming you already know everything about a young person's culture.
- B) Being open to learning from young people about their lived experiences. (✓)
- C) Expecting young people to teach you about their culture rather than doing your own research.
- D) Avoiding conversations about identity and culture altogether.

Ten tips for effective cross-cultural communication with young people



1. Maintain etiquette

Many cultures have specific etiquette around the way they communicate. Before you meet, research the target culture, or if time allows, do some cross-cultural training. For example, many cultures expect a degree of formality at the beginning of communication between individuals. Every culture has its own specific way of indicating this formality: ‘herr’ and ‘frau’ in Germany, reversing family and given names in China and the use of ‘san’ in Japan for men and women etc. Be aware of these familiarity tokens and don’t jump straight to first name terms until you receive a cue from the other person to do so.

2. Avoid slang

Not everyone has a comprehensive understanding of slang, idioms and sayings. They may understand the individual words you have said, but not the context or the meaning. As a result, you could end up confusing them or at worst, offending them.

3. Speak slowly

Even if a certain language is a common way to communicate in a cross-cultural situation, it’s not a good idea to speak at your normal conversational speed. Modulating your pace will help, as will speaking clearly and pronouncing your words properly. Break your sentences into short, definable sections and give your listener time to translate and digest your words as you go. But don’t slow down too much as it might seem patronising. If the person you’re speaking

to is talking too quickly or their accent is making it difficult for you to understand them, don't be afraid to politely ask them to slow down too.

4. Keep it simple

In a cross-cultural conversation, there's no need to make it harder for both of you by using big words. Just keep it simple. Two-syllable words are much easier to understand than three-syllable words, and one-syllable words are better than two-syllable words. Say "please do this quickly" rather than "please do this in an efficacious manner."

5. Practice active listening

Active listening is a very effective strategy for improving cross-cultural communication. Restate or summarise what the other person has said, to ensure that you have understood them correctly, and ask frequent questions. This helps build rapport and ensures that important information doesn't get missed or misunderstood.

6. Take turns to talk

Make the conversation flow more freely by taking turns to speak. Make a point and then listen to the other person respond. Particularly when people are speaking their second language, it's better to talk to them in short exchanges rather than delivering a long monologue that might be difficult for them to follow. Effective cross-cultural communication is about all parties feeling comfortable. In any conversation, treat them with respect, do your best to communicate clearly and give them encouragement when they respond. This will help build their confidence and trust in you.

7. Avoid closed questions

Don't phrase a question that needs a 'yes' or 'no' answer. In many cultures, it is difficult or embarrassing to answer in the negative, so you will always get a 'yes' even if the real answer is 'no'. Ask open-ended questions that require information as a response instead.

8. Be careful with humor

Especially when working with young people, it can be usual that humorous comments come across, however, professionals working with them should be careful and make sure it will be understood and appreciated in the other culture, without causing offence. Be aware that sarcasm usually has a negative effect in different cultures and settings.

9. Different cultural communication styles

Every culture has its unique communication style, which includes things like speech patterns and nonverbal communication. Knowing the young people's heritage helps workers understand their social practices and plan to adapt them. Body language, facial gestures, and mannerisms are all examples of nonverbal cues.

10. Religion

Religious identity significantly influences young people's values, which might influence their behavior and priorities. Religion can influence how young people see ethical conduct in different settings, impacting their decision-making. People have the freedom to practice their religion. Therefore, professionals working with young people need to have rules in place that accommodate young people's personal beliefs while still preserving a social and multicultural competence.

2.5. Case studies

Title of Good Practice/Project: *Bruno Bröcke Haus*

Location: Ahrensburg

Year of Implementation: 2024

Year of Institution's Founding: 1953

Promoting Organization/Institution: Public institution supported by the Ahrensburg Municipality

Summary:

This good practice serves as a model for professionals working with young people, demonstrating how to involve youth and promote their cultural competence effectively. It takes into account various environmental factors, such as social and family backgrounds.

Main Activities:

Safe and Supportive Space:

Bruno Bröcke Haus offers a peaceful and free environment for young people aged 12 to 21, where they can engage in a range of activities. Trained pedagogues provide guidance and support tailored to individual needs, accompanying youth throughout various stages in life. Environmental factors such as social and family background, as well as stressful life events, such as war or natural disasters, are taken into account.

Cultural Activities:

The institution offers a variety of recreational and cultural programs, including:

- Music sessions
- Basketball
- Graffiti
- Breakdance
- Video games
- Cooking
- The "Kino Project"
- Billiards
- Outdoor events
- Art therapy involving diverse cultural influences

These activities aim to help young people express themselves, connect with their heritage, and manage stress in a healthy way.

Workshops & Skill Development:

The institution also conducts workshops such as:

- Pottery and sewing
- Stress management
- Social skills development

Community Building:

The space fosters a sense of community where young people can connect with peers who may face similar life challenges, creating a supportive and inclusive atmosphere.

Family Support:

Bruno Brücke Haus offers counseling and support services for families from various cultural backgrounds. These services aim to help parents and guardians better understand and assist their children, particularly those facing mental health difficulties.

Main Achievements:

- **Youth Engagement:** Around 350 young people regularly participate, reporting increased happiness and reduced levels of depression.
- **Improved Mental Health:** Significant reductions in anxiety symptoms and enhanced emotional well-being have been observed.
- **Enhanced Coping Skills:** Participants develop practical strategies to deal with stress and navigate emotional and cultural challenges.
- **Social Integration:** The program strengthens participants' cultural understanding and fosters a deeper sense of belonging within the community.
- **Empowered Families:** Families report feeling more capable of supporting their children's mental health needs, improving overall family dynamics.

Reference:

Director Bernd Harms

Interview conducted on-site at Bruno Brücke Haus, Stormarnplatz / Klaus-Groth-Straße, 22926 Ahrensburg

Website: www.brunobroekehaus.de

Glossary

Natural disaster

A natural disaster is the very harmful physical and emotional impact on an individual or on community brought by natural phenomenon or hazard.

Cultural competence

The ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across diverse cultures. In mental health, this includes awareness of one's own cultural worldview, knowledge of other cultural practices, and skills to work cross-culturally.

Cultural humility

A lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique to understand and address power imbalances in relationships, especially between mental health providers and clients, acknowledging and respecting clients' cultural experiences.

Trauma-informed care

An approach to mental health treatment that recognizes the prevalence and impact of trauma on individuals, emphasizing safety, trustworthiness, and empowerment in culturally sensitive ways.

Intersectionality

A framework for understanding how overlapping social identities (e.g., race, gender, class) interact to create unique experiences of discrimination or privilege, particularly relevant in addressing mental health disparities.

Stigma

Negative stereotypes or social disapproval associated with mental illness, which may vary across cultures and influence individuals' willingness to seek treatment.

Acculturation stress

Psychological distress resulting from adapting to a new culture, often experienced by immigrants or refugees, including struggles with identity, values, and social integration.

Ethnocentrism

The tendency to view one's own culture as superior and to judge other cultures based on one's own cultural norms, which can hinder culturally competent mental health care.

Bicultural identity

The ability to navigate and integrate aspects of two different cultural identities, which can affect mental health and coping mechanisms in multicultural individuals.

Implicit bias

Unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect understanding, actions, and decisions in a way that can influence mental health diagnoses and treatment in culturally diverse populations.

Resilience

the capacity to recover from difficulties or adapt in the face of adversity. Culturally, resilience can be shaped by community, spirituality, and traditional practices, influencing mental health outcomes.

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Conclusion

Cultural competence plays a vital role during health crises and natural disasters by enhancing the knowledge, skills, and mindset needed to work effectively in diverse cultural settings. This is especially important when working with young people, as their age and developmental stage can present unique challenges for educators and caregivers. Being equipped with culturally responsive tools and resources enables professionals to approach young individuals with empathy and understanding. Ultimately, cultural competence supports more effective and supportive care, helping young people navigate mental health challenges in difficult times.

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Module 3: SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE TO ADDRESS DISCRIMINATION

THEORY

Discrimination is a persistent societal issue that affects individuals and communities in both overt and subtle ways. Whether rooted in historical, cultural, or systemic biases, discrimination creates barriers to equity and inclusion, limiting opportunities and reinforcing marginalization. For youth workers, understanding the complexities of discrimination is essential to effectively supporting young people who may experience prejudice based on race, religion, disability, or other personal attributes. This module is designed to equip professionals working with young people with the knowledge and skills necessary to recognize, address, and prevent discrimination. Through an exploration of several types of discrimination, real-world case studies, and practical strategies, participants will gain the tools needed to create inclusive environments and advocate for meaningful change.

Objectives and Learning Outcomes

At the end of this module, participants will be able to:

- Understand the various forms of discrimination (e.g., racial, disability, religious, and age-based discrimination) and their societal implications.
- Identify discriminatory behaviors and practices in different settings, including education, employment, and social interactions.
- Develop effective intervention strategies to support young people facing discrimination and help them navigate challenges.
- Recognize and challenge personal biases and stereotypes, fostering greater self-awareness and inclusiveness in professional practice.
- Apply knowledge through case studies and real-world scenarios, enabling proactive responses to discrimination in youth work.

Understanding discrimination necessitates a comprehensive exploration of its various forms, including but not limited to racial, age, disability, and religious discrimination. Each form carries unique implications, shaped by historical contexts and sociopolitical dynamics, yet all contribute to perpetuating inequality and marginalization. For example, racial discrimination often intersects with economic disparities, limiting access to education, healthcare, and employment for marginalized communities.

Addressing discrimination requires a multi-pronged approach, including legal protections, education, and advocacy for marginalized groups. It also demands a critical examination of structural inequalities and the implementation of policies aimed at fostering inclusion and diversity.

By unpacking the underlying mechanisms and manifestations of discrimination, societies can better strategize toward mitigating its impacts and promoting equity in all aspects of life.

Below is a detailed exploration of several types of discrimination:

The following sections aim to equip professionals working with young people with the necessary knowledge to recognize several types of discrimination, identify situations where young individuals may be victims, and reflect on their own potential biases and stereotypes that could contribute to discrimination.

1. Direct Discrimination

This occurs when a person or group is intentionally treated less favourably based on a protected attribute such as race, religion, or disability. Discrimination is explicit and often overt, where the causal relationship between the action and the characteristic is evident. Direct discrimination often stems from personal biases, stereotypes, or outright prejudice. It reflects individual attitudes and sometimes organizational policies deliberately designed to exclude or disadvantage certain groups.



Denying housing to an applicant based on their ethnic background is an example of ethnic discrimination. In this case, an individual's ethnicity is unjustly used as a basis to refuse them housing, violating their right to equal treatment. Direct discrimination is characterized by its often-clear intention, although this intention is not always necessary for it to be legally

recognized as such. This type of discrimination is typically easier to identify and challenge in legal contexts than indirect discrimination.

2. Indirect Discrimination

This occurs when a rule, policy, or practice that applies equally to everyone unintentionally disadvantages a specific group. It is less obvious than direct discrimination but equally harmful in its impact. Indirect discrimination often arises from a lack of consideration of diversity when designing policies or practices. It highlights structural and procedural flaws that reinforce inequality.

Indirect discrimination can occur in various subtle ways. A school's uniform policy that bans headscarves indirectly affects Muslim girls, as it prevents them from wearing an important aspect of their religious attire. Indirect discrimination focuses on outcomes rather than intent. Legal tests typically examine whether the practice can be justified as necessary and proportionate. This means that even if there was no intention to discriminate, the impact of the practice on certain groups is what matters. The key is to determine if the practice is essential and balanced in its application.

3. Systemic Discrimination

Embedded discrimination within the structures, policies, and practices of institutions or societies. It is often cumulative, involving historical inequalities that persist over time. Rooted in societal norms, cultural traditions, and institutional inertia. Systemic discrimination often perpetuates itself through "neutral" policies that maintain the status quo.

Racial disparities in access to quality healthcare due to geographic and economic barriers illustrate how certain groups may face significant obstacles in receiving adequate medical care. Systemic discrimination is not reliant on individual intent but rather on collective patterns of exclusion. It requires broad, structural solutions such as policy reforms and institutional accountability to address these deep-rooted issues.

4. Intersectional Discrimination

Intersectional discrimination arises from the interplay of two or more marginalized identities. It acknowledges that individuals are not solely defined by a single attribute but by the intersection of various social categories. This concept highlights how overlapping social identities, such as race, religion, and class can create unique and compounded experiences of discrimination and disadvantage.

Intersectional discrimination highlights the compounded disadvantages faced by individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups, such as religion and ethnicity. For example, a young woman of color might face discrimination in the workplace due to both her religion and her race. She may be overlooked for promotions or professional development opportunities because of stereotypes about her capabilities and commitment. Intersectional discrimination stresses the need for nuanced approaches to equality that address overlapping oppressions. It informs legal frameworks and social movements aiming to address compounded forms of discrimination. By recognizing the interconnected nature of various forms of discrimination, intersectional approaches seek to create more inclusive and effective solutions that consider the unique experiences of individuals facing multiple layers of oppression.

5. Harassment

Harassment is a form of discrimination involving unwelcome and offensive behaviour related to a protected characteristic. It creates an intimidating, hostile, or degrading environment for the victim. This type of conduct not only undermines the dignity and well-being of the affected individuals but also perpetuates systemic inequality and exclusion.

Harassment can be verbal, physical, or non-verbal. It often involves power imbalances and can escalate from microaggressions. Mocking someone's accent or cultural practices is a form of harassment that targets an individual's identity and heritage. This behaviour not only undermines the person's dignity but also creates a hostile and degrading environment. Such actions perpetuate stereotypes and contribute to a culture of exclusion and discrimination, making it difficult for the affected individuals to feel accepted and respected in their community or workplace. Harassment is often psychological in nature, resulting in significant stress and diminished well-being for the affected individuals. This form of discrimination can create a pervasive atmosphere of fear and discomfort, severely impacting mental health and productivity. Workplace harassment is extensively covered by laws and organizational policies, reflecting the critical need to address and mitigate such behaviour. These legal frameworks and policies are designed to protect employees and ensure a safe and respectful working environment.

6. Victimization

Occurs when an individual is treated unfairly or punished for asserting their rights or supporting others in cases of discrimination. Victimization often discourages individuals from speaking out against discrimination, perpetuating silence and complicity.

An example of victimization can be seen when a student is ostracized for testifying in a case of racial bullying. This form of retaliation not only isolates the student socially but also creates a hostile and intimidating environment. Such behaviour undermines the student's courage to stand against injustice and perpetuates a culture of fear and silence. Victimization is focused on retaliation against efforts to seek justice or equality. It involves punishing individuals who have taken steps to address or report discrimination. This form of discrimination is explicitly prohibited under most anti-discrimination laws, reflecting the importance of protecting those who stand up against injustice. By safeguarding these individuals, legal frameworks aim to encourage the reporting of discriminatory practices and ensure that efforts to achieve equality are not undermined by fear of retaliation.

7. Microaggressions

Subtle, often unintentional, acts of discrimination communicate derogatory or prejudicial messages to individuals based on their identity. Rooted in implicit biases and stereotypes, microaggressions can occur even in environments that outwardly promote diversity.

Examples of microaggressions faced by young people can be seen in everyday interactions. For instance, telling a young person from a non-native Turkish-speaking background, "You speak Turkish so well," can be patronizing and imply that they are not expected to be proficient in the language. Microaggressions, characterized by their subtle nature, can accumulate over time and lead to significant psychological harm. These minor incidents, when experienced repeatedly, can erode an individual's mental health and well-being. Addressing microaggressions formally is often challenging due to their subtle and pervasive nature, making it difficult to pinpoint and address specific instances. This underscores the importance of creating awareness and fostering environments that actively discourage such behaviours.

8. Positive Discrimination (Affirmative Action)

Preferential treatment is given to underrepresented or disadvantaged groups to redress historical inequalities and foster diversity. Positive discrimination, also known as affirmative action, employs various mechanisms to promote equality and address historical disadvantages faced by certain groups.

An example of positive discrimination can be seen in the practice of reserving university places for students from low-income backgrounds. This approach aims to address the educational disparities faced by economically disadvantaged students by providing them with greater access to higher education opportunities. Positive discrimination, often referred to as affirmative action, is a subject of considerable debate regarding its fairness and effectiveness. Critics frequently label it as reverse discrimination, arguing that it unfairly advantages certain groups at the expense of others. Despite these criticisms, positive discrimination is typically employed as a temporary measure aimed at achieving equality. By addressing historical and systemic disadvantages, it seeks to create a more level playing field and promote diversity and inclusion within various sectors of society.

Discrimination manifests in various interconnected forms, with direct and indirect discrimination frequently overlapping with systemic patterns. These overlapping forms of discrimination create complex and multifaceted challenges that require comprehensive solutions. Legal frameworks and social interventions are designed to address these nuances holistically, ensuring that efforts to combat discrimination are effective and inclusive. By recognizing the interconnected nature of several types of discrimination, these frameworks and interventions aim to dismantle systemic inequalities and promote a more equitable society.

Challenges Faced by Youth Experiencing Discrimination

Discrimination can profoundly affect young individuals' psychological, social, educational, and economic development. Below is a comprehensive exploration of the challenges faced by youth subjected to various forms of discrimination:

1. Psychological and Emotional Challenges

- **Low Self-Esteem and Identity Issues** Young people often internalize discriminatory messages, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, significantly impacting their self-esteem. Minority youth may struggle to form a positive self-identity, especially when their cultural or ethnic heritage is devalued by society. This internalization of negative societal attitudes can result in profound identity issues, as these young individuals navigate the complexities of their intersecting identities. Consequently, the psychological harm inflicted by such discrimination can hinder their personal development and overall well-being. Addressing these issues requires a

comprehensive approach that includes supportive interventions and policies aimed at fostering an inclusive and affirming environment for all youth.



- **Mental Health Impacts** Studies have established a strong correlation between discrimination and heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For instance, research indicates that discrimination functions as a social stressor, significantly compromising psychological well-being and increasing the risk of mental health disorders.¹⁴ The persistent experience of discrimination can lead to severe psychological distress, significantly impacting mental health. Additionally, microaggressions and systemic biases contribute to chronic stress, which is a significant factor in long-term health issues. This chronic stress can exacerbate existing health conditions and lead to new ones, highlighting the profound impact of discrimination on overall well-being.
- **Social Isolation** Fear of rejection or judgment can lead young people to withdraw from social interactions, fostering feelings of loneliness and alienation. This social withdrawal can have significant negative impacts on their mental health and overall well-being. Additionally, youth facing discrimination often hesitate to seek support due to fears of stigma or disbelief. This reluctance to reach out for help can exacerbate

¹⁴ [Relation of perceived discrimination with depression, insomnia and post-traumatic stress in COVID-19 survivors - PMC](#)

their struggles, leaving them without the necessary support and resources to cope with the challenges they face.

2. Educational Challenges

- Bias in Educational Institutions** Educational challenges often stem from stereotypes about intellectual or behavioural capacities, leading to unfair treatment in classrooms. For instance, students from marginalized groups may face lower expectations or harsher discipline due to biased perceptions. Additionally, curriculums that lack inclusivity can marginalize minority groups, leaving them disconnected from their education. This disconnection can hinder their academic performance and overall engagement, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantages and exclusion.
- Disparities in Opportunities** often arise from discrimination, which can limit access to quality education, advanced courses, or extracurricular activities for marginalized groups. School policies that fail to account for cultural or socioeconomic diversity further exacerbate educational inequality. These policies can create barriers that prevent students from fully participating in and benefiting from educational opportunities, thereby perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and limiting their potential for academic and personal growth. Addressing these disparities requires a comprehensive approach that includes inclusive policies and practices to ensure equitable access to education for all students.

3. Social and Peer Challenges

- Bullying and Peer Exclusion** Discriminatory attitudes among peers often manifest as bullying, harassment, or exclusion, creating a hostile environment for the affected individuals. Youth experiencing discrimination are particularly vulnerable to cyberbullying, especially in the digital age where online platforms can amplify harmful behaviours. This form of peer exclusion not only isolates the victims but also exacerbates their emotional and psychological distress.
- Challenges in Developing Social Skills** A hostile social environment can significantly hinder the development of confidence and interpersonal skills in young people. When marginalized youth face such environments, they may struggle to navigate cultural or

societal norms that differ from their own. This can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation, further exacerbating their challenges.

4. Economic Challenges

- **Barriers to Employment** Barriers to employment for young people from marginalized backgrounds are significant and multifaceted. Discriminatory hiring practices disproportionately affect these individuals, limiting their access to job opportunities and career advancement. Additionally, systemic inequities often result in a lack of access to mentorship, internships, or networking opportunities, which are crucial for professional development. These barriers not only hinder the immediate employment prospects of marginalized youth but also perpetuate long-term economic disparities and social exclusion.
- **Cycle of Poverty** Economic hardships resulting from discrimination often perpetuate poverty, restricting access to resources like higher education and healthcare.

5. Health and Well-Being Challenges

- **Physical Health Disparities** Physical health disparities among marginalized youth are a significant concern. Chronic stress resulting from discrimination can negatively impact physical health, increasing the risks for conditions such as hypertension and diabetes. Additionally, marginalized youth often face barriers to accessing quality healthcare, including mental health services. These barriers can stem from systemic inequities, lack of resources, and cultural insensitivity within healthcare systems.
- **Substance Use and Risky Behaviours** Discrimination-related stress can lead to various maladaptive coping mechanisms, including substance use or self-harm. These behaviours often arise as individuals attempt to manage the intense emotional and psychological distress caused by discrimination. The chronic stress associated with discriminatory experiences can overwhelm an individual's ability to cope healthily, leading them to seek relief through harmful means. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive support systems and interventions that focus on both the immediate and long-term well-being of those affected by discrimination.

6. Legal and Institutional Challenges

- Lack of Protection** In some regions, legal frameworks fail to adequately protect youth from discrimination, leaving them vulnerable to systemic bias. This lack of protection can perpetuate inequalities and expose young people to ongoing discriminatory practices. Additionally, reporting mechanisms for discrimination are often inaccessible, intimidating, or ineffective. These barriers can discourage individuals from reporting incidents, further entrenching systemic bias and allowing discriminatory behaviours to persist unchallenged.
- Overrepresentation in Justice Systems** Marginalized youth, particularly those from racial minorities, are disproportionately represented in juvenile detention systems. This overrepresentation is due to biases in policing and judicial decisions, which often result in harsher treatment and higher rates of incarceration for these young individuals.

7. Cultural and Familial Challenges

- Intergenerational Trauma** Discrimination experienced by previous generations can profoundly affect young people through inherited trauma and learned helplessness. This intergenerational transmission of trauma can manifest in many ways, including heightened anxiety, depression, and a sense of powerlessness. Additionally, youth may feel the burden of representing their entire community, which can add to their stress and exacerbate feelings of isolation and pressure. This dual impact of inherited trauma and the responsibility of representation can significantly hinder their mental health and overall well-being.
- Cultural Conflicts** Youth from immigrant or minority communities often face significant challenges in reconciling their cultural heritage with the dominant cultural expectations of the society they live in. This struggle can lead to a sense of identity conflict, as they navigate the pressures to assimilate while trying to maintain their cultural traditions and values. These young individuals may experience feelings of alienation and marginalization, as their unique cultural perspectives are often undervalued or misunderstood.

8. Barriers to Civic Participation

- Disenfranchisement** Discrimination can significantly discourage young people from engaging in political or community activities, as they may feel that their voices will not be valued or heard. This sense of disenfranchisement can lead to a lack of participation and representation in important civic processes. Additionally, policies such as voter ID laws or gerrymandering often disproportionately disenfranchise minority youth, further exacerbating their exclusion from the political sphere. These systemic barriers not only undermine the democratic process but also perpetuate social and economic inequalities.
- Lack of Representation** Lack of representation in leadership roles or public platforms significantly impacts young people, making it harder for them to see role models who reflect their identity. This limited visibility can hinder their aspirations and sense of belonging, as they may struggle to envision themselves in positions of influence or success. The absence of diverse role models can also perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce systemic barriers, further marginalizing these youth.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR YOUTH WORKERS

When working with young people who experience discrimination, a structured approach to addressing their concerns is essential. By providing appropriate support, professionals can help young individuals navigate their experiences and empower them to respond effectively to discrimination.

- Active Listening and Validation** Listening actively and validating a young person's experience is the first crucial step in addressing discrimination. When young individuals share their experiences, it is essential to give them space to express their thoughts and feelings without interruption. This approach helps build trust and reassures them that their concerns are taken seriously. Acknowledging their emotions and affirming their experiences can provide a sense of validation, which is critical in situations where they may feel dismissed or unheard. Additionally, professionals should be mindful of their body language and tone, ensuring they convey empathy and understanding. Creating a non-judgmental space where young people feel safe to speak openly is key to supporting them through difficult experiences.

- **Providing Emotional and Psychological Support** Providing emotional and psychological support is essential in helping young people cope with the effects of discrimination. Experiencing discrimination can lead to anxiety, self-doubt, and even long-term psychological distress. Youth workers and educators should encourage open discussions in a supportive environment where young people feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and emotions. In cases where discrimination has significantly impacted a young person's well-being, it may be necessary to refer them to mental health professionals or peer support networks. Offering access to counseling services or connecting them with youth organizations that specialize in emotional resilience can be highly beneficial in helping them process their experiences and regain confidence.
- **Empowering Young People Through Awareness** Empowering young people through awareness is another vital step in addressing discrimination. Many young individuals may not fully understand their rights or the legal protections available to them. Educating them about their rights and providing guidance on how to seek assistance can significantly impact their ability to advocate for themselves. Encouraging self-advocacy and engagement with youth-led organizations can also be empowering, as it allows young people to take an active role in challenging discrimination and creating change within their communities. By equipping them with knowledge and skills, youth workers can foster a sense of agency and resilience among young individuals.
- **Acting and Addressing Incidents** Addressing the incident and acting when discrimination occurs is crucial in ensuring that young people receive the necessary support and protection. If the discrimination took place in an institutional setting, such as a school, workplace, or community space, it is important to report the incident to the appropriate authorities. Youth workers should be familiar with institutional policies and procedures for handling discrimination complaints and guide young individuals in navigating these systems. In cases where immediate intervention is required, conflict resolution strategies may be employed to address the issue and prevent further harm. Advocating for policy changes within institutions can also contribute to creating safer and more inclusive environments for young people.

- **Ensuring Long-Term Support and Follow-Up** Following up and creating long-term support networks can ensure that young individuals continue to receive assistance beyond the initial response to discrimination. Checking in regularly with those who have experienced discrimination can help gauge their well-being and identify any ongoing challenges they may be facing. Connecting them with community support groups, mentorship programs, and inclusion initiatives can provide ongoing encouragement and reinforce a sense of belonging. Establishing peer networks where young people can share experiences and support one another can be a powerful tool in fostering resilience and collective action against discrimination.

Existing Tools and Resources

Here are some tools, apps, and websites that can help professionals understand and address discrimination:

- UNESCO's Anti-Discrimination Toolkit offers a comprehensive guide for educators and youth workers on addressing discrimination in schools and communities. This resource provides practical strategies and case studies that help professionals navigate complex issues related to discrimination. More information can be found at <https://www.unesco.org/en/no-racism-no-discrimination>.
- The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) Educational Resources provides a wide range of lesson plans, discussion guides, and training materials for tackling discrimination. These resources are designed to support educators and youth workers in fostering inclusive environments and addressing bias effectively. Visit <https://www.adl.org/families-and-educators> to explore available materials.
- The video "That Little Voice" serves as an engaging tool to highlight the importance of advocating for diversity and inclusion. It showcases real-life scenarios of discrimination and encourages individuals to take an active role in promoting equality. The video can be accessed at [That Little Voice - YouTube](#).
- Online platforms such as Coursera's Diversity and Inclusion Course offer structured learning on addressing discrimination. These courses equip professionals with the necessary skills to create inclusive spaces and challenge biases effectively. More details can be found at <https://www.coursera.org/specializations/diversity-inclusion>.

Natural Disasters and Youth Vulnerability

Natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, wildfires, and extreme weather events do not affect everyone equally. These crises tend to amplify existing social inequalities, disproportionately impacting vulnerable groups such as youth with disabilities, refugees, and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. The concept of social vulnerability highlights how marginalized youth often lack access to resources, support networks, and safe environments—factors that critically influence their ability to respond to and recover from disaster situations.

Numerous studies emphasize the strong link between exposure to disasters and increased rates of trauma, anxiety, and depression in young people. For example, research from Türkiye’s Marmara region following recent earthquakes revealed that refugee youth and adolescents from low-income neighborhoods experienced not only higher levels of psychological distress but also significant barriers to accessing support services. Disasters are not neutral events—they intersect with structural discrimination, making youth from already marginalized communities doubly at risk. For youth workers, it is essential to recognize the complex, layered impact disasters have on mental health, community belonging, and access to education or care. Preparing for and responding to natural disasters must go beyond logistical coordination—it must include trauma-informed care, culturally sensitive communication, and inclusive support frameworks.

Disaster Resilience Tools and Exercises

Building on the theme of inclusive response, this section offers tools that youth workers can use to prepare young people, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds, for natural disasters.

- **Digital Resilience Toolkit** – Developed under the Erasmus+ KA210 “Enhancing Youth Resilience to Earthquakes Through Digital Interventions” project in Türkiye, this digital platform provides youth-focused preparedness training. It includes chatbot-guided simulations, first-response tips, and storytelling features where young people share their earthquake survival narratives to inspire peer-to-peer learning.
- **Simulation Exercise** – Youth workers can facilitate a role-play exercise where participants respond to a fictional earthquake in a school. The scenario involves supporting a refugee student with a mobility disability. Participants work in small

groups to design inclusive evacuation plans, practice active listening, and engage in post-disaster trauma response.

- **Disability-Inclusive Planning Checklist** – Inspired by Erasmus projects such as “Let’s Overcome Disabilities Together Against Disasters,” this tool guides youth centers in evaluating their own disaster preparedness. The checklist includes items on accessible emergency exits, availability of multilingual alerts, trained personnel, and mental health follow-up.

Online Learning Exercise: Identifying and Addressing Discrimination

- **Objective:** To help youth workers identify discrimination and respond effectively in real-life situations.
- **Instructions:** Participants will be presented with three real-life case studies depicting different forms of discrimination, such as racial or disability-based discrimination. They will be asked to analyse each scenario carefully and determine the type of discrimination occurring. The exercise will then prompt participants to choose from a set of responses, explaining their reasoning for selecting a particular course of action. Here are some examples for this objective:

Case Study 1: Racial Discrimination in Education

Scenario: Aisha, a high school student from a minority ethnic background, consistently performs well in his classes and expresses interest in applying to a prestigious university. However, one of his teachers subtly discourages him, suggesting that such universities may not be “the right fit” and that he should consider a more “realistic” option. Meanwhile, students from the majority ethnic group with similar or even lower academic performance are encouraged to apply to top institutions and receive additional support in preparing their applications.

Analysis: This case highlights racial discrimination in education, where Aisha faces lowered expectations and discouragement based on his ethnic background. The teacher’s biased assumptions undermine his confidence and perpetuate systemic inequalities that limit academic and career opportunities for minority students. Such attitudes reinforce the notion

that academic excellence is not equally attainable for all groups, thereby contributing to educational inequity.

Key Indicators: A key indicator of discrimination in this scenario is the difference in academic expectations and encouragement between students of different ethnic backgrounds. Aisha's abilities and aspirations are undervalued due to implicit bias, while his peers receive preferential support. This reflects a broader systemic issue where minority students often face unequal access to academic guidance and opportunities.

Possible Responses: Aisha could raise his concerns with the school administration, diversity officer, or a trusted counselor to report the biased behavior and seek support. Schools should implement anti-bias and cultural sensitivity training for staff to ensure that educators hold equitable expectations for all students. Additionally, establishing mentorship programs that connect students from minority backgrounds with academic role models can help promote inclusion, build confidence, and counteract discriminatory attitudes within educational settings.

Case Study 2: Disability-Based Discrimination in Public Spaces

Scenario: Ahmed, a university student who uses a wheelchair, finds that his college library has no ramp or elevator access. He is forced to rely on others to carry him up the stairs or collect books for him. When he raises the issue, the administration acknowledges the problem but does not act, stating that renovations would be "too expensive".



Analysis: This case represents disability-based discrimination, where Ahmed faces structural barriers that prevent him from fully accessing educational resources. By neglecting to provide accommodation, the university creates an environment of exclusion, making it difficult for students with disabilities to participate equally in academic life.

Key Indicators: The lack of accessible infrastructure, such as ramps or elevators, is a clear indicator of discrimination. Additionally, the administration's dismissive attitude, citing financial concerns rather than prioritizing inclusivity, further highlights the systemic neglect of students with disabilities.

Possible Responses: Ahmed could file a formal complaint under disability rights laws to ensure that his university fulfils its legal obligations regarding accessibility. He could also start an advocacy campaign within the university, rallying support from students and faculty to push for change. The administration, in turn, could explore funding options or grants dedicated to improving accessibility in educational institutions.

As participants engage in the exercise, immediate feedback will be provided on their chosen responses, offering best-practice solutions for handling such situations. By comparing their answers with recommended strategies, participants will gain a deeper understanding of effective intervention techniques. The exercise will conclude with reflection questions designed to encourage participants to think critically about how they would apply these strategies in their professional roles. Questions may include: "How would you approach a similar situation in your work?" and "What potential challenges might arise when addressing discrimination?"

Platform: This exercise can be implemented using online learning tools such as Moodle, Google Forms, or interactive training software. By incorporating interactive elements, the activity ensures that youth workers actively engage with the content and develop practical skills for addressing discrimination.

Multiple Choice Exercise: Understanding and Addressing Discrimination

1. Which of the following best describes indirect discrimination?

- A) Intentional unequal treatment based on race or religion.
- B) A neutral policy that unintentionally disadvantages a particular group.
- C) A law designed to support marginalized individuals.

D) Physical harassment in the workplace.

Answer: B) A neutral policy that unintentionally disadvantages a particular group.

2. What is the key characteristic of systemic discrimination?

A) It results from individual bias only.

B) It is based on personal intent.

C) It is embedded within institutional structures and policies.

D) It occurs only in educational settings.

Answer: C) It is embedded within institutional structures and policies.

3. How does intersectional discrimination differ from other forms?

A) It only focuses on racial inequality.

B) It involves multiple overlapping identity factors, such as race and class.

C) It excludes economic factors from analysis.

D) It is only relevant in legal contexts.

Answer: B) It involves multiple overlapping identity factors, such as race and class.

4. What is the primary role of youth workers in combating discrimination, according to the module?

A) To observe discrimination without intervening

B) To promote neutrality and avoid discussing discrimination

C) To recognize, address, and prevent discrimination through education and advocacy

D) To refer all discrimination issues to legal authorities

Answer: C) To recognize, address, and prevent discrimination through education and advocacy

5. Why are young people from marginalized backgrounds more vulnerable during natural disasters?

A) They lack interest in emergency preparedness.

B) They often have fewer resources, limited access to support, and face systemic barriers.

C) They are less affected because of community solidarity.

D) They receive more institutional support than others.

Answer: B) They often have fewer resources, limited access to support, and face systemic barriers.

CASE STUDIES

A notable example of combating discrimination in educational settings is the "Equaliteach" initiative in the United Kingdom. Equaliteach, an organization specializing in equality and diversity education, launched the "Equally Safe" program to support schools in tackling racial discrimination. The initiative provided training for teachers, youth workers, and students to recognize, report, and respond to incidents of racial bias effectively. One of the key components was a peer mentoring system, where older students were trained to support younger peers who faced discrimination, creating a safe space for discussion and guidance (Equaliteach, 2022). As part of the program, schools implemented workshops on understanding unconscious bias, bystander intervention, and legal rights regarding discrimination. The initiative also led to policy changes, including updates to school anti-racism policies and the introduction of stricter measures against racial bullying. An impact report showed that after implementation, students felt more supported, and schools recorded a reduction in discriminatory incidents by 35% over a year (Equaliteach, 2023). This case study highlights how structured interventions, awareness campaigns, and peer support systems can help create a more inclusive and supportive environment for young people facing discrimination. Youth workers can adapt similar strategies by fostering safe spaces, providing mentorship opportunities, and advocating for institutional changes that promote inclusivity.

Case Study: Youth Perspective on Disaster Management in Türkiye

Following the devastating 2023 earthquakes in Kahramanmaraş, a youth-led initiative supported by Pendik Municipality launched a project titled "Youth Perspective on Natural Disaster Management". The project engaged over 100 young people from different backgrounds-including Syrian refugees, students with disabilities, and high school volunteers-to participate in municipal disaster planning. Youth participants identified key gaps in the city's emergency response plans, especially concerning communication barriers for non-Turkish speakers and inaccessible shelters. Through interactive workshops and policy roundtables, the group proposed concrete solutions, such as visual signage, youth-led emergency teams, and mobile mental health units. Several of their recommendations were later adopted by local authorities, showing how empowering young people can improve institutional preparedness and inclusion. This case highlights the transformative potential of

including youth voices in disaster resilience planning, especially when those youth bring lived experience of marginalization and discrimination.

CONCLUSION

Discrimination remains a significant barrier to achieving social equity, affecting young individuals in ways that can hinder their emotional well-being, educational progress, and overall life opportunities. As explored in this module, discrimination manifests in various forms-ranging from direct and indirect discrimination to systemic and intersectional biases-each requiring a nuanced understanding and a targeted approach for intervention. Youth workers play a crucial role in recognizing, addressing, and preventing discrimination. By fostering safe and inclusive spaces, equipping young people with the knowledge of their rights, and advocating for systemic change, they can empower individuals to challenge discrimination and build resilience. Practical strategies such as active listening, emotional support, legal guidance, and institutional advocacy are essential tools in mitigating the harmful effects of discrimination and promoting social inclusion. Moreover, real-world examples, such as the Equaliteach initiative, demonstrate that structured programs combining education, peer support, and policy reform can lead to measurable improvements in reducing discriminatory incidents. Youth workers and educators must continue to draw from such best practices to implement evidence-based approaches that drive meaningful change. Moving forward, combating discrimination requires ongoing education, self-reflection, and initiative-taking engagement with young people and communities. By committing to these efforts, professionals can help cultivate a society where diversity is celebrated, and every young person can thrive in an environment free from bias and exclusion.

GLOSSARY

- **Affirmative Action:** Policies and measures designed to address historical inequalities and promote diversity by giving preferential treatment to disadvantaged groups. Also known as positive discrimination.
- **Bias:** A preconceived opinion or attitude toward a person or group, which can be either conscious (explicit bias) or unconscious (implicit bias).
- **Direct Discrimination:** Occurs when a person or group is intentionally treated less favourably based on a specific characteristic such as race or disability.
- **Harassment:** Unwanted behaviour related to a protected characteristic that creates a hostile, intimidating, or degrading environment.
- **Implicit Bias:** Unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect decision-making and behaviour toward different social groups.
- **Indirect Discrimination:** When a policy or practice that appears neutral disproportionately disadvantages a particular group.
- **Intersectional Discrimination:** Discrimination that arises from the interaction of multiple identity factors, such as race and class, leading to unique and compounded disadvantages.
- **Marginalization:** The social process of pushing a group or individual to the periphery of society, limiting their access to resources and opportunities.
- **Microaggressions:** Subtle, often unintentional comments or actions that communicate negative or prejudiced messages toward marginalized individuals.
- **Positive Discrimination:** The practice of favouring individuals from historically disadvantaged groups to promote equality, often referred to as affirmative action.
- **Structural Discrimination:** Systemic disadvantages imposed by institutions, policies, or societal norms that perpetuate inequality.
- **Systemic Discrimination:** Discrimination embedded within social and institutional structures that persist over time and disproportionately disadvantage certain groups.

- **Victimization:** Unfair treatment or retaliation against an individual for asserting their rights or supporting others in discrimination-related cases.

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MODULE 4: COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING SKILLS



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4.1. MODULE INTRODUCTION: COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIP COMPETENCE

We live in a world where both digital and analogue interaction and communication are of great importance. This applies, on the one hand, to the social positioning of adolescents who face a variety of risks and health problems that exacerbate their social disadvantage and push them to the margins of society. It is well known that disadvantaged and marginalized adolescents, who also struggle with mental health and other issues, are often isolated and disconnected from society's communication processes. On the other hand, youth workers should be able to recognize mental health issues and develop skills that promote adolescents' ability to form relationships, both digitally and in person.

Communication and relationship skills go hand in hand and should be considered together when aiming to intervene constructively in youth work and design appropriate measures for the integration of adolescents into social structures.

This module, developed by the University of Innsbruck, focuses on strengthening communication and relationship skills among young people – especially those affected by social disadvantage, psychological stress, or marginalization, including circumstances arising from natural disasters. In an increasingly digital world, the ability to communicate empathetically and effectively – both online and face-to-face – has become a key element of successful youth work and psychosocial support.

The module provides practical knowledge, solid theoretical foundations, and proven methods – such as the use of biographical maps – to support young people in making their life stories visible, building resilience, and developing trusting relationships. Youth work professionals gain valuable tools to competently support young people in challenging life situations, including those impacted by natural disasters.

Especially in times of crisis – such as natural disasters or public health emergencies – communication and relationship skills become even more relevant. Empathic communication, digital competence, and stable interpersonal relationships can provide stability, reduce psychological stress, and foster a sense of self-efficacy and belonging in young people.

Module Objectives and Learning Outcomes

By the end of the module, participants will be able to:

- **Identify and promote key communication and relationship skills**, such as empathy, active listening, nonverbal expression, and constructive conflict resolution – especially in stressful or crisis-related contexts, including natural disasters.
- **Apply biographical methods** (e.g., biographical maps) to give young people space to reflect on their life stories, highlight important experiences, and uncover individual strengths and coping strategies, including experiences related to natural disasters.
- **Implement crisis-specific communication strategies** – particularly during natural disasters or health emergencies – to foster emotional stability, prevent social isolation, and provide meaningful support to vulnerable youth.

<https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000175281/was-jugendlichen-mit-psychischen-problemen-aus-der-krise-hilft>



4.1.1 Key Competencies: Digital Skills

Media Literacy: A critical and reflective handling of digital content is essential. Young people must learn to evaluate information, question sources, and protect themselves from misinformation.

Data Protection and Internet Security: Awareness of personal data protection, as well as

knowledge of secure passwords and privacy settings, is important to minimize risks such as cyberbullying or identity theft.

Digital Communication Competence: The ability to express oneself appropriately online, communicate respectfully, and resolve conflicts in digital spaces is crucial for positive online interactions.

Problem-Solving and Adaptability: The use of digital tools for information gathering and creative problem-solving, as well as the willingness to adapt to new technologies, supports a self-determined and resilient lifestyle.

4.1.2. Key Competencies: Relationship-Enhancing Skills

Emotional Intelligence: Recognizing and understanding one's own and others' emotions enables young people to respond empathetically and build deeper interpersonal connections.

Empathy and Active Listening: Through empathy and the ability to listen attentively to others, trusting and supportive relationships are formed.

Clear and Constructive Communication: The ability to articulate thoughts and feelings in an understandable way helps avoid misunderstandings and defuse conflicts at an early stage.

Conflict Resolution Competence: A structured and respectful approach to disagreements strengthens relationships and fosters harmonious interactions.

Social Self-Regulation: Young people learn to react appropriately in stressful situations, which strengthens their resilience and enables them to cope better with setbacks.

4.1.3. Significance for the Mental Health of Young People

Strengthening Resilience: Those who possess solid digital and social competencies are better able to cope with challenges such as cyberbullying, excessive media consumption, or interpersonal conflicts. This serves as a preventive measure against mental strain.

Promotion of Self-Esteem: Successful communication and positive social interactions bolster self-confidence and have a protective effect on mental stability.

Prevention of Isolation: Digital skills make it possible to maintain social contacts even in virtual spaces. At the same time, relationship-enhancing competencies ensure that these contacts are of high quality and supportive.

Prevention and Early Detection: Healthy digital behavior and stable relationships provide young people with resources to draw upon in times of crisis. This reduces the risk that negative experiences on social networks will lead to serious mental health problems.

4.1.4. Role of Youth Workers and Other Professionals

Mentoring and Role Modeling: Youth workers and professionals act as important role models. Through their own behavior, they demonstrate how digital media can be used responsibly and how a healthy communication culture is shaped.

Support and Counseling: Through individual counseling, group discussions, and workshops, professionals can help young people develop their digital and social competencies and overcome challenges in a targeted manner, including challenges arising during natural disasters.

Structured Learning Opportunities: Offerings such as training sessions, seminars, and educational projects systematically promote the development of media literacy and socio-emotional skills. This enables young people to learn safe and critical handling of digital content and to strengthen their interpersonal relationships, even under the pressures and uncertainties caused by natural disasters.

Networking and Resource Facilitation: Professionals help build supportive networks where young people can exchange ideas and support each other. This creates a stable social environment that significantly contributes to mental health, which is particularly crucial in situations like natural disasters when communities face collective stress and upheaval.

Digital competencies and relationship-enhancing skills are essential building blocks that empower young people to navigate safely and confidently in a digitally influenced world while simultaneously building stable, supportive relationships. Youth workers and professionals play a key role by acting as multipliers, mentors, and counselors – they not only impart knowledge but also create a safe environment in which young people can develop their skills and effectively address mental challenges, including those intensified by natural disasters.

4.1.5. To promote relationship skills: Biographical maps

At this point, it is important to develop methods that are oriented toward the experiences, life plans, and perspectives of the affected young people. The question is how to make their biographical experiences, particularly those related to mental health, visible and gain insights

into their life histories in order to create a comprehensive profile and identify the causes of disadvantages, health risks, and other issues, including those connected to natural disasters. This is especially important for initiating a process of mutual understanding and avoiding paternalistic strategies.

<https://www.jugendzentren.at/wer-wir-sind-was-wir-tun/newsarchiv/junge-stimmen/>



The biographical maps method (biographical communication) developed by us in Innsbruck could be a way to gain insights into the everyday reality and, specifically, the mental health of young people. In their biographical narratives, people often mention individuals and places that have or had special meaning for them or that are connected with individual problems, risks, and obstacles. Their narratives express both positive and negative experiences or events that have influenced their entire life design. These situations can be of a personal, familial, or institutional nature and become biographically relevant for the individual. On this basis, “biographical maps” can be created that show where young people’s mental health problems, difficulties, and communication issues originate, how cumulative risks and crises develop, and how these challenges can be managed. In doing so, the perspectives and strategies that young people have developed in dealing with various challenges (resource orientation), including those arising from natural disasters, also become visible.

Based on the “biographical maps” they create, it could then be discussed which paths and solution strategies are conceivable for their participation in society. The connection between experiences of discrimination and social powerlessness on the one hand and the life strategies, competences, and resources that young people have developed on the other can

significantly strengthen their communication and relationship skills, and thereby also their self-esteem. In this way, youth work offers opportunities for positive experiences of self-efficacy. (Terms such as agency, resource orientation, and empowerment are well established in the literature in this context.)

The visualization of the individual biography, or “biographical maps,” can be used as a basis for discussion to uncover how seemingly “unsolvable” problems and obstacles have accumulated. This enables a more precise localization (localization and contextualization) of the accumulation of various challenges, including those triggered by natural disasters. What strategies have the young people in question developed in difficult situations that are essential for communication and relationship skills and for constructive interventions?

When disadvantaged and crisis-prone young people are required to adapt to externally imposed demands – often in the context of natural disasters or health crises – they may experience stress and fear that their situation is not being taken seriously or respected, that their abilities and habits remain invisible, or that they are being devalued (attention and respect).

For an ideal communication situation, it is essential to incorporate different perspectives and use them as a resource. The underlying idea is that the specific life situations, experiences, and perspectives of young people living under precarious and marginalized conditions should be particularly included in the conceptual considerations of youth work. In order to understand the unique situation of those affected and to strengthen their communication and relationship competencies, it is indispensable to develop concepts that take into account the individual life experiences and interests of young people when designing youth work. The following three points are of great importance for constructive and communicative youth work:

SELF-REFLECTION FLEXIBILITY

In joint communication situations, discriminatory structures and discourses are questioned and made visible; this involves a critical examination of one’s own methods in youth work (reflexive youth work).

RESOURCE ORIENTATION:

Joint communication aims to determine how young people shape their everyday lives; invisible resources, strengths, and potentials are made visible; and young people’s life plans

are recognized without being confined to a specific interpretation (resource-oriented communication).

EMPOWERMENT:

Joint communication serves to create spaces for experience, action, and self-determined localization (open youth work); it supports resistance strategies against negative attributions and discrimination of young people; and it specifically promotes solidaristic attitudes and networks among young people. This strengthens their relationship competence (the relevance of self-determination in youth work), which is especially crucial when facing challenges arising from natural disasters.

4. 2) TOOLS AND EXERCISES

4.2.1) VIDEO: RESPECTfully

The short video story »RESPECTfully – Communication« can serve as an introduction to the topic of »communication and relationship skills« and provide an initial basis for discussion:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOWSw19ozLU>

This short video uses a small example to show how misunderstandings can be cleared up through positive and respectful communication: Three students (two boys and a girl) are friends and usually spend their free time together. One of the two boys had arranged to meet the girl after sports, but without telling her that he wanted to discuss something personal with her. In the meantime, the girl had also suggested to the other boy that they meet up in the afternoon. The first boy reacts with disappointment and the other two with incomprehension. An argument is brewing. By finally expressing their motives openly and in a positive way, all three are able to acknowledge them and agree on a proposal.

4.2.2) Exercises

All the practical exercises outlined below are based on the exchange of biographical experiences. Using short biographical episodes from interviews with other young people (in text form or as video), the youth can attempt to articulate their own biographical experiences and express and visualize them by creating “biographical maps.” These can be used to understand the unique stories of individuals and to develop empathy for the similar or

different crisis experiences of others, including those related to natural disasters. These exercises provide encouragement by recognizing self-efficacy, building self-confidence, and laying the foundation for positive social relationships.

The following exercises and activities can help young people build positive relationships and improve their communication skills. Their own experiences/biographical maps or other short biographical texts/videos can serve as a basis, especially when exploring the impact of natural disasters on personal and community life.

A) Reading/Listening to a Biographical Life Story

MAHIR – BETWEEN DISCRIMINATION, MARGINALIZATION, AND REORIENTATION
 MAHIR lives in a high-rise housing estate that was built in the northern part of Cologne after World War II. Today, it is predominantly inhabited by migrants, refugees, and their descendants. It is a neighborhood with a bad reputation and is perceived in public discourse as a "ghetto." These desolate living conditions and the negative reputation of the district have a detrimental impact on the life plans of the young people and lead to health problems. The following biography is an example of growing up in a territorially stigmatized high-rise housing estate. Here is a short video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ea34zTZizpo>



MAHIR¹⁵ is 23 years old, born and raised in Chorweiler, and defines himself as a German-Turk, as an artist, and as a musician. He is a rapper who critically addresses in his music the dismal living conditions under which he grew up and the negative images of Turkish migrants. In conversation, he describes his parents' migration history to Germany, the conditions

under which they had to live, and the experiences of discrimination they encountered in various areas of society: »They were insulted everywhere as Turks or 'Kanaken.' Some fathers

¹⁵ Das Bild: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=411245744514864&set=a.411245731181532>

are 60 years old, they had office jobs. They look very fresh. But my father worked hard. He doesn't look as fresh anymore. His hands look rugged.«

Time and again, Mahir deals with the negative image of the district and its consequences for the lives of the residents: “When you apply for an apprenticeship here in the neighborhood and say you come from Chorweiler, they frown. The reputation follows us, believe me. On one hand, people are proud that they live in Chorweiler. They respect us. On the other hand, it's shitty. People don't judge you as a person, but as a resident of Chorweiler. I want to be judged as MAHIR. I am MAHIR—okay, I live in Chorweiler. But I am still MAHIR, an independent person.”

He describes his upbringing in Chorweiler as follows: “It wasn't like in the other neighborhoods. My father always worked. He didn't go for walks with us. We were always outside and could do whatever we wanted. You grew up with people from other countries. It was definitely nice. You share the same fate. You are a migrant. Your parents come from somewhere else. You are not white, you are yellow, you are black, brown. That is what connects you.”

One of the experiences that Mahir speaks about in conversation and shares with other migrant youths is social exclusion and the accompanying lack of societal recognition, which negatively affects the mental health of those affected. For him, Chorweiler is a product of discrimination and exclusion, which goes along with the self-isolation and marginalization of those affected: “One isolates oneself as well. One thinks that this country does not recognize you. Then something like Chorweiler comes about. In any case, the idea is that of a ghetto. They put up a shopping center, a few doctors—here is Ford, here is Bayer—here they can live. Then they say: 'We didn't want that,' 'we made a mistake,' 'this shouldn't actually happen.' If my father had gone anywhere, he would never have gotten an apartment in a German settlement.”

MAHIR'S vision is to be recognized as part of society and as a musician in his contradictory normality. As he grows up, he moves between reorientation and societal non-recognition and tries to position himself in this in-between space and develop life strategies. His story also underscores how, in times of crisis, such as natural disasters, existing inequalities and experiences of exclusion can become even more pronounced, affecting mental health and community cohesion.

Questions for the participants:

1. What social problems are visible in MAHIR's biographical narrative?
2. What health problems are recognisable?
3. What competences and skills has MAHIR developed to overcome these problems, particularly in contexts where crises like natural disasters may exacerbate social and health challenges?

B) Creation of a Biographical Map

After a brief introduction, the young people create their own biographical map on which places, experiences, events, people, and connections that are particularly relevant to them are visualized. (These can be of a positive or negative nature, implying positive or negative experiences.)

- The biographical map is designed to encourage participants to reflect on their life story and to make the relevant milestones and connections visible, attempting to visualize them. The visualized biographies should reveal which negative and positive experiences have been encountered so far, including experiences related to natural disasters,
- which experiences or events are marked as biographically significant, particularly those influenced by crises such as natural disasters,
- which people or places are mentioned that have a particular significance for biographical development, especially in the context of coping with natural disasters,
- which ways of life have been developed, sometimes as adaptive strategies in response to natural disasters,
- which biographical crises and risks can be identified, including those arising from natural disasters,
- which skills and abilities can be read from the biographical map, such as resilience developed through experiences with natural disasters.
- In particular, reflection can focus on the extent to which the biographical maps created, visualized, and presented by the individual participants are useful for appropriate and future intervention strategies in youth work, especially in situations affected by natural disasters.

Title	Biographical map - visualisation of the biography
Learning outcome/objectives	- Insights into the biographical constructions and specifically into the physical situation of young people - Visualisation of biographical breaks, risks and resources
Procedure	<u>Creation and visualisation of the biographical map</u>

- Individual work

Task: Each participant takes a blank sheet of paper in A3 format and tries to visualise their biographical developments and make the relevant connections visible (special experiences, events, incidents, places, people; role models, special memories).

- Procedure

General overview:

Places, people and skills, challenges, problems and coping competences are identified as intersections at certain points and then linked together where possible.

Possible accompanying questions:

- What difficulties, disadvantages and challenges did I face?
- What competences/skills did I acquire where?
- Where did I get my language skills from?
- Which people from where have supported, encouraged and influenced me?
- Which places were important to me?
- What experiences/events have had a positive or negative influence on me?

Title: Everyone is asked to give their own biography map title.

Suggestion for further activities:

1) Exchange biography maps for two

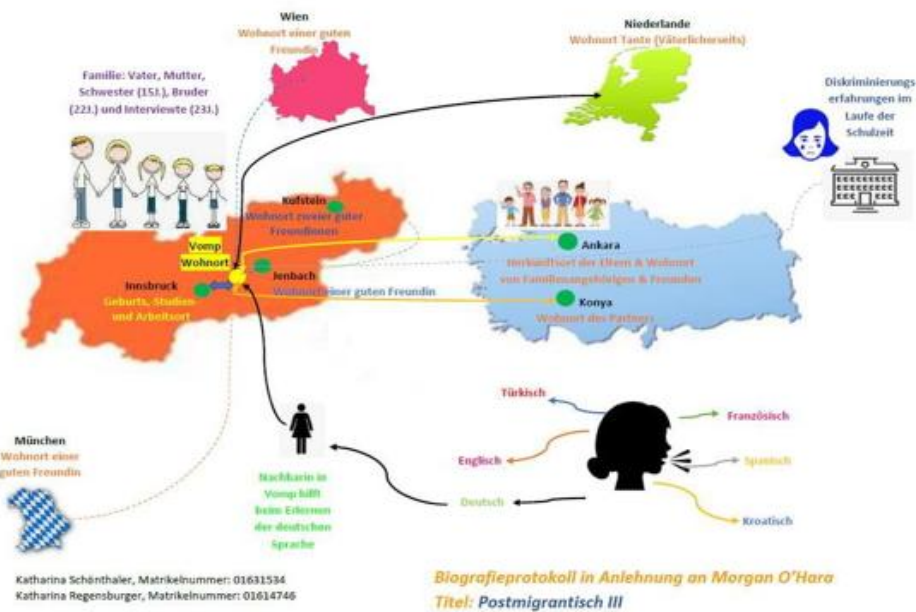
Two participants choose each other because they are interested in the other sheet or because it is the exact opposite of their own and exchange their ideas:

PERSON A) I chose your poster because

- a) What did I notice about this work?
- b) What do you notice about my work?
- c) What is important to me?
- d) Which competence stands for which place?

	<p>e) Where are there biographical breaks/crises/problems? f) Which coping strategies become visible? g) What do our sketches have in common? h) What differences are there?</p> <p><u>2) Prepare a small exhibition/ visit the gallery: The biography cards are handed out (moderated by one person):</u> <u>Everyone presents/ reflects on:</u></p> <p>My biography / My world / My psychological problems Our similarities/ differences Special characteristics/skills/challenges Biographical crises/risks/breaks/peculiarities Observations</p>
<p>Additional information for trainers</p>	<p>Youth workers should be able to make their own life story the subject of discussion and reflection. The focus should be on psychological health problems.</p>

Different Examples for Creative Biographical Maps



1

Biographical maps: Creative Pictures

MEIN TITEL

Freunde
Schule
Eltern
Hobbies

MEIN TITEL

Hobbies
Sprachen in meiner Küche
Kommunikation

BIOGRAFIE

Biografie - Lebenslauf

2

A) Practicing Empathy and Active Listening

Based on their biographical map, the young people can explain which events, places, and relationships have played a special role in their lives, including experiences related to natural disasters. (They may mention one or two brief examples.) The listeners focus on the speaker without interrupting.

B) Role-Play Scenarios

Selected biographical situations, difficulties, and challenges—including those caused by natural disasters—are addressed by designing scenarios in which the young people can identify strategies or develop alternatives—for example, to resolve a conflict or seek support for their mental health risks/crises. This helps them practice empathy and effective communication strategies.

C) Nonverbal Communication and Expression of Feelings

Using their biographical maps, the young people try to convey a message or emotion solely through body language and facial expressions. The others attempt to guess the underlying context, which could also involve situations linked to natural disasters. This exercise emphasizes the importance of nonverbal signals in communication and helps them articulate their feelings while understanding others' perspectives.

D) Exchange of Feedback

In pairs or small groups, constructive feedback is given or received regarding a specific task or activity. With the help of the trainer, the individual potential of their biographical experiences is highlighted—including how they coped with challenges such as natural disasters—such as creative strategies, problem-solving skills, positive interactions, etc. In this way, the young people learn to give and receive feedback in a respectful and effective manner, recognizing and valuing both their own resources and potentials as well as those of the other participants. Mutual feedback strengthens communication and relationship skills, thereby enhancing the self-esteem of the young people.

4.3) CASE STUDIES: An Example of Good Practice

A proven method in this context is (transcultural) biographical work with young people with migration and refugee backgrounds (conducted by Dr. Annemarie Schweighofer-Brauer:

<https://www.gewaltinfo.at/themen/gewalt-an-unter-jugendlichen/transkulturelle->

[biographiearbeit-und-biographische-sensibilitaet-in-der-arbeit-mit-jugendlichen-mit-](#)

[fluchtgeschichte.html](#)). In (transcultural) biographical work, the focus is on the mental health of the young people, including how they cope with experiences of natural disasters. Competent work with young people with migration and refugee histories requires biographical sensitivity. Biographical work refers to targeted measures to make young people visible with their unique stories, perspectives, and experiences, which may also include experiences related to natural disasters.

This includes the following aspects:

- Motivation for self-reflection
- Active listening
- Activating experiential knowledge
- Creating awareness of opportunities for life design and the scope for decision-making
- Recognizing problems/risks and identifying possible solutions

Through targeted biographical work, we gain insights into the life stories of young people with migration backgrounds and refugees, enabling us to intervene specifically and highlight the existing resources of the affected young people.

Further important steps:

Biographical sensitivity broadens the horizons of both young people and youth workers, making visible the developments that are relevant to the affected young people.

- To what extent do youth workers and initiatives relate to the real-life situations of the young people (adequacy)?
- Do marginalized and disadvantaged young people feel effectively supported and treated equally compared to their more privileged peers (equal opportunity)?
- From the young people's perspective, are there issues of mediation, information deficits, or access barriers (communication)?
- From the perspective of helping youth organizations, are there particular expectations and perceptions regarding the young people (helper theory)?
- Are there ways to mobilize the resources and capabilities of the young people so that they can better orient themselves (resource utilization)?
- What intervention options are available to youth welfare institutions and other youth organizations when structural barriers or obstacles arise for particularly crisis- and risk-laden young people (conclusions)?

4.4) SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND IMPLIKATIONS FOR FUTURE FOR YOUTH WORK

This module, developed by the University of Innsbruck, focuses on strengthening communication and relationship-building skills among young people, particularly those experiencing social disadvantage, psychological stress, and marginalization. The training combines theoretical grounding with practical tools to enhance digital competence, emotional intelligence, empathy, and active listening—crucial skills for fostering positive relationships and supporting mental health in youth work, especially in contexts affected by natural disasters.

A central innovation is the use of biographical maps, which enable young people to visualize their life experiences, reflect on personal challenges, and identify hidden strengths and coping mechanisms. These personalized narratives support the development of self-efficacy, resilience, and social participation, making youth work more inclusive and responsive to real-life contexts, including those shaped by natural disasters.

Exercises, case studies, and tools like the video RESPECTfully and empathy-based role-plays promote reflective dialogue and peer interaction. They aim to make invisible resources visible and turn biographical crises—including those stemming from natural disasters—into learning moments.

Youth workers are positioned not only as mentors and facilitators but also as co-learners and advocates. Their role involves fostering self-reflection, resource orientation, and empowerment, and creating safe, culturally sensitive environments that recognize and validate diverse life stories, including experiences of natural disasters.

Conclusion

The module underscores the necessity of integrating biographical, relational, and digital skills in youth work. In times of crisis – such as pandemics, social upheaval, or natural disasters – these competencies become essential for building trust, preventing isolation, and promoting mental well-being. Future youth work must therefore be adaptive, participatory, and emotionally intelligent. It must center young people's lived experiences, empower their voices, and challenge societal narratives that marginalize them. This approach not only enhances personal development but also contributes to a more inclusive and resilient society.

Implications for Future Youth Work

Possible implications that are relevant for future work with young people who are disadvantaged, socially isolated, and confronted with psychological and health issues:

- **Individualized, Life-World-Oriented Approaches:**

Every young person brings unique experiences and needs. Therefore, youth work must be flexible and adaptable, particularly when working with those affected by natural disasters.

- **Relationship Orientation Before Structure:**

Relationships and trust form the foundation for every intervention. Initiatives should be less formal and more personal.

- **Long-Term Perspective and Continuity:**

Disadvantaged and crisis-prone youth, including those impacted by natural disasters, particularly benefit from stable role models and continuous support.

- **Empowerment and Participation:**

It is important for young people to take on responsibilities to strengthen their independence and self-esteem.

- **Cultural Sensitivity:**

A conscious approach to diversity and inclusion is essential to avoid misunderstandings and to address the needs of all young people.

- **Self-Reflection of Professionals:**

The attitudes and communication styles of professionals significantly influence the success of their work. Regular supervision and further training are vital, especially in contexts affected by natural disasters.

<https://www.dw.com/de/wege-aus-der-jugendarbeitslosigkeit/a-16798295>



Title: Focus on young people in times of EU crisis



4.5) GLOSSARY – (Selected Terms and Definitions)

Agency:

See Self-Efficacy.

Biographical Work:

Biographical work is a method in which individuals recount and reflect on their past memories, experiences, and events—a form of self-reflection. Reflecting on these biographical

experiences helps in understanding them in the present and in shaping the future. The individual biography is viewed within a societal and historical context, from which future potentials for action can be developed.

Biographical Map / Biographical Visualization:

The goal is to interconnect the places, people, experiences, and events that appear or become visible in the biographical narratives, to create a cartography, and to attempt to visually represent these elements.

Empathy:

Empathy has a special significance in the psychological context. It is the ability to understand and resonate with the feelings and perspectives of others. This involves the capacity to mentally and emotionally step into another's world, encompassing not only their emotional state but also their thoughts and intentions.

Experiential Knowledge:

The term "experiential knowledge" is generally used to describe knowledge based on an individual's experiences, memories, and beliefs, referring to the capabilities of a person or organization. Unlike specialized knowledge, it is difficult to codify and document.

Cumulative Problems, Crises, and Risks:

This refers to the fact that the young people in question face multiple problems, risks, and crises simultaneously, which significantly impact their lives. One might also speak of multiple crises or disadvantages. To perceive and understand this complexity, youth workers require a very nuanced perspective.

Life-World Orientation:

Life-world orientation is one of the guiding principles of (open) youth work. It means placing the interests, experiences, and issues of young people at the center of the work. This approach takes the actual living conditions of youth as its starting point, establishes access

and trust, perceives young people in their entirety and subjectivity, and recognizes and takes seriously their needs and hopes.

Natural Disasters: Sudden and extreme events in nature, such as floods, earthquakes, wildfires, or storms, that can cause widespread damage and significantly impact the mental health and social circumstances of affected communities, particularly vulnerable youth.

Nonverbal Communication:

Nonverbal communication encompasses all forms of communication that do not rely on the verbal transmission of information. Information can be conveyed through all the senses, such as through music, images, smells, tastes, gestures, and body posture. It plays a central role in many areas of life.

Resource Orientation:

In youth work, resource orientation means emphasizing the strengths and potentials of the affected young people. A resource-oriented approach places the life worlds of young people, as well as their subjective needs and constructions of meaning, at the forefront.

Self-Reflexivity:

Self-reflexivity refers to the willingness and ability to make oneself the subject of reflection, implying a degree of self-distance. It can be described as rethinking one's own perspectives and attitudes.

Self-Efficacy/Agency:

Self-efficacy means having the inner conviction that one can successfully manage difficult or challenging situations using one's own abilities. This concept goes beyond mere self-confidence, emphasizing the belief that positive outcomes and experiences can be achieved through personal action. This conviction significantly influences how young people overcome obstacles and deal with problems, risks, and crises.

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Module 5: TECHNOLOGICAL SKILLS

5.1. Key components of digital literacy

5.1.1. What is digital literacy?

This module explores the key principles and strategic objectives of the **Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)**, a flagship initiative of the European Union aimed at modernising and strengthening digital education across Europe. In an era where digital transformation influences every aspect of life, education systems must become more resilient, innovative and inclusive. This module highlights the importance of fostering digital literacy, supporting professional development, and promoting innovative practices that enable all learners—regardless of background or location—to acquire the digital skills essential for full participation in today’s society.

Through a mix of theoretical insight and practical examples, participants will deepen their understanding of how the Digital Education Action Plan is shaping education and training policies across Member States. The module encourages critical reflection and equips participants with the tools and knowledge to contribute meaningfully to this transformation in their own educational contexts.

Module Objectives and Learning Outcomes

By the end of this module, participants will be able to:

- **Understand** the strategic goals and priority areas of the Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027) and their relevance to inclusive, high-quality digital education.
- **Analyse** how the plan supports the development of digital skills and competences for learners, educators, and education institutions across Europe.
- **Apply** key concepts from the plan to design or enhance digital learning strategies in their own professional practice, with a focus on innovation, equity and accessibility.



Image resource: Freepik

As well as improving digital literacy in general, the Action Plan also aims to bridge the digital divide and ensure that everyone, regardless of background, has equal access to digital learning opportunities. This is particularly important for youth workers and professionals supporting young people with fewer opportunities, as digital literacy plays a key role in their engagement, education and empowerment.

Digital literacy refers to an individual's ability to find, evaluate and communicate information effectively using digital platforms and tools. It combines technical skills with critical thinking, enabling individuals to create, evaluate and share information responsibly in an increasingly digital world. For youth workers and practitioners, strengthening their own digital literacy is crucial as it enables them to better support young people in developing these skills themselves.

In addition, digital literacy is a powerful tool for youth workers, enhancing their ability to engage and communicate with young people, especially those facing social, economic or psychological challenges. By using digital platforms such as social media, online forums and messaging tools, they can connect more effectively with young people and provide guidance and support. Incorporating interactive methods such as videos, podcasts and gamified content also makes learning more engaging and relevant for young people. Digital literacy also enables youth workers to build and maintain online communities, providing safe spaces

where young people can express themselves, seek support and connect with others facing similar challenges.

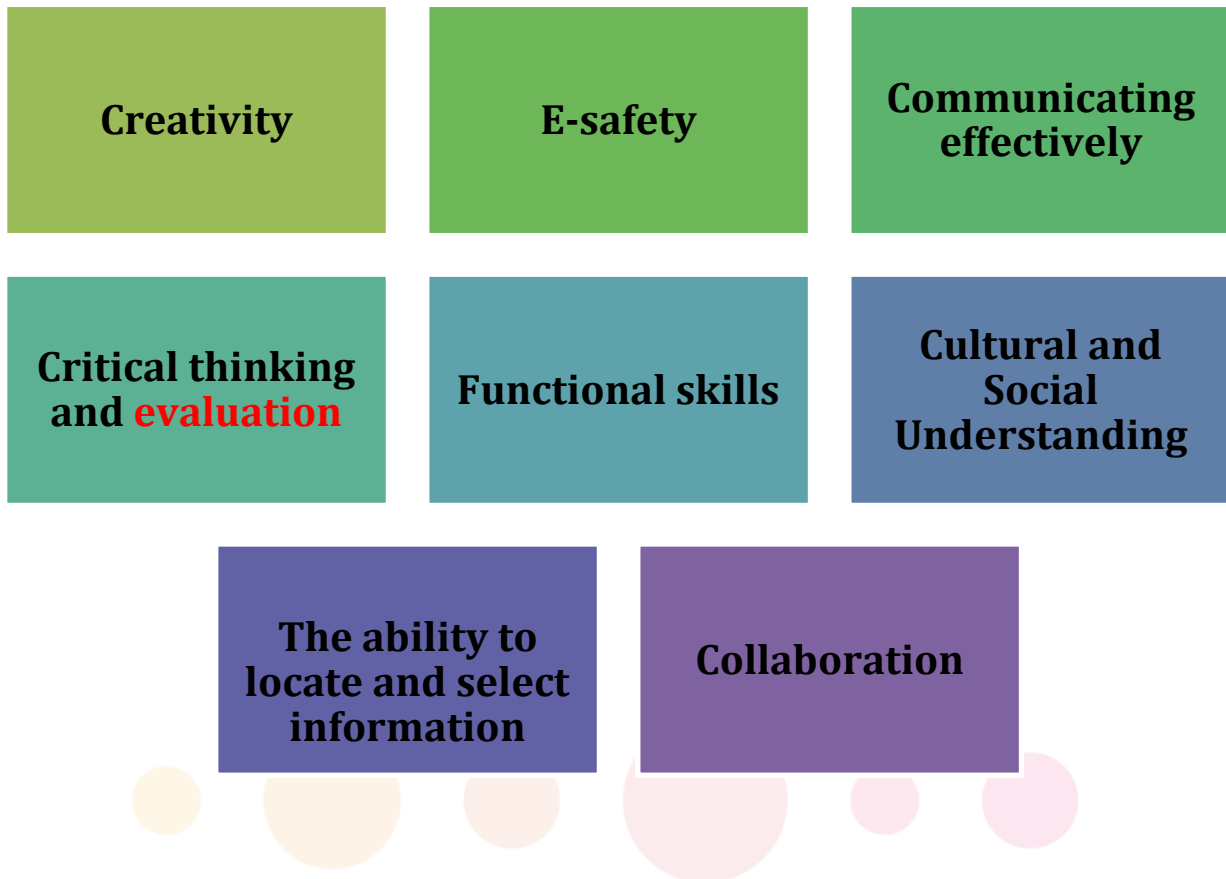
Another important benefit of digital literacy is access to reliable resources and training. Through e-learning platforms, webinars and open educational resources, youth workers can find, evaluate and share high-quality materials, ensuring that they stay up-to-date with best practices in education and youth engagement. In addition, digital literacy opens doors to continuous professional development, allowing youth workers to enhance their skills through online courses, peer networks and digital collaboration platforms.

Beyond education and communication, digital literacy also plays a critical role in supporting young people's mental health and resilience. It enables youth workers to identify trusted mental health resources and integrate online support tools such as chat services, self-care apps and digital wellbeing programmes. Digital platforms can also be used to raise awareness of key issues such as cyberbullying, online safety and digital stress management, ensuring that young people are equipped with the knowledge and tools they need to navigate the digital world safely and responsibly.

In conclusion, digital literacy is essential not only for youth workers themselves, but also for the young people they support. By developing their own digital skills, youth workers can create more engaging learning experiences, foster online communities, provide mental health support and access continuous professional development. This directly aligns with the objectives of the Digital Literacy Action Plan, ensuring that youth workers are well equipped to help young people overcome digital barriers and fully participate in today's digital society.

The following key digital competences represent essential skills and understandings that enable young people and youth workers to engage confidently, critically and creatively with digital technologies, ensuring they can collaborate effectively, access reliable information, communicate clearly and stay safe in an increasingly digital world.

The components of digital literacy



Let's now look at these key digital competences, which are essential to engage effectively and safely in the digital world. These competences help both young people and youth workers to use digital technologies creatively, critically and collaboratively, supporting their personal, educational and professional development.

- **Creativity**

The ability to think creatively and imaginatively and to use technology to produce output and represent knowledge in different formats and modes. To know when and how digital technology can support creative processes and to think creatively about and with technology.

- **Critical thinking and evaluation**

Being able to use reasoning skills to engage with, question, analyse, scrutinise and evaluate digital media and their content, and to formulate and support arguments about them and their use. Critical thinking involves being reflective, developing insight into underlying

assumptions, interpreting meaning and determining significance in order to understand and make sense of the world.

- **Cultural and Social Understanding**

The ability to recognise that there are social, cultural and historical influences that shape the creation of digital content and our understanding of it. This includes understanding how your own and others' perspectives have been shaped by cultural heritage, and being aware of the social and cultural contexts in which digital media are created and used.

- **Collaboration**

The ability to work successfully with others to create and share meaning and understanding. To develop team working skills, to be able to collaborate when using technology and to understand how technology can support collaboration both in the classroom and in the wider world.

- **The ability to locate and select information**

Define the type of information needed for a task or activity, know where and how to find information, critically appraise sources to select relevant, valuable and reliable information, and be aware of intellectual property issues relating to plagiarism and copyright.

- **Communicating effectively**

Being able to express ideas and feelings clearly so that others can understand them. Understand the different modes (visual, audio, textual, etc.) in which meaning can be conveyed and show awareness of the needs of different audiences. Understand how technology can support this and how to communicate effectively using different types of technology.

- **E-safety**

The ability to stay safe when using digital technologies, such as the internet and mobile phones, and to understand what constitutes appropriate use and content.

- **Functional skills**

Knowing how to use a range of different technologies competently and having the skills and flexibility to adapt this knowledge to learn how to use new technologies.

5.1.2. The Role of Digital Literacy in Navigating Natural Disasters, Health Crises and Mental Health

Digital literacy goals and principles are crucial in supporting young people during and after natural disasters, equipping them with the necessary skills and tools to effectively navigate challenging situations. As well as helping to manage the logistical complexities that arise in times of crisis, digital literacy is vital for addressing the mental health issues that often accompany such events. With access to digital tools, young people can seek emotional support through online counselling, engage with peer support networks and access reliable resources for coping with stress and trauma.

The same applies to health crises, where digital competence enables young people to stay informed, maintain social connections and manage their emotional well-being. While the specific needs differ depending on the nature of the crisis, the ability to adapt and apply digital skills appropriately is a fundamental aspect of digital literacy, underscoring its relevance in a variety of unpredictable and evolving situations.

By investing in education, infrastructure, and awareness, communities can empower individuals—especially young people—with the skills they health crises need to deal with these challenges effectively. As natural disasters become more frequent and severe due to climate change, prioritizing digital literacy is not an option but a necessity for building resilient societies where both physical and mental well-being are supported.

Here's how digital literacy can help young people cope with natural and health disasters and protect their mental health

Preparing Youth
for Crisis
Management

Enhancing
Communication
and
Collaboration

Promoting
Mental Health
and Emotional
Resilience

Encouraging
Responsible Use
of Technology

Long-Term
Recovery and
Community
Engagement

1. Preparing Youth for Crisis Management

Accessing Reliable Information: Digital literacy enables young people to find accurate and timely information about disaster risks, safety measures, and available resources.

Evaluating Credibility: Training in digital literacy helps them distinguish trustworthy sources from misinformation, which is vital during emergencies when false news can create panic.

Using Alert Systems: Familiarity with digital platforms and tools helps youth subscribe to early warning systems or disaster alert apps, ensuring they stay informed about evolving situations.

2. Enhancing Communication and Collaboration

Staying Connected: Digital tools can keep young people connected with their families, peers, and support networks during disasters, reducing feelings of isolation and helplessness.

Utilizing Social Media: Digital literacy teaches youth how to use social platforms for real-time communication, sharing updates, and seeking assistance when needed.

Coordinating Relief Efforts: Young people with digital skills can engage in organizing or participating in community-led relief initiatives through online collaboration tools.

3. Promoting Mental Health and Emotional Resilience

Accessing Digital Support Networks: Digital literacy can guide young people to online counseling resources, mental health apps, and peer-support groups to cope with the emotional impact of disasters.

Creative Expression: Skills in digital content creation allow them to express their experiences through blogs, videos, or art, fostering emotional processing and advocacy.

Building Resilience through Learning: Familiarity with digital learning platforms helps youth continue their education and development even when schools or physical resources are unavailable.

4. Encouraging Responsible Use of Technology

Avoiding Misinformation: Digital literacy helps young people critically evaluate information before sharing, reducing the spread of harmful rumors during disasters.

Safeguarding Privacy: Training in safe digital practices ensures they know how to protect their personal data when engaging with online platforms, especially during crises.

5. Long-Term Recovery and Community Engagement

Access to Resources: Digital literacy equips youth to use online tools to apply for recovery aid, scholarships, or job opportunities post-disaster.

Advocacy and Awareness: Young people can leverage digital platforms to advocate for disaster preparedness and share their experiences to raise awareness.

Skill Building for Future Resilience: Using digital frameworks like DigComp, youth can learn skills that make them more adaptable in future crises, such as problem-solving, collaboration, and digital content creation.

Key Recommendations for Digital Literacy in Disaster Response Initiatives

To ensure that young people with fewer opportunities, including those experiencing mental distress, are adequately prepared for and supported during crises, digital literacy programmes need to be tailored to their specific challenges and circumstances. By integrating digital literacy training with disaster preparedness and mental health support, these programmes can empower young people to access critical information, stay connected to support networks, and protect their well-being in times of crisis.

In order to effectively support young people with fewer opportunities, including those experiencing mental distress, in preparing for and responding to crises, digital literacy programmes should be adapted to their specific needs.

The following recommendations will ensure that youth workers and professionals can equip young people with the necessary digital skills to navigate disaster situations safely and effectively:

- **Tailor digital literacy to crisis contexts:** Develop youth-friendly, accessible training modules that focus on emergency communication, identifying reliable online resources and ensuring digital safety during disasters. For young people facing mental health challenges, these modules should also include coping strategies, mental health support networks and online help services.
- **Encourage cross-sectoral cooperation:** Partner with NGOs, educators and technology companies to co-design digital tools and training programmes that address the specific needs of disadvantaged youth. These collaborations can enhance the capacity of youth workers to provide targeted guidance and ensure that young people understand how to use digital platforms for crisis response, psychological support and community resilience.
- **Ensure equitable access to digital resources:** Many young people, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, refugee communities or rural areas, may not have access to reliable digital tools. It is essential to provide low-cost or free access to digital literacy programmes to ensure that every young person, regardless of socio-economic status, can develop essential disaster preparedness and response skills.

By integrating disaster-specific digital literacy into youth programmes, youth workers can empower young people to use technology effectively in times of crisis, increasing their resilience, safety and ability to connect with critical resources.

By integrating disaster-specific digital literacy initiatives into a structured framework, youth workers and practitioners can ensure that young people develop essential digital skills for crisis preparedness and response. An example of such a framework is the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp), which provides a standardised approach to understanding and measuring digital literacy across multiple domains. DigComp serves as a valuable reference for designing digital literacy programmes that enhance education, employment, personal development and resilience in disaster situations, equipping young people with the skills needed to effectively manage crises and contribute to recovery efforts.



The DigComp framework¹⁶

The DigComp framework identifies the key components of digital competence in 5 areas:

¹⁶ joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/scientific-activities-z/education-and-training/digital-transformation-education/digital-competence-framework-citizens-digcomp/digcomp-framework_en

1. **Information and data literacy:** To articulate information needs, to locate and retrieve digital data, information and content. To judge the relevance of the source and its content. To store, manage, and organise digital data, information and content.
2. **Communication and collaboration:** To interact, communicate and collaborate through digital technologies while being aware of cultural and generational diversity. To participate in society through public and private digital services and participatory citizenship. To manage one's digital presence, identity and reputation.
3. **Digital content creation:** To create and edit digital content. To improve and integrate information and content into an existing body of knowledge while understanding how copyright and licences are to be applied. To know how to give understandable instructions for a computer system.
4. **Safety:** To protect devices, content, personal data and privacy in digital environments. To protect physical and psychological health, and to be aware of digital technologies for social well-being and social inclusion. To be aware of the environmental impact of digital technologies and their use.
5. **Problem solving:** To identify needs and problems, and to resolve conceptual problems and problem situations in digital environments. To use digital tools to innovate processes and products. To keep up-to-date with the digital evolution.

5.2. Key Challenges of Youth

Technology has become an integral part of our lives, shaping the way we learn, work and interact with the world. It has made life easier, more convenient and more interactive, while also contributing significantly to economic growth and better services. Young people in particular have been the most active users of new technologies and digital tools, using them for education, social connectivity and creativity. Similarly, according to another study, how people use the internet is shaped not only by whether they have access or not but also by factors such as the frequency of use, time spent online, ways of using it, their needs, and the

development of skills based on their expertise (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007, p. 4). Therefore, the technological skills and experiences of youth cannot be generalized as a phenomenon applicable to the entire generation (Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008, p. 778; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008, p. 602). The reasons why young people have access to or lack access to information technologies are often examined within the framework of "second-level digital divide" or "digital inequality," particularly in the context of inclusion or exclusion (Hargittai, 2002; Hargittai & Hinnan, 2008; Hargittai, 2010; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007).

However, the relationship between youth and technology is complex, reflecting both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, an over-reliance on technology often leads to issues such as digital fatigue, cybersecurity risks and the erosion of critical thinking skills.

Challenges include information overload, the lack of non-verbal cues, privacy and security concerns, the potential for miscommunication and misinterpretation, and the digital divide in terms of access and skills.

Moreover, these challenges can create a compounded effect on young people, making it harder for them to seek help or trust the resources available. For instance, misinformation can lead to ineffective or harmful coping strategies, while cyberbullying and harassment may intensify feelings of isolation or hopelessness. Overexposure to negative content can contribute to a heightened state of anxiety, preventing emotional recovery, and the digital divide further exacerbates inequalities by leaving the most vulnerable youth without access to the tools and support they need to address their mental health concerns. Addressing these barriers is essential for ensuring equitable and effective mental health support for all young people.

The main reasons for these challenges can be summarized as follows:

1. Digital Divide

- Access to Technology: Not all youth have equal access to the internet, computers, or smart devices, leading to disparities in skill development.
- Infrastructure Gaps: Rural and underserved areas often lack reliable connectivity, hindering consistent learning opportunities.

2. Lack of Digital Literacy

- **Basic Skills Gap:** Many youth struggle with foundational digital skills, such as operating devices, using software, or navigating the internet safely.
- **Critical Thinking Online:** Understanding how to evaluate information sources and recognize misinformation remains a significant challenge.

3. Socioeconomic Barriers

- **Financial Constraints:** Limited financial resources may restrict access to advanced tools, software, or training programs.
- **Language Barriers:** Many educational and technological resources are not available in local languages, creating a barrier to learning.

5. Gaps in Education Systems

- **Outdated Curricula:** Schools and training programs may not prioritize emerging technological skills such as coding, AI, or digital marketing.
- **Lack of Teacher Training:** Educators may themselves lack the skills or resources to effectively teach technology-related subjects.

6. Cybersecurity and Privacy Issues

- **Awareness Deficits:** Youth often lack awareness of online privacy, data protection, and cybersecurity best practices.
- **Online Risks:** Exposure to cyberbullying, scams, and inappropriate content can negatively impact their digital experiences.

7. Emerging Technologies

- **Rapid Evolution:** The fast pace of technological advancements makes it challenging for youth to stay up-to-date with new tools and trends.
- **Specialized Skills Gap:** High-demand fields like AI, machine learning, and blockchain require specialized knowledge, which is not easily accessible.

8. Soft Skills in Tech Contexts

- **Collaboration in Digital Environments:** Adapting communication and teamwork skills to online platforms can be difficult for some youth.
- **Problem-Solving Skills:** Using technology to creatively and effectively solve real-world problems requires a blend of technical and critical thinking skills, which may be underdeveloped.

9. Cultural and Societal Factors

- **Digital Norms and Etiquette:** Understanding and adapting to the cultural norms of digital interactions can be confusing.
- **Resistance to Change:** Societal resistance or lack of awareness about the importance of technological skills can slow down adoption among youth.

The role of technology skills in disaster preparedness and recovery:

- **Early warning and communication:** Technologically literate youth can use apps, websites, and SMS-based alerts to stay informed about impending disasters and disseminate warnings to their communities.
- **Emergency navigation tools:** Skills in using GPS and mapping software (e.g. Google Maps, disaster-specific apps) help young people identify safe zones, shelters, and evacuation routes during emergencies.
- **Access to information:** Digital skills enable youth to access critical disaster-related resources, such as government announcements, relief programmes, and self-help guides.
- **Continuity of Education:** Technology skills help young people continue their education through online learning platforms when schools are closed due to disasters.
- **Community support and advocacy:** Tech-savvy youth can mobilise support through social media campaigns, crowd-funding or community engagement tools to raise awareness and resources for affected areas.

5.3. Exercises and Tools

Tools

1. Information and Data Literacy

- **FactCheck.org** can help youth workers teach critical thinking skills, enabling young people to question online information and develop the ability to identify misinformation and fake news. This strengthens their ability to navigate digital content responsibly. <https://www.factcheck.org>

- **Checkology** offers youth workers interactive teaching tools to build media literacy, helping them engage young people in discussions about disinformation, fact-checking, and responsible media consumption, which is essential for active citizenship and informed decision-making. <https://www.checkology.org>

2. Communication and Collaboration

- **Padlet** allows youth workers to facilitate collaborative activities, enabling young people to brainstorm, share ideas, and co-create content, enhancing teamwork and digital communication skills in a safe environment. <https://padlet.com>
- **Slack** provides youth workers a way to introduce young people to professional communication platforms, helping them develop skills needed for digital collaboration in education, employment, and community projects. <https://slack.com>

3. Digital Content Creation

- Canva allows youth workers to help young people express themselves creatively, teaching them visual communication skills essential for both personal projects and professional development, such as creating social campaigns or digital portfolios. <https://www.canva.com>
- **Adobe Express** helps youth workers encourage youth-led digital storytelling, enabling young people to produce multimedia content that enhances digital creativity while reinforcing content creation skills. <https://www.adobe.com/express/>

4. Safety and Security

- Cyberwise equips youth workers with ready-made resources for teaching cybersecurity and responsible technology use, helping them address online risks and promote positive digital citizenship. <https://www.cyberwise.org>

5. Problem Solving

- **Codecademy** enables youth workers to introduce young people to coding and computational thinking, building logical problem-solving abilities and increasing confidence in technology use, even for those with no technical background. <https://www.codecademy.com>
- **Common Sense Education** - Digital Citizenship Curriculum provides youth workers with real-life scenarios to help young people apply digital literacy and decision-making skills to complex situations, such as managing online conflict or protecting their privacy. <https://www.commonsense.org/education>

Exercise: Exploring and applying DigComp competencies

Objective:

This exercise helps young people develop digital literacy skills through scenario-based learning, applying the five DigComp skills - Information & Data Literacy, Communication & Collaboration, Digital Content Creation, Security and Problem Solving - to real-life situations. It enables youth workers to equip participants with essential digital skills for education, employability and online safety.

Methodology

Using DigComp as a framework, this exercise follows a scenario-based, experiential learning approach. Scenario-based learning is an active learning method in which participants develop knowledge, skills and decision-making abilities by engaging with realistic situations or challenges. Through scenario analysis, participants enhance their critical thinking, problem solving and decision-making skills, ensuring that they not only understand DigComp as a framework, but also apply it effectively in their work with young people.

Steps

1. Explore the five DigComp competence areas

Start by learning about the five key digital competence areas of the European Digital Competence Framework (DigComp)- information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, security and problem solving. You'll discover why these skills are important for your personal development, education and future career, and how they can help you navigate the digital world safely and effectively.

2. Understand the scenario-based learning approach

Next, you'll be introduced to scenario-based learning - an approach that helps you develop practical digital skills by analysing real-life situations. You'll see how each scenario is linked to one or more of the DigComp skill areas, helping you to apply what you've learned to real-life situations you might encounter online.

3. Analyse scenarios and answer questions

For each digital scenario, you'll be asked to read the situation carefully and then answer a series of questions designed to help you think critically, identify risks and propose solutions. Your answers will help strengthen your digital skills, preparing you to make smart, safe decisions online and to support others in your community.



The European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp) provides a roadmap for developing and improving digital skills essential for personal, professional, and societal success. It identifies five key competence areas:

- Information and data literacy
- Communication and collaboration
- Digital content creation
- Security
- Problem solving

Scenario:

Ayşe is a high school student who feels inadequate about her life due to constant exposure to "perfect lives" on social media. A friend suggests she reduce her social media usage, but Ayşe is unsure how to start.

Question 1:

What is the first step Ayşe should take to evaluate if the advice she read online about reducing social media usage is credible?

- A. Assume the advice is true if it has many likes.
- B. Check if the author is credible and if the source is reputable.
- C. Follow the advice immediately.
- D. Ignore the advice altogether.

Question 2:

Which of the following would help Ayşe verify the credibility of the information? (Choose all that apply)

- A. Check if the source is well-known and reputable.
- B. Look for references to scientific studies or expert opinions.
- C. Compare the information with trusted sources like government or academic websites.
- D. Evaluate the design and layout of the website.

Question 3:

If Ayşe decides to share the advice she found online with her friends, what is the most responsible way to do so?

- A. Post it without checking the source, assuming her friends will figure it out.
- B. Share it with a note explaining why she thinks it's useful and mention the source.
- C. Share it anonymously to avoid responsibility.
- D. Don't share it at all.

Question 4:

Ayşe decides to create a blog post about managing social media usage. Which of the following steps should she take to ensure her content is ethical and useful?

- A. Use copyrighted images without permission.
- B. Provide clear references to the sources of information she used.
- C. Ensure the language and tone are respectful and inclusive.
- D. Avoid citing any sources to keep the post simple.

Question 5:

While reducing her social media usage, Ayşe decides to enhance her online security. Which actions should she prioritize?

- A. Create strong, unique passwords for each account.
- B. Share personal information only on private groups.
- C. Use two-factor authentication for her accounts.
- D. Click on all links her friends share with her to stay connected.

Question 6:

Ayşe struggles with staying focused on her studies and managing social media distractions. Which solution aligns with problem-solving in DigComp?

- A. Delete all her social media accounts immediately.
- B. Schedule specific times for social media usage and stick to a routine.
- C. Use apps that block social media access during study hours.
- D. Both B and C.

Key Answers

1. B
2. A, B, C
3. B
4. B, C
5. A, C
6. D

Good practice

Good Practice: ALL DIGITAL WEEKS

[ALL DIGITAL WEEKS](#) offers a coordinated Europe-wide campaign combining local events, online workshops and digital tools, allowing youth organisations, schools and community centres to adapt activities to local needs. Its focus on a wide range of digital skills, in line with DigComp, ensures relevance for different skill levels.

Impact and scalability


The campaign reaches thousands of participants across Europe, including young people, adults and vulnerable groups. Its scalable design allows any organisation to participate, ensuring wide accessibility, even in rural or disadvantaged areas.

Target audience

ALL DIGITAL WEEKS focuses on people with low digital skills, including young people, job seekers, migrants and refugees, helping them to develop essential digital skills for education, employment and participation.

Tackling barriers

The campaign tackles digital exclusion, lack of confidence and misinformation by providing free, easily accessible training and resources to help youth workers and educators better support their target groups.

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping circles in shades of yellow, orange, and pink, positioned above the section header.

How ALL DIGITAL WEEKS can be used by youth workers and professionals working with youngsters

1. Access ready-to-use resources

Youth workers can benefit from free toolkits, training materials, webinars and workshops provided by ALL DIGITAL Weeks to help them improve their own digital skills and gain practical tools to use with young people.

2. Engaging young people in digital literacy activities

Youth workers can organise local events such as digital literacy workshops, online safety sessions or content creation challenges, using ALL DIGITAL Weeks themes and materials to engage young people in fun, relevant activities.

3. Raising awareness and participation

Youth workers can encourage young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, to take part in ALL DIGITAL WEEKS events and help them access free learning opportunities that build digital confidence and skills.

4. Link to wider European initiatives

By participating, youth workers can link local activities to a Europe-wide campaign, giving young people a sense of belonging to a wider community and raising awareness of digital inclusion efforts across Europe.

5. Strengthening professional networks

ALL DIGITAL WEEKS also allows youth workers to collaborate with other educators, NGOs and digital inclusion experts across Europe, share good practices and learn from others' experiences.

Glossary:

Digital literacy: The ability to use digital technologies effectively and critically to communicate, collaborate, access, analyse and create information in a variety of digital formats. It includes skills such as navigating the web, using digital tools and understanding digital content.

Misinformation: False or misleading information that is disseminated regardless of the intent to deceive. In the context of digital education, tackling misinformation involves teaching individuals how to check sources, assess the credibility of content and think critically about the information they encounter online.

Information and data literacy: The set of skills required to locate, access, evaluate and use information and data effectively and responsibly. It includes understanding how data is collected, processed and analysed, and recognising biases and ethical considerations in the use of data.

Cybersecurity: The practice of protecting systems, networks and data from digital attack, unauthorised access or damage. In education, it involves teaching individuals how to recognise potential cyber threats, protect their personal information, and adopt safe online practices.

Digital norms and etiquette: Guidelines and expectations for appropriate behaviour in digital environments, often referred to as 'netiquette'. This includes respecting the privacy of others, communicating respectfully online, and understanding the impact of one's actions in a digital space. These norms help promote positive and responsible interactions in digital communities.

The Digital Education Action Plan: The Digital Education Action Plan is a strategic initiative of the European Union aimed at improving digital literacy and skills in all Member States to ensure inclusive, high quality and sustainable education systems. It outlines a vision for digital transformation in education and training to support lifelong learning, innovation and economic resilience.

The **Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp)** is a European framework designed to help individuals, organizations, and policymakers understand and develop digital skills necessary for personal, professional, and societal success

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