



YouHEALTH



YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT TOOLKIT

Developed under the YouHealth Project,
Work package 5
University of Innsbruck, Austria



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Part I: Introduction and context



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1.1. Foreword and purpose of the toolkit

Mental health issues among young people are a growing priority across Europe and worldwide. The well-being of young people directly influences their ability to learn, participate actively in society, and build meaningful futures. Promoting mental health is therefore not only a matter of individual care, but also an essential investment in stronger, more resilient communities.

Recent evidence highlights the urgency of this challenge. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), one in seven adolescents aged 10–19 experiences a mental disorder. Depression, anxiety, and behavioural disorders are among the leading causes of illness and disability in this age group. In Europe, the OECD (2021) reported that symptoms of anxiety and depression among young people doubled during the pandemic, with recovery progressing only slowly. Similarly, the UNICEF State of the World's Children Report (2021) indicates that almost 20% of adolescents live with a mental health condition, many of which remain untreated due to stigma and lack of accessible services.

This Youth Mental Health Support Toolkit was created to provide concrete strategies to safeguard and strengthen young people's mental health, particularly during and after public health crises or social disruptions. It brings together preventive approaches, immediate support techniques, and long-term strategies to ensure that young people receive support at every stage of their journey.

Developed as part of the YouHealth Project, an Erasmus+ initiative, the toolkit reflects the combined expertise of partners in Austria, Germany, Slovenia, and Türkiye. It integrates academic research, youth work practice, and community-based innovation, ensuring that its content is both evidence-based and practical.

Importantly, this resource is designed to be fully usable across different sectors and contexts:

- Youth workers and community organisations can apply the activities in group sessions, outreach work, and peer-support settings.
- VET providers and academic institutions can integrate the tools into classrooms, training modules, and research activities, promoting resilience and mental health literacy among students.
- Educators and trainers can adapt the strategies to support vulnerable learners, including those with fewer opportunities or at risk of exclusion.
- Schools, universities, and community services can use the toolkit as a bridge to strengthen collaboration and ensure continuity of care.

By incorporating the strategies and activities presented here, professionals across these sectors can promote well-being in structured learning environments, foster safe and inclusive spaces, integrate mental health literacy into curricula, and contribute to ongoing research and innovation in the field.

The toolkit is designed to be practical, adaptable, and accessible. It can be applied in schools, youth centres, community organisations, vocational training settings, and digital environments. Its

content reflects European best practices as well as local realities, making it a valuable resource for anyone committed to improving the mental health and well-being of young people.

The Youth Mental Health Support Toolkit has been developed to achieve the following objectives:

- Strengthen the capacity of youth workers, educators, trainers, VET providers, and academic institutions to identify early signs of mental health challenges, implement preventive measures, and respond appropriately in times of crisis.
- Provide practical tools and strategies for integrating mental health promotion into everyday practice across youth work, schools, training environments, and community organisations.
- Support young people in building resilience and coping mechanisms, empowering them to manage stress, regulate emotions, and respond constructively to life's challenges.
- Promote cross-sector collaboration by encouraging cooperation between families, schools, universities, community services, and health professionals, ensuring continuity of care and holistic support.

This resource is aligned with UNICEF's global vision of empowering young people and professionals alike to become "mental health champions", fostering supportive environments and helping to reduce stigma around mental health.

1.2. Partner Country Perspectives and Resources

Promoting mental health among young people is not just the responsibility of youth workers; it is also a growing priority for vocational education and training (VET) providers and academic institutions across Europe. Schools, universities and VET centres play a vital part in spotting early signs of distress, incorporating resilience-building activities into their programmes and ensuring learners from all backgrounds have equal opportunities to thrive. The YouHealth Project partner countries - Austria, Germany, Slovenia and Turkey - each contribute unique insights and resources to address this shared challenge.

Austria

Research by the Austrian Health Promotion Foundation (Fonds Gesundes Österreich) and the Austrian Youth Report highlights that stress, performance pressure, and uncertainty about the future are major issues among students. The brochure *Wie geht es dir?* (Austrian Youth Information Centres, 2025) provides self-assessment tools and wellbeing exercises that can be adapted in schools and VET institutions to support learners. Universities such as the University of Innsbruck have also integrated mental health literacy into teacher training and higher education curricula. [Download the brochure \(Jugendinfo, 2025\)](#)

Germany

Germany has prioritised mental health awareness in both schools and higher education. The nationwide programme Verrückt? Na und! (“Mental? So what!”) developed by Irrsinnig Menschlich brings lived experience of mental illness into classrooms, promoting open dialogue and stigma reduction. VET schools and universities increasingly use this model to train both students and teachers. The Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA) also develops resources on resilience and stress prevention tailored to young learners. [Irrsinnig Menschlich - Official Website](#)

Slovenia

The National Institute of Public Health (NIJZ) coordinates the long-term programme To sem jaz (“That’s Me”), which promotes life skills and mental health among adolescents in schools and VET contexts. The programme provides structured workshops, teacher guidelines, and materials for building resilience, communication skills, and emotional regulation. These resources are widely used in schools and can be integrated into vocational training. [NIJZ - Programmes](#)

Türkiye

In Türkiye, mental health promotion is strongly linked to youth centres and formal education settings. The Ministry of Youth and Sports coordinates youth centres that integrate psychosocial support, sports, and wellbeing activities into everyday programmes. Yeşilay (the Green Crescent Society) develops nationwide prevention and wellbeing resources, which can be adapted in schools and VET institutions to promote healthy lifestyles and resilience. Universities have also begun embedding wellbeing modules in teacher training and vocational curricula. [Yeşilay Official Website](#)

1.3. Understanding Youth Mental Health in Emergencies

Mental health is more than the absence of illness. It reflects emotional balance, resilience, and the ability to cope with change. Adolescence is a sensitive period, and emergencies such as pandemics, earthquakes, or displacement can disrupt routines, social connections, and safety, increasing the risk of anxiety, stress, and depression.

Key risk factors include:

- Loss of safe spaces and stability.
- Increased family or community stress.
- Interrupted education and activities.
- Limited access to professional support.
- Exposure to traumatic events (such as natural disasters, accidents or violence).

- Economic insecurity and financial hardship within families.
- Social isolation and reduced opportunities for peer interaction.
- Stigma and discrimination related to mental health, disability or minority status.
- Uncertainty about the future, including employment or education prospects.
- Overexposure to negative or distressing information via social media and the news.
- Lack of trust in institutions or authorities during crises.
- Difficulties accessing digital tools for remote learning or support services.

However, with the right support, young people can turn adversity into an opportunity for growth. With the right guidance, they can strengthen their coping mechanisms, develop resilience and forge meaningful connections with their peers. These experiences help them not only to navigate current challenges, but also to prepare for future difficulties with confidence. Youth workers play a vital role in this process, offering encouragement, creating safe spaces and equipping young people with the practical tools they need to manage stress, express their emotions and foster mutual support.

1.4. The YouHealth Project and Methodology

The YouHealth Project was created in response to the growing need for structured, accessible and high-quality resources in the field of youth mental health. Across Europe, youth workers, educators and community organisations often report a lack of practical tools with which to address the emotional needs of young people, particularly during and after public health emergencies, natural disasters or social crises. To address this issue, the YouHealth Project has brought together a consortium of experienced partners from Türkiye, Austria, Germany and Slovenia, combining diverse expertise and local knowledge.

The project is supported by partner organisations with strong backgrounds in youth work, community engagement, and training delivery. This multi-actor approach guarantees that the outcomes are scientifically sound and directly relevant to everyday youth practice.

The YouHealth methodology is guided by three core principles:



Accessibility:

All tools and resources are designed to be practical, user-friendly, and available in multiple languages. Materials are created in formats suitable for youth workers with different levels of prior experience, ensuring they can be applied in both urban and rural contexts. Particular attention is given to reaching young people with fewer opportunities and those who may face barriers in accessing support.

Evidence-based practice:

The project draws on psychological research, youth work methodologies and international best practice. Input from mental health professionals, academic experts and youth organisations ensures that activities are creative, engaging and effective in promoting wellbeing. Evaluation and feedback mechanisms are integrated throughout the project cycle to ensure continuous improvement.

Collaboration:

YouHealth is fundamentally collaborative, both cross-sectoral and cross-border. It connects universities, NGOs, local authorities and youth organisations to foster knowledge exchange and innovation. By combining academic expertise with grassroots experience, the project ensures that its results are practical, adaptable and sustainable in different European contexts.

The project also adopts blended learning methods. These include in-person workshops, peer-learning circles and digital platforms, providing flexibility for both youth workers and young people. This hybrid approach acknowledges the importance of human connection while leveraging technology to reach wider audiences, particularly when physical meetings are not possible.

The Youth Mental Health Support Toolkit is one of the project's key outputs. Designed as a training resource for organisations looking to build capacity, it also serves as a practical handbook for individual youth workers engaging directly with young people. Its content reflects the contributions of multiple stakeholders, including researchers, practitioners and young people themselves, making it a genuinely co-created product aimed at achieving a sustainable impact.

Part II: Core Principles



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2.1. Prevention: Identifying early signs

Prevention is the cornerstone of supporting young people's mental health. Many serious mental health issues can be mitigated, or even avoided, if early signs of distress are recognised and addressed promptly. Youth workers are often well placed to notice small but meaningful changes in behaviour, emotions or physical wellbeing, particularly among young people who may not feel comfortable discussing their struggles openly.

Key early signs include:

- Behavioural signs withdrawal from friends or activities; decline in school or training performance; loss of concentration; aggression; irritability; or risk-taking behaviours.
- Emotional signs include persistent sadness, frequent mood swings, irritability, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, lack of motivation and heightened anxiety.
- Physical signs include frequent headaches or stomach pains without a clear medical cause, constant fatigue, changes in appetite or sleep patterns, and unexplained physical complaints.

For more details on the overlapping and distinct symptoms of anxiety and depression, check the chart here: [Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression Chart](#).

Practical steps for youth workers:

- Observe patterns over time rather than one-off events.
- Create a safe environment where young people can express themselves without fear of judgement.
- Encourage open conversations by asking simple questions such as 'How have you been feeling lately?'
- Use tools such as mood calendars or check-in cards to make it easier for young people to express their emotions.

Tip for practice: Remember that prevention is not only about identifying risks, but also about promoting protective factors such as strong social connections, regular routines and positive peer relationships.

2.2. Immediate support: Psychological First Aid (PFA)

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an evidence-based approach to providing humane, supportive, and practical help in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. It ensures that young people feel safe, listened to, and connected when they are experiencing stress, confusion, or fear. It is not therapy, but it can stabilise emotions and reduce harm in the short term.

Core principles of PFA (WHO, 2011):

- **Look** - Ensure safety, identify urgent needs, and assess risks.

- **Listen** - Offer a calm and compassionate presence, allowing the young person to share at their own pace.
- **Link** - Connect them with practical support, peers, families, or professionals

The five core actions of PFA are:

- **Listen without judgement:** Pay active attention, avoid interruptions and show genuine interest.
- **Comfort and validate feelings:** Acknowledge the young person's emotions by saying things like "It makes sense that you feel this way".
- **Protect physical and emotional safety:** Make sure that the young person is in a safe environment, away from any further harm or sources of stress.
- **Connect with family, peers or services:** Link the young person to trusted individuals or professional resources for ongoing support.
- **Empower them by encouraging them to recognise their own strengths:** Remind them of their past coping strategies and strengths to reinforce their self-confidence.

Examples:

- After a natural disaster, a youth worker reassures a teenager, helps them breathe calmly, and supports family reunification. If the teenager continues to panic for days, they are guided towards a psychologist.
- During a workshop, a young participant reveals persistent suicidal thoughts. The youth worker listens compassionately, ensures immediate safety, and refers them directly to crisis intervention services.

Tip for practice: Always end PFA with a clear plan: "Who can you turn to if you feel worse?" and "Here is a contact number if you need immediate help." This ensures continuity of care.

Important reminder:

- PFA is not professional therapy or long-term treatment.
- Youth workers should know their professional limits and not attempt to manage complex clinical cases alone.
- Building referral pathways and having a list of local mental health resources is essential for effective youth work.

Examples of PFA in practice:

- Sitting quietly with a distressed young person after a traumatic event and letting them talk at their own pace.

- Reassuring a teenager experiencing exam anxiety that their feelings are valid and offering simple breathing exercises.
- Helping a young person connect with a school counsellor or mental health hotline.

Tip for practice: Even brief interventions, such as active listening, grounding exercises or a supportive presence, can significantly reduce distress and promote a sense of safety.

While Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an essential initial response to distress, its effectiveness is naturally limited. While it provides immediate comfort, safety and support, PFA does not replace professional mental healthcare. If a young person exhibits severe or persistent signs of distress, such as suicidal thoughts, self-harming behaviour, extreme withdrawal or actions that endanger themselves or others, youth workers must act quickly and refer them to specialised services.

These services may include mental health professionals, doctors, crisis helplines or emergency care providers. Understanding the limitations of their role is an important aspect of professional youth work. No youth worker should feel that they must handle complex or high-risk cases alone.

For this reason, organisations and youth workers should always maintain an up-to-date list of reliable contacts and referral resources at both the international and national levels. Having these resources readily available ensures that young people never go without support and can access the care they need promptly.

The resources below provide international guidelines, as well as details of national helplines and services in Türkiye, Germany, Austria and Slovenia. These resources are intended for direct sharing with young people, their families, or other professionals, and they should be regularly reviewed to ensure they remain accurate and accessible.

International:

- **WHO (2011). Psychological First Aid: Guide for Field Workers.** World Health Organization, War Trauma Foundation, World Vision International.
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241548205>
- **UNICEF & WHO (2020). Helping Children Cope with Stress During the COVID-19 Outbreak.** Practical tips for parents, caregivers, and youth workers.
<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/helping-children-cope-with-stress-print.pdf>

Türkiye:

- **ALO 183 - Sosyal Destek Hattı:** Free, 24/7 support for families, children, and youth.
- **Yeşilay Danışmanlık Merkezi (YEDAM):** Professional counselling on addiction and psychosocial support. <https://yedam.org.tr>

Germany:

- **TelefonSeelsorge (0800 111 0 111 / 0800 111 0 222):** Free 24/7 crisis helpline.
- **Nummer gegen Kummer (116 111):** Child and youth helpline.
<https://www.nummergegenkummer.de>

Austria:

- **Rat auf Draht (147):** National child and youth helpline, 24/7.
<https://www.rataufdraht.at>
- **Telefonseelsorge (142):** Crisis helpline for all ages.

Slovenia:

- **TOM - Telefon za otroke in mladostnike (116 111):** Free youth helpline.
<https://www.e-tom.si>
- **Slovene Association for Mental Health (ŠENT).** Support for people with mental health issues. <https://www.sent.si>

2.3. Continuity of care and long-term support

Mental health recovery rarely happens immediately; it is a gradual and ongoing process. While early intervention and immediate support are vital, young people also need consistent, long-term strategies to prevent feelings of abandonment once a crisis has passed. Continuity of care helps maintain stability, build resilience and develop sustainable coping mechanisms that extend into everyday life.

Long-term strategies include:

- **Follow-up sessions and check-ins:** Regular, informal conversations show young people that support continues beyond the initial crisis and help to monitor progress and address new challenges.
- **Group activities:** Peer-to-peer groups, creative workshops and sports activities rebuild trust and strengthen social connections, protecting against isolation.
- **Reintegration support:** Providing practical help with returning to school, vocational training or work after a crisis ensures smoother transitions and prevents setbacks.
- **Referral pathways:** Clear and accessible information on how to access professional counselling, healthcare providers or specialised services makes it easier for young people to seek the right support when they need it.

- **Sustained self-care routines:** Encouraging simple daily habits such as exercise, journaling, relaxation techniques and balanced nutrition helps young people take ownership of their well-being.

The role of youth workers in continuity of care:

- **Maintain consistent contact:** Staying in touch reduces the risk of isolation and reassures young people that they are not alone.
- **Coordinate with families and schools.** Collaboration ensures a united approach where all key adults contribute to the young person's stability and growth.
- **Celebrate small achievements:** Recognising progress, no matter how small, builds confidence and reinforces resilience.
- **Support goal setting:** Encourage young people to set realistic and achievable goals using the SMART methodology (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound). This framework breaks down big ambitions into manageable steps, making long-term recovery more structured and motivating.

Example of a SMART goal: Instead of saying 'I want to feel less anxious', a youth worker can help a young person to reframe this as: 'I will practise deep breathing for five minutes, three times a week, for the next month.' By providing consistent support, structured follow-up and empowerment in self-care, youth workers can help young people to build the confidence and skills needed to recover and thrive in the long term.

Tip for practice: Continuity of care also involves creating a culture of resilience, helping young people to see that mental health is not just about overcoming crises, but also about developing lifelong skills for wellbeing.

Part III: Practical Guidance for Youth Workers



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3.1. Everyday Wellbeing Practices

Taking a proactive approach to promoting everyday wellbeing can strengthen youth mental health. Research shows that small, consistent lifestyle habits can have a significant impact. According to UNICEF, around 20% of children and adolescents experience a mental health condition, many of which are common and can be treated with the right support. Youth workers play a vital role in modelling positive behaviours and embedding wellbeing practices into daily programmes.

Evidence-based practices include:

- **Movement:** Regular physical activity, such as walking for 30 minutes or exercising for an hour, boosts mood and reduces stress hormones. Sports and dance workshops can also be integrated into youth programmes.
- **Nutrition:** Healthy diets support brain health. Bananas and nuts provide energy, while oily fish such as sardines and salmon contain omega-3 fatty acids, which are essential for cognitive function.
- **Hydration:** Simple reminders to drink water during sessions can help improve focus, energy levels and emotional regulation.
- **Sunlight:** Encouraging outdoor activities ensures vitamin D intake, which supports serotonin production and stabilises mood.
- **Sleep:** Youth workers can introduce sleep hygiene tips, such as going to bed and waking up at regular times, reducing caffeine intake, and limiting screen time before bed.
- **Gratitude:** Encouraging participants to share positive moments in journals or on "gratitude walls" can strengthen resilience.
- **Social connection:** Group games, peer projects and cultural activities can encourage laughter, a sense of belonging and mutual support.

Tip for practice: Youth workers can create a 'daily wellbeing checklist' for participants to fill in, helping them to track small healthy habits and reinforce accountability and self-awareness.

3.2. Building Emotional Literacy and Resilience

Emotional literacy is the ability to recognise, understand and label feelings, and express them constructively. This skill enables young people to navigate their inner world and communicate effectively with others. Without these skills, however, emotions may be suppressed, misinterpreted, or expressed through unhealthy behaviours such as aggression, withdrawal, or self-destructive coping mechanisms.

Developing emotional literacy is closely linked to building resilience – the ability to adapt, recover and grow stronger when facing difficulties. Resilience is reinforced when challenges are viewed as opportunities for learning and personal growth rather than as signs of failure. By

helping young people accept that struggles are a normal part of life, youth workers can encourage them to recognise their own capabilities and resources.

Practical activities for youth workers:

- **Feelings wheels or emojis:** These are simple, visual tools that make emotions easier to name and discuss, especially for younger adolescents.
- **Reflective journals or drawings:** Writing or drawing enables young people to privately process feelings and express what may be difficult to verbalise.
- **Story sharing circles:** Participants share personal experiences of overcoming challenges, providing mutual encouragement and peer-to-peer learning.
- **Gratitude circles:** Young people take turns to express gratitude for something positive, which reinforces optimism and appreciation within the group.

Additional strategies to strengthen resilience:

- **Role-play exercises:** These allow participants to practise responding to stressful situations in a safe setting.
- **Resilience maps:** Young people identify their personal resources (e.g. friends, hobbies, safe spaces and coping skills) and discuss how to utilise them in times of stress.
- **Emotion-action link activities:** Help young people connect specific feelings (e.g. anger, sadness and joy) with healthy responses and teach them constructive regulation skills.

Tip for practice: Encourage 'strength spotting' – ask young people to identify their own strengths and the strengths of their peers. This builds self-esteem and fosters a culture of recognition and mutual support. Over time, this practice will strengthen both individual resilience and group cohesion.

3.3. Communication guidelines:

Effective communication is the foundation of trust in youth work. The words, tone of voice and body language of youth workers can open doors to meaningful dialogue or unintentionally shut them. Because adolescence is a stage where identity and self-esteem are still developing, many young people may be particularly sensitive to how others whether adults, peers, or community members respond to their emotions. Dismissive or judgmental reactions, even subtle ones, can discourage them from sharing further or lead them to internalise shame. For this reason, it is important to foster communication in all settings that acknowledges and validates young people's feelings, reduces the risk of shame, and demonstrates genuine empathy.

Supportive phrases include:

- 'I'm here for you.'
- 'Your feelings are valid.'
- 'It's OK to feel this way.'
- 'Thank you for sharing that with me.'
- Unhelpful phrases to avoid include:
 - 'It's not a big deal.'
 - 'You should just get over it.'
 - 'Others have it worse.'
 - 'Stop being so dramatic.'

Using such phrases may minimise the young person's experience, causing them to withdraw further or feel ashamed for expressing their emotions.

Key principles for effective communication:

- **Active listening:** Maintain gentle eye contact, nod and summarise what you hear to show understanding (e.g. 'It sounds like you've been feeling stressed about school lately.'). Avoid distractions such as phones or multitasking.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Use prompts such as 'Can you tell me more?' or 'What was that like for you?' instead of closed yes/no questions. This encourages deeper sharing.
- **Cultural sensitivity:** Be aware that different cultures and families have different norms around emotional expression. Some people may use indirect communication, while others may find direct eye contact uncomfortable. Respect these differences.
- **Tone and body language:** Speak calmly, use a reassuring tone and maintain an open and non-threatening posture. Young people often pick up on non-verbal cues more than words.
- **Silence as a tool:** Allow pauses. Silence gives young people time to think, showing them that their words do not need to be rushed.
- Discuss the impact of each response.
- **Communication diary:** After each session, youth workers should reflect on one phrase they used that worked well and one that could be improved.
- **Peer feedback circles:** In small groups, youth workers practise active listening and provide each other with constructive feedback on their tone of voice, body language and choice of words.
- **Cultural role-play:** They simulate cross-cultural conversations to raise awareness of language barriers and differences in non-verbal communication.

Tip for practice: Sometimes, it's not about finding the right words, but about being present and consistent. Simply being present, listening with genuine care and avoiding judgement can have a powerful impact on a young person's willingness to open up.

3.4. Creating Safe and Inclusive Spaces

A safe space is more than just a physical room; it is an environment characterised by trust, respect, acceptance and openness. For many young people, especially those who face stigma, discrimination or exclusion in their daily lives, safe and inclusive spaces are essential for self-expression, learning and personal growth. Youth workers play a vital role in creating and maintaining such spaces, ensuring that all participants feel valued, respected and supported. When young people feel safe and accepted, they are more willing to share openly, engage in meaningful dialogue and participate in activities. This fosters stronger group cohesion, builds confidence and encourages resilience. Over time, safe spaces can evolve into empowering environments where young people receive support and learn to support one another.

Essential elements of safe and inclusive spaces include:

- **Clear rules and boundaries:** Establishing norms against bullying, harassment, and exclusion is fundamental. These rules should be co-created with young people at the beginning of a programme, giving them a sense of ownership and accountability.
- **Inclusivity and representation:** Spaces should reflect diversity by acknowledging and celebrating different cultures, genders, abilities and identities. Visual representation, such as posters and flags, as well as inclusive language, can reinforce this.
- **Opportunities for expression:** Providing channels such as art, music, storytelling, theatre or group projects allows young people to share their experiences and feelings in a creative way, which strengthens trust and peer connection.
- **Flexibility of space:** The physical and emotional environment should support both relaxation and activity, with quiet areas for reflection and active zones for collaboration.
- **Accessibility:** Ensure the space is physically and digitally accessible to all, including young people with disabilities or from remote areas.

Practical strategies for youth workers:

At the start of a programme, create a 'community agreement' with participants to decide how they want the space to feel safe, respectful, supportive and inclusive, for example:

- Displaying this agreement visibly reinforces its importance.
- Use icebreakers and team-building activities early on to reduce barriers between participants and encourage openness.

- Practise inclusive facilitation to ensure that all voices are heard: rotate speakers, use small groups and encourage quieter participants to share their thoughts.
- Establish confidentiality guidelines to show young people that their personal stories will be respected and not shared outside the group.
- Incorporate peer mentoring to encourage young people to support and include one another.

Tip for practice: Regularly check in with the group and ask, 'Do you still feel this is a safe space for you?', being open to adjusting rules or approaches if needed. Remember, a safe space is not created once and for all, but maintained continuously through mutual care and respect.

3.5. Using digital tools safely

Digital platforms have become an integral part of young people's everyday lives. While they offer opportunities for connection, learning and creativity, they also expose young people to risks such as misinformation, cyberbullying, unrealistic comparisons and excessive screen time. How digital tools are used can either support or harm mental health. Youth workers play a vital role in promoting responsible usage and cultivating digital literacy as a life skill. By combining digital literacy with wellbeing education, youth workers can empower young people to take control of their online lives. Rather than banning or ignoring technology, this approach teaches young people how to use digital tools in a critical, responsible and positive way that supports their mental health.

Key approaches include:

- **Encouraging wellbeing apps:** introduce youth-friendly tools such as mood trackers, meditation apps or journaling platforms that promote self-awareness and stress management. Youth workers should test and recommend evidence-based apps rather than commercial ones that may misuse data.
- **Promoting digital balance:** Encourage 'digital detox' practices, such as setting boundaries like screen-free times before bed, device-free meals, and planned offline group activities. These habits can help to reduce anxiety, improve sleep and encourage face-to-face social interaction.
- **Teaching critical thinking:** Train young people to critically evaluate online health information. Teach them how to identify credible sources, question sensational headlines, and recognise misinformation. Encourage the use of reliable websites such as the WHO, UNICEF and national health institutes.
- **Modelling respectful communication:** Youth workers should model positive digital behaviour by avoiding online negativity, responding respectfully and highlighting the impact of cyberbullying. This helps to set community norms.

- **Addressing online risks:** Talk openly about cyberbullying, harmful content and online exploitation. Provide clear guidance on where to seek help and how to report unsafe behaviour.

Practical activities for youth workers:

- Run a group activity in which participants review a mental health or wellbeing app together, rating its usability, effectiveness and potential risks. This will build awareness and strengthen digital critical engagement.
- Create a 'digital wellbeing pledge' with young people, in which they set personal goals for healthy technology use.
- Run a myth-busting workshop where groups analyse viral health posts or TikTok trends, identifying whether they are accurate, misleading or harmful.
- Encourage young people to create positive digital content, such as short videos or infographics, that promote wellbeing and a respectful online culture.

Tip for practice: Establish regular 'digital check-ins' where young people reflect on their online habits, such as the time they spend online, the content they consume and the emotions they experience. This will promote self-awareness and healthier digital routines over time.

3.6. Collaborate with families, schools and professionals.

Youth workers should not work in isolation. Supporting young people's mental health requires a network of cooperation involving families, schools and professionals working together to provide consistent, sustainable and holistic care. This ensures that young people receive the right type of help at the right time, while also reducing the risk of conflicting messages or fragmented support. When youth workers, families, schools and professionals share responsibility, young people experience a consistent circle of care. This builds trust and strengthens resilience as they see that support is available across different areas of their lives. Over time, such networks contribute to community-wide awareness and reduce stigma around mental health.

Levels of collaboration include:

Families: Parents and caregivers are often the first line of support for young people. Engaging them through workshops, information sessions or resource guides can help them to understand mental health needs and reduce stigma. Encouraging open family discussions about emotions creates a safe environment at home where young people feel heard and validated.

Schools: Teachers and school counsellors are well-placed to spot early signs of distress, such as behavioural changes, deteriorating academic performance or withdrawal from peers. By working together with schools, youth workers can implement consistent strategies, deliver classroom-based activities and strengthen the link between academic and emotional wellbeing.

Professionals: Some issues require specialised intervention. Referral pathways established with psychologists, social workers, doctors and local health services ensure that young people with more serious or ongoing needs can access timely professional care. Clear protocols and regular communication between youth workers and professionals help maintain continuity of support.

Practical strategies for youth workers:

- Develop a 'support map' listing local services, hotlines, NGOs and trusted professionals. Distribute this to young people and families so they know where to turn in case of need.
- Organise multi-stakeholder meetings (e.g. youth worker, parent, teacher and counsellor) to coordinate care for young people facing complex challenges.
- Create community partnerships with local organisations (e.g. sports clubs and cultural associations) that can provide additional supportive environments.
- Hold case reflection sessions with professionals to learn how to handle sensitive situations more effectively.

Tip for practice: Encourage young people to participate in the collaborative process by inviting them to identify who they trust and would like to be included in their 'support circle'. This ensures that the collaboration respects their voice and agency.

Part IV: Training Activities and Tools



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4.1. Mood tracking and reflection

The first step in learning how to regulate emotions is recognising them. Many young people find it difficult to identify or articulate their feelings, which can lead to frustration, social withdrawal, or the adoption of unhelpful coping mechanisms. Mood tracking activities provide practical tools for identifying emotional patterns, linking feelings to daily experiences and developing emotional literacy – the foundation of resilience and self-regulation.

Examples of mood tracking activities:

- **Mood calendars:** Participants colour in a box each day to represent their overall mood (e.g. green for calm, yellow for stressed, blue for sad and red for angry). Reviewing these calendars at the end of a week or month enables young people to identify patterns (e.g. stress linked to exams or sadness linked to isolation).
- **Reflection journals:** Writing or drawing about daily emotions provides a safe and private outlet for expression. Prompts can include “Today I felt...” or “Something that made me smile...”.
- **One-word check-ins:** At the beginning or end of a session, participants share one word to describe their mood. This simple practice normalises talking about emotions and creates space for openness and reflection.
- **Emotion graphs:** Participants plot their mood over the course of a week or project period on a simple line graph. This visualises highs and lows, encouraging reflection on external factors.
- **Group mood boards:** Participants use colours, images or symbols to collectively represent the group's emotions at a given moment. This helps to build empathy and peer support.

Practical tips for youth workers:

- Encourage participants to look for patterns, not perfection – the aim is to raise awareness, not to feel 'happy' all the time.
- At the end of each week or month, review the mood data collectively and facilitate discussions on stress management, coping strategies and positive changes.
- Combine mood tracking with resilience activities, such as mindfulness or peer support groups, to show young people practical tools for managing emotions.
- Remind participants that mood trackers are private tools and that sharing is always optional. Respecting boundaries is essential for building trust.
- Mood tracking empowers young people to take control of their emotional well-being. By connecting their feelings to their daily routines, external stressors or positive experiences, young people can develop greater self-awareness and learn to recognise when they need extra support. Over time, this practice can reduce the stigma surrounding the discussion of emotions and strengthen a culture of openness and resilience within youth groups.

Tip for practice: Youth workers can use anonymous group check-ins (e.g. everyone writes their mood on a sticky note and posts it on a board) to reveal group-wide trends. This makes it easier to address shared stressors while keeping individual experiences confidential.

4.2. Group Coping and Resilience Activities

Coping strategies are more effective when shared, practised and reinforced within a community. Group-based activities foster solidarity, alleviate feelings of isolation, and normalise the fact that everyone encounters challenges. These activities also enable young people to learn from one another, discover new coping methods and develop a sense of belonging. Seeing that others have overcome difficulties gives young people confidence in their own ability to do the same.

Examples of resilience-building group activities:

- **Role-plays:** Small groups act out stressful scenarios, such as preparing for exams, resolving conflicts with friends or adapting to new environments. Afterwards, the group discusses possible solutions and reflects on how different reactions may influence outcomes.
- **Storytelling circles:** Participants take turns to share a challenge they have faced and how they coped with it. This process fosters empathy, encourages vulnerability, and enables peers to share practical strategies.
- **Creative projects:** Young people work together to create posters, murals, songs or short theatre performances that capture their emotions and coping methods. Creative expression provides an alternative means of communication for those who may find it difficult to articulate their feelings.
- **Resilience games:** These are activities such as 'Strength Bingo' or resilience card decks, where participants identify personal resources (friends, hobbies, safe spaces) and discuss how these can be used in difficult times.
- **Peer support groups:** These are structured sessions where young people set goals, check in on each other's progress and provide encouragement.

Practical tip for youth workers:

Combine resilience activities with art, music or movement to engage those who may find it difficult to express themselves verbally. For instance, a group could compile a 'resilience playlist' of empowering songs or collectively paint a 'wall of strengths', each participant contributing something they are proud of. These activities strengthen individual resilience and create a visible symbol of shared support.

4.3. Mindfulness and relaxation

Mindfulness helps young people to calm their nervous system, regulate stress, and improve focus. These practices train the mind to stay present, reduce overwhelming thoughts, and create

a sense of stability. For youth who may feel anxious, restless, or distracted, mindfulness offers simple and effective techniques that require little or no equipment, making them highly adaptable in schools, youth centres, or community settings. When practiced together, mindfulness not only supports individual stress management but also strengthens group cohesion. Shared silence and calmness can create a collective sense of peace and safety, helping young people feel more connected and less isolated in their struggles.

Examples of mindfulness practices for youth:

- **4-4-4 Breathing:** Inhale for four seconds, hold for four seconds, exhale for four seconds. This short breathing cycle lowers the body's stress response and improves concentration.
- **Body scans:** Guide participants step by step to relax each part of the body—from the toes up to the head. This practice teaches awareness of physical tension and encourages release.
- **One-minute pauses:** Encourage young people to sit quietly, focus on their breathing, or simply observe the environment around them. These micro-practices help integrate mindfulness into everyday life.
- **Grounding techniques (5-4-3-2-1 method):** Ask participants to notice five things they can see, four they can touch, three they can hear, two they can smell, and one they can taste. This exercise is especially helpful for anxiety.
- **Mindful movement:** Light stretching, yoga poses, or walking slowly in silence can bring awareness to the body and improve relaxation.

Practical tips for youth workers:

- Introduce short mindfulness practices as part of regular routines (e.g., starting or ending a session with one minute of mindful breathing).
- Keep instructions simple, concrete, and age-appropriate—avoid overly abstract language.
- Allow participants to choose whether to close their eyes or keep them open, respecting different comfort levels.
- Encourage consistency: practising mindfulness even for a few minutes daily is more effective than long sessions done rarely.
- Create a calm environment by dimming the lights, playing quiet background music or forming a circle formation, as this can help set the mood.

Tip for practice: Encourage participants to create their own 'mindfulness toolbox', which is a collection of techniques (such as breathing exercises, grounding techniques, drawing or

stretching) that they can use whenever they feel stressed, whether that be at school, at home or in the community.

4.4. Digital Storytelling and Creative Expression

Young people are often described as 'digital natives', meaning technology is an integral part of their daily lives. Digital storytelling enables them to express emotions in a familiar format while strengthening their digital literacy, creativity and sense of ownership over their experiences. When young people use technology to share stories of resilience and wellbeing, they process their own emotions and inspire and support their peers.

Digital storytelling enables young people to take ownership of their stories and see their resilience represented in tangible ways. By combining creativity with technology, youth workers can bridge the gap between emotional expression and digital literacy, empowering young people to see themselves as both storytellers and changemakers.

Examples of digital storytelling activities:

- **Video or audio diaries:** Young people record short daily or weekly reflections on their coping strategies, challenges or positive experiences. These can be revisited later to observe personal growth over time.
- **Photo challenges:** Participants capture images of places, objects or moments that make them feel safe, calm or happy. Sharing these images fosters group empathy and recognition of everyday sources of resilience.
- **Collaborative digital projects:** Groups work together to design posters, infographics, podcasts or short films about wellbeing and resilience. These projects promote teamwork and produce creative outputs.
- **Digital storytelling apps or platforms:** Tools such as Canva, Padlet and Storybird can help young people to combine text, images and sound to create narratives about their emotions and coping strategies.
- **Resilience blogs or e-zines:** Small groups co-create online magazines or blogs where they share wellbeing tips, stories, and artwork with their peers.

Practical tips for youth workers:

- Encourage the sharing of digital projects in safe and controlled spaces only, such as closed online groups, in-person workshops or private exhibitions, rather than on public social media platforms, to protect privacy.
- Provide guidance on digital safety and responsible sharing before beginning activities.

- Involve young people in setting clear rules about consent when creating or sharing photos and videos.
- Celebrate both the creative process and the final product, and remind young people that effort is what matters most, not perfection.

Tip for practice: At the end of a digital project, hold a 'story showcase' session where participants present their work to the group in a supportive environment. This validates their efforts and reinforces group solidarity.

4.5. Templates, worksheets and checklists

Structured tools, such as templates, worksheets and checklists, provide youth workers with a practical framework for planning, monitoring and evaluating mental health activities consistently and transparently. These tools also empower young people by providing them with clear methods to reflect on their well-being, track their progress and recognise when they need additional support. By integrating structured tools into youth programmes, youth workers can strike a balance between flexibility and accountability. These resources provide young people with concrete steps to help them understand their emotions, practise coping strategies and develop sustainable self-care habits. At the same time, youth workers gain reliable data to improve programme quality and demonstrate impact to stakeholders.

Examples of useful tools include:

- **Session planning templates:** These help youth workers to outline session objectives, select methods, allocate time and prepare reflection questions. Having a clear plan ensures consistency and quality across different sessions or groups.
- **Distress checklists:** These are simple observation sheets that help identify early warning signs of emotional or behavioural difficulties, such as withdrawal, sudden aggression or a lack of focus. These checklists guide youth workers on when to provide extra support or consider a referral.
- **Feedback forms:** Short surveys allow young people to share what they found helpful, how the activity made them feel, and what could be improved. Collecting feedback helps to ensure that programmes remain relevant and responsive to participants' needs.
- **Personal wellbeing action plans:** These are worksheets where young people can list trusted contacts, coping strategies, daily routines and goals. These plans act as a reference tool during times of stress, reinforcing self-care and resilience.
- **Progress trackers:** Visual tools, such as mood graphs or self-rating scales, that enable young people to reflect on the evolution of their feelings and coping skills over time.

Practical tips for youth workers:

- Involve young people in designing templates and worksheets. When tools are created with their input, they become more engaging, relevant and youth-friendly.
- Keep tools simple and accessible – avoid jargon or overly complex scoring systems.
- Offer both digital and paper versions to ensure accessibility in different contexts.
- Use the results not only for evaluation, but also as a basis for group discussions or one-to-one conversations.

Tip for practice: Encourage young people to personalise their wellbeing action plans using colours, drawings or symbols. This makes the tools more engaging and increases the likelihood that young people will use them in their daily lives.

Part V: Implementation and Capacity Building



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5.1. Training Program and Peer Learning

To ensure a sustainable impact, the YouHealth Project has developed a comprehensive training programme aimed at strengthening the capabilities of youth workers and other professionals supporting young people experiencing mental distress. The programme provides knowledge, skills and practical tools that can be applied directly in youth work. It was co-created by partners from Slovenia, Germany, Turkey and Austria, who each contributed their own area of expertise.

YouHealth Training Modules:

Module 1: Understanding Youth Mental Health

Focuses on equipping youth workers with the knowledge and tools to recognise and support young people experiencing mental distress. It includes a theoretical background, practical strategies and exercises for identifying and addressing challenges, particularly during health crises or natural disasters.

Module 2: Cultural Competence

This module provides youth workers with the skills to work effectively with diverse groups, particularly those facing cultural challenges that can affect their mental health and access to support. It contains theory, tools and exercises for fostering inclusive and culturally sensitive practices.

Module 3: Skills and Knowledge to Address Discrimination

Focuses on recognising and responding to the discrimination that young people with fewer opportunities often experience. It offers a theoretical background on discrimination and practical methods to reduce its negative impact on mental health and access to support.

Module 4: Communication and Relationship Building Skills

This module is designed to develop the communication and relationship-building skills of youth workers, which are essential for establishing trust and supporting young people in distress. Topics covered include active listening, constructive dialogue and strategies for working with young people during crises or disasters. The module also supports youth workers in helping young people strengthen their communication and relationship-building abilities so they can better express emotions, resolve conflicts and collaborate with peers.

While the primary focus is on equipping youth workers with strong communication skills to enable them to model empathy, build trust and provide constructive guidance, the module also highlights methods for fostering these same skills among young people. This dual focus ensures

that both youth workers and the young people they support benefit from improved communication and stronger relationships.

Module 5: Technological Skills

Focuses on digital skills and tools that youth workers can use to connect with young people, integrate well-being practices online and ensure the safe and responsible use of digital platforms.

This training programme demonstrates how structured modules can build professional capacity, ensure consistent quality and allow adaptation in different cultural and organisational contexts. By combining expertise from four countries, the programme provides youth workers with a solid foundation on which to strengthen mental health support in their communities.

Tip for practice: Encourage peer learning by organising exchange visits where youth workers can observe these modules in action.

5.2. Ethics and safeguarding:

Safeguarding is a cornerstone of all youth work, especially when addressing sensitive mental health issues. It involves creating an environment in which young people feel safe, supported and respected, while ensuring that any interventions protect their dignity and rights. Youth workers must strike a balance between building trust and respecting clear professional and ethical boundaries.

When safeguarding is prioritised, young people are more likely to trust youth workers, engage openly and seek help when needed. This creates a culture of safety and accountability that extends beyond individual programmes and strengthens entire communities.

The core principles of safeguarding include:

- **Confidentiality:** Young people need to know that their privacy will be respected. However, there are limits to confidentiality: if a young person's safety is at risk, youth workers have a duty to act responsibly and involve the relevant services.
- **'Do no harm':** All interventions should reduce, not increase, stress or trauma. Youth workers must avoid forcing disclosure, re-traumatising through inappropriate questioning or fostering dependency.
- **Equity and inclusion:** Safeguarding means providing equal protection and support to all young people, especially those who are disadvantaged or marginalised. No one should be left behind due to gender, disability, cultural background or socioeconomic status.

- **Child protection:** Youth workers must be able to recognise the signs of neglect, abuse or exploitation, and must follow the established procedures for reporting them promptly. Safeguarding is not optional; it is a legal and ethical obligation.
- **Professional limits:** Youth workers are not therapists. Knowing when and how to refer a young person to qualified specialists, such as psychologists, counsellors and doctors, is key to safeguarding. Respecting professional boundaries protects both the young person and the youth worker.

Practical safeguarding measures:

- Develop a clear safeguarding protocol that is known, understood and followed by all staff, volunteers and participants.
- Provide safeguarding training for youth workers, including how to respond to disclosures of abuse or severe distress.
- Establish safe reporting mechanisms so that young people know who they can turn to if they feel unsafe.
- Accurate, confidential records of safeguarding concerns and the actions taken must be kept.
- Regularly review and update safeguarding policies to reflect new challenges, such as online safety and digital well-being.

Tip for practice: Co-create a 'safeguarding charter' with young people. Involving them in setting rules about safety, confidentiality and respect helps them to understand their rights and responsibilities and fosters a stronger sense of shared accountability.

Part VI: Conclusion and resources



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The Youth Mental Health Support Toolkit offers youth workers, trainers and organisations a structured framework for prevention, immediate support and continuity of care. It translates evidence-based practices into practical strategies that can be applied in a variety of youth work settings. By promoting everyday wellbeing habits, clear communication guidelines and safe, inclusive environments, the toolkit empowers professionals to foster resilient youth communities.

Key protective factors reinforced in the toolkit include:

- Healthy daily routines involving exercise, consistent sleep, balanced nutrition, and hydration;
- opportunities for connection and expression through social interaction, creativity, and emotional sharing;
- access to safe environments and supportive adults who foster trust and inclusion; and
- strong referral systems ensuring that young people can reach professional services whenever needed.

Additional resources for practice:

- National and local mental health hotlines for crisis intervention.
- WHO and UNICEF frameworks on adolescent and youth mental health.
- There are also free online wellbeing platforms and mindfulness apps that can be integrated into programmes.

Final note:

By applying the strategies outlined in this toolkit, youth workers can ensure that young people, regardless of their background, abilities or circumstances, are equipped with the tools they need to thrive mentally, emotionally and socially. This toolkit is not a substitute for professional therapy; rather, it is a bridge between everyday youth work and specialised care. It empowers professionals to promote resilience, reduce stigma and create supportive communities.

For those seeking more structured, in-depth content, this toolkit builds on the YouHealth Training Programme, which provides youth workers with detailed theory, strategies, and exercises. The modules are:

- Module 1: Understanding Youth Mental Health
- Module 2: Cultural Competence
- Module 3: Addressing Discrimination
- Module 4: Communication and Relationship Building Skills
- Module 5: Technological Skills

For more information and access to these modules, youth workers and organisations can consult the project's training curriculum and partner organisations.

Resources and References

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YouHEALTH



YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT TOOLKIT

Developed under the YouHealth Project,
Work package 5
University of Innsbruck, Austria

