Mental Health Literacy in Youth Information Work

YIMinds

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This guide is an indispensable tool for youth workers, information professionals, and anyone interested in the welfare of young people in the field of youth information work. Six chapters that cover everything from understanding mental health to empowering youth voices are included, which focuses on the crucial intersection of youth information services and mental health.

YIMinds guide highlights the critical role that youth workers play and supports for their acknowledgment and assistance, placing special emphasis on the transformative partnerships that they can build with institutions and other professionals. While not trying to take the place of clinical manuals, it is a useful companion that offers resources, strategies, and insights. With a holistic view of mental health, it draws on research, expert consultations, and nuanced insights into youth information challenges. Practical tools, such as effective communication about mental health, crisis management, and collaboration with mental health professionals, are offered to enhance the effectiveness of youth work.

Rooted in a commitment to the well-being of young people, the YIMinds Partnership has embraced a broad definition of youth work as diverse social, cultural, educational, and political activities fostering personal development and active citizenship. As a companion on the journey to support youth mental well-being, the development of this guide was intended to empower readers, offering concise advice to create safe and supportive environments where young individuals can thrive emotionally, mentally, and socially.

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Prologue

Youth workers and youth information workers are in contact with young people daily. They can provide valuable insights, accompany young people in referral processes, and promote healthy habits and opportunities. They also have the potential to develop critical collaborations with relevant professionals and institutions. The partners of YIMinds believe there is a pressing need to support youth workers and youth information workers in their role – recognising their crucial social importance and the respect they deserve.

The primary aim of this guide is to equip youth information workers, youth workers, and other youth-related professionals with **information, strategies, and resources to better support young people's mental wellbeing** and mental health. Namely, it offers guidance, examples, and tools to enhance the role of youth work and youth information services in promoting and supporting young people's mental health. The guide is not a substitute for professional mental health services or a clinical manual. Rather, it provides practical information and approaches to create safe and supportive environments for young people to manage their mental wellbeing.

Our approach is rooted in a holistic view of mental health, encompassing the absence of mental illness and the presence of wellbeing and resilience. We recognise that mental **health is a dynamic interplay**, and youth information and youth work play an essential role in promoting positive mental wellbeing and preventing mental health issues among young people.

We have developed this guide through analysis of research conducted among youth (information) professionals and young people, consultation with experts, and a deep understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities in youth information and young people's mental health. It draws upon evidence-based practices, good practice examples, and the invaluable experiences of youth workers and youth information professionals.

We intend this guide to be a companion in your journey to support young people's mental wellbeing, offering **practical advice, steps, and inspiration** to make a difference in their lives. We hope this guide empowers you to create nurturing environments where young people feel supported to thrive mentally, emotionally, and socially.

What does youth work and youth information work mean?

This guide refers to **youth work** to describe "the various social and informal education practices targeted towards children and young people as a support for the personal development, social integration, and active citizenship of young people. Youth work is an umbrella term for all kinds of activities with, for and by young people of a social, cultural, educational, or political nature. It belongs to the domain of 'out-of-school' education, most referred to as either non-formal or informal learning. The main objective of youth work is to create opportunities for young people to shape their own futures. Youth work often has a strong educational purpose or dimension, and non-formal education is at the core of this educational dimension. The practices of youth work across Europe are very diverse, as is the status of youth workers. Youth work can be organised by a variety of institutions and organisations, individually and in teams. Each country in Europe has its own history and traditions of youth work, ranging from long-established professional youth work provisions to relying mostly on voluntary youth work structures and youth organisations."*

This guide refers to **youth information work** to describe free quality information that empowers young people to exercise their rights, make responsible decisions, and participate in society. Youth information services aim to support and empower young people with full and reliable information on their rights and options to address their needs, interests and wellbeing. As described in the ESCO classification of professions and occupations, youth information workers deliver reliable, accurate and understandable information to young people. They ensure that information services are accessible, resourced, welcoming, address young people's needs, and guide them to act autonomously and think critically. These services have a remarkable preventive function that greatly benefits society.

Youth information activities across Europe encompass various services and activities, such as informing, counselling, supporting, coaching, training, peer-to-peer, networking, or referral to specialised services. Depending on the location, youth information is provided in youth information centres or integrated into a wider array of youth-related services. One way or another, youth information work is not a stand-alone isolated unit – but an intrinsic part of youth work. Therefore, the skills of a youth information worker should also be viewed and understood in a wider context of youth work.**

** This description is adapted from The Council of Europe Youth Work Portfolio (p. 4). Council of Europe (2018).*
*** This description is adapted from the Compendium of national youth information and counselling structures (p.42). ERYICA and the Council of Europe (2014)*

Chapter 1:
Understanding Mental Health in Youth (Information) Work

1.1 Introduction

This Chapter explains the guide's purpose, defines the concept of mental health, and explains youth workers' roles through the 'mental wellbeing playing field' conceptual framework.

The issue of mental wellbeing has risen to the top of the agenda in recent years within youth work and youth information settings. It is clear that young people's mental wellbeing is under pressure and that mental health problems are more visible in places where young people meet – such as youth centres and youth information points. In fact, 75% of youth workers surveyed as part of YIMinds have witnessed an **increase in mental-health-related inquiries** since the COVID-19 pandemic.

So, what can youth work do? How do we tackle the issue? Is this the role of youth (information) workers? And how can we address mental health and wellbeing in the context of youth information and counselling?

Youth (information) work has an important role to play in this domain. Youth work takes place in various settings and forms changing from country to country. Regardless of the location, youth (information) work is not an isolated entity, but an integral component of youth work. As such, the competencies of a youth (information) worker should be considered and understood within the broader context of youth work.

Wherever they are, youth workers are safe figures in a society that mainly confronts people with obligations, leaves little room to figure things out on the fly, and rarely allows failure. For this reason, young people entrust youth workers and youth information workers with many questions related to things other than leisure and recreation. These include problems at home, at school, with themselves, and with society. Youth work, which takes place in young people's leisure time, is advantageous because nothing is a must, and everything is possible. Youth work and youth information services can provide a safe environment where young people can talk about their problems – but it can also positively promote mental health and wellbeing.

Youth work is already working hard to strengthen young people's mental wellbeing. In the context of youth information and counselling, young people's health has always had a prominent place within the information offered and centres. However, youth workers can often be cautious when approaching mental health. Some youth services and centres already have clear protocols, multidisciplinary teams, and well-established partnerships.

For others, they even have staff equipped to provide first-hand mental health support. However, the vast majority of youth workers surveyed and interviewed in the framework of YIMinds consider that their mental health literacy is limited, and their training and learning resources in this area are scarce. This study shows a demand for resources to boost mental health literacy adapted to their position and professional needs – as they currently primarily engage in self-training and informal learning.

So, what if we genuinely harnessed the power of youth work and youth information and acted towards a future where positive mental wellbeing is a given for every young person? We designed this guide to help you achieve that!

1.2 Understanding Mental Health

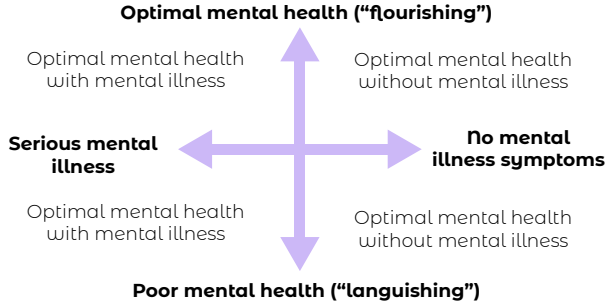
Mental or psychological health, mental wellbeing or mental fitness, mental health problems or issues, psychological problems...

These different terms are all used interchangeably. They are all related, but it is important to be aware that mental health is more than the **absence of illness or disorders or having depression, anxiety or ADHD.** It is also about positive mental health or 'wellbeing'. It's also about how comfortable you are in your skin, how you feel emotionally and about other people, and how energetic you are.

Corey Keyes' **dual continuum model** illustrates how positive mental health and mental illnesses interact. The first continuum (the horizontal axis) represents mental illness, ranging from maximum to minimum presence of psychological symptoms and complaints. The second continuum (the vertical axis) is positive mental health, ranging from poor to optimal mental wellbeing or feeling comfortable in one's skin.

The two axes do not overlap completely but can influence each other. This interaction means that working on one axis can lead to shifts in the other. It also means that **if psychopathology (higher levels of mental illness) is in play, someone may benefit from strengthening their mental wellbeing.**

Dual Continuum Model of Mental Health and Mental Illness



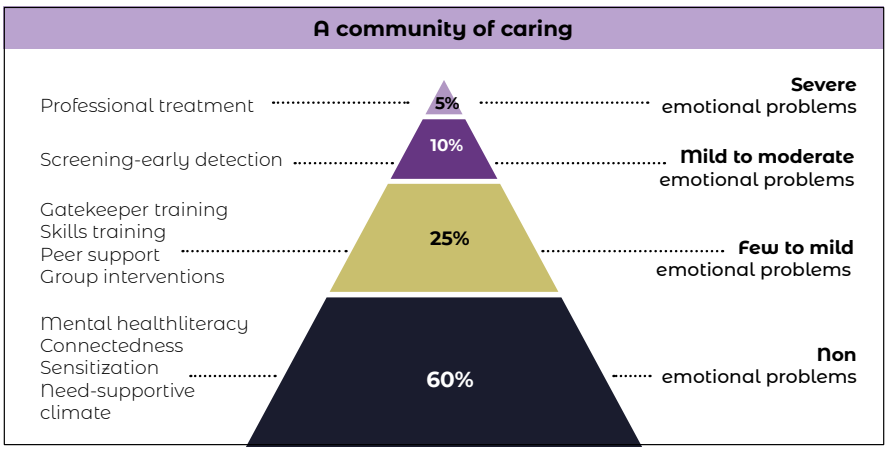
MacKean, 2011. Adapted from: The Health Communication Unit at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto and Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario; based on the conceptual work of Corey Keyes

In this way, the dual continuum model has important implications for mental health care. While the focus has been on treating disorders, experts highlight the importance of **investing in wellbeing, which can help prevent mental disorders.** The power of youth (information) work in this regard is **investing in the wellbeing of young people.** However, when interacting with young people, it is always appropriate to have basic mental health literacy, which may allow you to recognise and respond to warning signs of mental health distress (see Chapter 2).

In this context, it is important to talk about the **community approach.** Prof. Ronny Bruffaerts refers to **a community of caring** that cares for each other as early as possible, not only when mental health problems develop. Suppose we want to build such a community. In that case, we need to initiate specific interventions at each level of the pyramid below. You can also find the full explanation in the video at Moodspace.

We need a **social system switch** in which we **strengthen mental well-being to prevent and/or treat mental health problems.** From a public health perspective, we can achieve a lot in the early stages before young people start to feel bad – but also as soon as the writing is on the wall. The more we can focus on this and tackle issues early, the more we can reduce the burden on specialist services and ensure that more young people feel good about themselves. **Let's use the power of youth work and youth information to make that happen!**

A community of caring



1.3 Role of Youth (Information) Workers in Mental Health Support

1.3.1 The Power of Youth (Information) Work

Scientific research into the key predictors of wellbeing offers hope. Research shows that strong connections with others are the main predictor of happiness later in life. For example, the Flemish SIGMA study shows that having **high-quality daily social interactions is strongly related to young people's mental health.** These findings are hopeful because they show what we can do to promote wellbeing. Helping young people to make informed decisions and meaningful connections with others will lead to tremendous resilience in the future.

All young people have a right to information and youth work. The European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights considers information a human right. It stresses the need to provide **accurate, understandable, and timely information to address their needs and concerns.** In the context of mental health and wellbeing, access to youth work and any opportunity to engage with others and stay active can be an enormously powerful safeguard against developing negative mental wellbeing. Research shows the central role of connection with others. Youth work is an expert in connecting!

#Youthworkworks because youth (information) workers...

Consistently put young people at the centre of their actions. Youth information workers always start from the situation of young people. They offer young people their own social space, with room for what they are able and willing to do based on their interests and needs.

Give young people ownership. Activities, group building, daily operations, processes, experiments – young people can manage these themselves. They find themselves on equal footing with their youth leaders and youth work professionals

Give equal importance to process and product. Together with young people, youth information workers aim towards a goal or outcome. But the road to reaching the result is at least as valuable. Cycles of reflection and action alternate. In dialogue, from experience, in a group, or individually, young people learn, take steps forward, and make informed decisions and opinions.

Use the power of the group positively. Youth work and youth (information) activities connect young people by cooperating, linking to shared interests, meeting each other, networking and community building. That way, youth (information) work provides a sense of belonging and creates openness towards different opinions or habits.

Help shape society. Youth work and youth (information) activities support young people in growing up as active and committed citizens. Together with other young people, they think about their neighbourhood or (local) policies and set up initiatives that bring people closer together.

Empower young people through youth-friendly information. Youth (information) workers ensure that young people can access reliable, age-appropriate, and easily understandable information on their rights, needs and opportunities. They create safe, non-judgmental spaces where young people can openly discuss their concerns and seek guidance. Youth (information) work promotes self-awareness, critical thinking, and informed decision-making regarding young people's wellbeing.

Collaborate with other professionals, organisations, and services. Youth (information) workers provide accurate and up-to-date resources and guidance. They are crucial in connecting young people with services and support networks, ensuring they receive the assistance they need.

1.3.2 Playfield of Mental Well-being

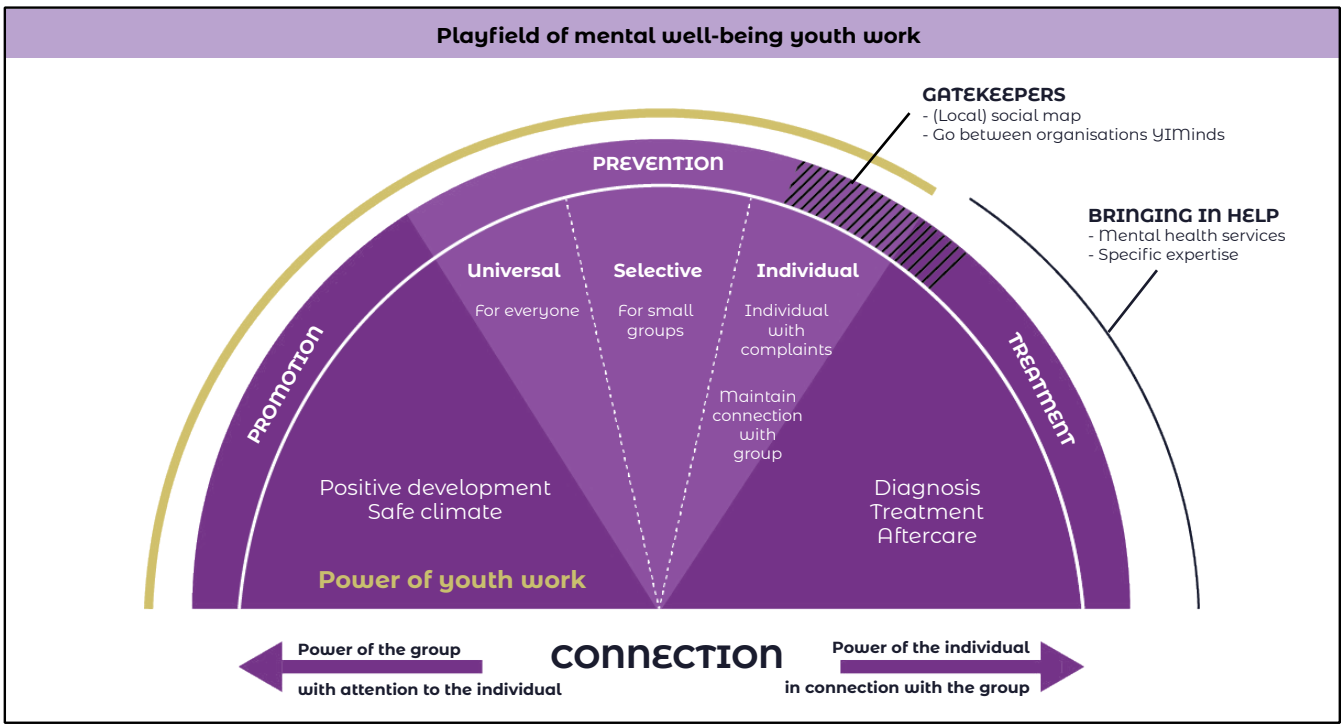
De Ambrassade, a youth work umbrella organisation and main youth information provider in the Flemish-speaking community of Belgium, developed the 'Playfield of mental well-being in youth work' together with youth workers and experts. It's a framework with several aims:

- giving youth work an anchor and a language to formulate its own mental wellbeing policy tailored to the organisation.
- defining the role and responsibility of youth work in the mental wellbeing of young people.
- building bridges to other sectors, services and professionals (especially wellbeing).
- providing examples, concrete tools and support.

Youth work and youth (information) work are situated mainly on the left side of this spectrum **(Promotion and Prevention).** Youth work and some youth information activities use their strengths and the power of the group to empower young people and prevent mental health problems.

Youth (information) workers also engage in meaningful interactions and conversations with young people, which rely on strong one-on-one connections and reveal valuable insights about a young person's wellbeing. As soon as the middle line is crossed, especially in the **treatment area**, we move towards an additional individual scenario where mental health services come into view. This is when we discuss bringing **specialised professional help** or referral systems (see Chapter 4). Of course, we can also use youth work and youth information methods in this process. It remains important to continue working on promotion and prevention and not lose contact with young people at this stage. However, the role of youth work professionals becomes limited and we should handle our interventions cautiously.

In the following section, we will look at the different areas of the 'Playfield' and how you can focus on them. As you can see, there is a wide range of possibilities between promotion and treatment, namely prevention. In other words, you do not have to rush to a psychologist at every sign of mental distress. You can do many things without needing to be a mental health professional.



1. Promotion

Promotion means **working proactively on the mental wellbeing of young people** – both in groups and on an individual basis, before and independently of the development of mental health problems. Within youth work, youth information services encompass a variety of options, including face-to-face and online interactions conducted in both individual and group settings. Although less personalised, digital services provide a valuable platform for reaching out to more young people with youth-friendly information resources and opportunities that can actively foster their mental wellbeing.

Individual work

As a youth information worker, you interact with young people to address their questions, needs and concerns. Youth information services provide a **confidential and supportive environment** where young people can openly discuss their emotions and challenges without fear of being judged or misled. This **individual person-mediated youth (information) work** provides the ideal context to introduce young people to various opportunities and activities that can contribute to their mental wellbeing. Here, the focus is on **tailoring the information to each young person's interests and needs.** For instance, if a young person expresses a passion for socialising, you can provide information on youth work activities, volunteering, or youth organisations. Similarly, if a young person shows interest in sports or connecting with nature, you can inform them about relevant clubs, events, or outdoor activities. Activities involving social interactions, physical and mental exercise, development of creativity, or contact with nature enhance our wellbeing and contribute to our mental and physical health.

Group work

It is important that young people feel comfortable working in groups by providing a safe space to be themselves and where **dealing with emotions is considered normal.** Creating a safe space reduces the risk of mental health problems and can be achieved by intentional or unintentional actions, such as introductory games or group-building activities. These protective factors have a dual role. They help young people be more confident whilst also providing a buffer against what might go wrong.

Research by Pimento, the centre of expertise within the Chiro Jeugd Vlaanderen network, shows that youth work is very good at using the **protective factor of connection.** The next step is to start naming and making these existing efforts visible. For example: "We do 'energisers' at the beginning of an activity to create a positive atmosphere where everyone feels welcome. In this way, you are helping youth workers and young people put mental wellbeing into words. You don't have to spell it out every time you plan an energiser, but it is important to name these things when working on your integrity policy."

It is also important to create **a safe space for youth workers themselves.** Young adults working with young people don't always have enough mental space, or certain things can trigger them, too. So, it is essential to feel safe to talk about this and to create a gentle environment as a group without expecting every youth worker to engage.

This is where the power of youth work lies. We put young people at the centre, use the group's power and individual solid bonds, value both process and product and actively shape society by giving them ownership and information according to their needs and aspirations. These aspects promote positive mental wellbeing, but we do not value and name them enough. We can make a real difference to young people by ensuring their access to quality life-changing information and giving them a place where they can be themselves, where fun and enjoyment come first, and where they can develop through trial and error. **And that is something to be proud of!**

Some questions to consider when focusing on promotion:

- What can you do in any activity, such as checking in and out to promote mental wellbeing?
- How do you activate silent bystanders in a conflict or bullying situation?
- How can you promote social skills?
- How do you create an environment with few rules that still ensure mutual respect?
- Is there room for talking and listening?
- How do you make 'flat thresholds' (affordable, physically and mentally attainable, accessible, culturally sensitive)?
- What kind of information resources, activities and opportunities boosting wellbeing can you recommend to young people?

2. Prevention

Preventing mental health problems means focusing on factors that can cause or trigger mental health issues. You raise awareness of these factors or try to reduce their impact. We distinguish **three types of prevention** you can use or face depending on the risk in your target group. Note that the boundaries between them are not always clear. This is not a bad thing, as long as you think about the different forms within your organisation.

The methods used for prevention in youth work and youth information work can also reflect the **different levels of interpreting the process of mental wellbeing deterioration.** Preventive measures would consider the needs and desires, the fears and challenges of individuals and specific groups, and the value system and living conditions young people face. Good examples are activities or interventions focusing on identity-building, strengthening self-esteem, or fostering tolerance and acceptance between different groups.

Universal

These are preventive actions that you introduce **for everyone.** Some examples are a game about the dangers of alcohol and drug use, a tool to tackle bullying, or tips on reasonable screen use on your youth information website. By definition, youth work and youth information work in all their forms are universal among young people, as they target all young people without exception and put young people's wellbeing at the centre of their activity.

Regarding youth (information) work, it is important to distinguish between **'do-it-yourself information' and 'person-mediated information'.** Do-it-yourself information is available in a form that enables young people to solve problems on their own. Although this type of information best matches young people's need for independence, this is not always the most adequate information for all young people – especially regarding complex or sensitive issues. In many cases, information through personal contact via hotlines, messaging, social media, or a face-to-face conversation may be more effective in providing adequate support.

Selective

These are preventative actions that you set up for (groups of) **young people at increased risk of developing mental health problems**. Intersectionality is a key concept here. Social inequality and exclusion occur along different axes that intersect. Increased risk of mental health problems is also related to background factors such as home environment, socio-economic status, gender identity, ethnic-cultural background, disability, and having someone in the family with mental health problems.

Person-mediated and individual youth information and counselling are also key at this level. Think about the added value of personal exchange and one-o**n-one dialogues to boost self-esteem and self-confidence.** Here, offers for youth work, participation, physical activity, or support for identity building become important and empowering preventive measures.

Youth work is already doing a lot of selective prevention, for example, through safe(r) spaces, inclusion policies, outreach activities by youth information services in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, individual consultations, or specific information targeting the LGBTQ+ community.

Indicated or individual

These are **preventative actions that you set up for young people with developing problems.** For example, you notice that a young person is having difficulty and take them aside to discuss it. During an individual youth (information) session, you may see that the young person struggles with other issues. In the context of a youth work activity, you must always link the personal discussions to the group situation (which youth work is, by definition). How can we ensure that the group remains a warm environment for the person without losing the safety of the group? As a youth worker, this is where you take on some mental health wellbeing tasks without engaging in professional mental health care. Examples include:

- offering a sympathetic ear
- making time available
- giving a young person at risk of dropping out a specific task to ensure they can still function in the group

Strengthening the individual as an active part of a group, developing a positive self-image, and strengthening resilience are important elements of mental wellbeing.

As a youth (information) worker, you may be able to identify early signs of mental health issues thanks to the confidence you build with young people. Identifying **these early signs is key to ensuring personalised guidance and professional assistance.** Personalised information and counselling in a person-mediated form go beyond merely offering general advice. It helps design a roadmap for each young person and aligns their needs, passions and interests with wellbeing-enhancing opportunities to boost their self-esteem and confidence. Youth information professionals serve as guides. They help young people discover pathways to wellbeing that resonate with them.

Due to the trust levels involved, youth work can provide a platform for more intensive prevention work with young people. The confident and resilient relationship between a young person and a youth worker is the most important element for this kind of prevention. However, youth work is not always the best route for addressing existing issues – as certain interventions on a personal level might endanger the principle of voluntary participation. Furthermore, indicated prevention is often connected with treatment. Both approaches might conflict with the principles of youth work, where trust and relationships are the basis of our work. Therefore, it is essential but not always easy to **know your boundaries and when you need to bring in help!**

3. Bringing in help

When promotion and prevention are insufficient, and the youth worker has done all they can, they must bring in external help. Even in this case, it is best if the youth worker does not lose contact with the young person.

Sometimes, it is not enough to work on a young person's mental wellbeing through the power of the group and youth information. The young person struggles with dark thoughts for some time, does not seem to be themselves, asks for help, or does not function well in the group, in one-on-one moments or daily life activities in general. At this time, it is important to **bring in external help** (see Chapter 4).

Where we used to speak of 'referring', we now talk more about 'bringing in' a professional who will begin a diagnosis and/or treatment process. This is the task of (individual) mental health care services, but certain specialised youth work, youth information services, or welfare services may also play a role.

In addition to treatment, staying committed to promotion and prevention is essential. In other words, the youth (information) worker and the professional caregiver can work together to ensure the young person can continue to belong to the group and access opportunities that may support the treatment. How can you be close and stay close? This is the difference between bringing in help and referring.

Bringing in help requires consultation and cooperation between youth work or youth information services, mental health services and local authorities. This is a new approach in which each organisation or sector has a role. Youth work and youth (information) work can play their part by engaging and/or collaborating with the following intermediaries or agencies:

The gatekeeper

Building a bridge to mental health care is not easy for every youth worker or youth (information) worker, some of whom may be young volunteers. They have to make an assessment, and too often, there is a hesitation to act due to a lack of knowledge, resources, and competencies. It is also important **to know the (local) social map and the context** in which you and the young people operate to understand certain issues.

Some youth (information) workers, whether volunteers or paid staff, tend to quickly become the **confidants of young people** because of their presence, talent, or the nature of their role. They are unconditionally there and see the young person's value. This has a lot of beauty, but it is also a pitfall for the person concerned. That is why we believe in the gatekeeper role, which the youth work organisation, youth information services, and umbrella organisations should adequately support (see Chapter 7). The role of the gatekeeper is to **bridge the gap between prevention and mental health care.**

In youth work, **gatekeepers are (volunteer) youth workers and approachable, trusted people in the (local) group or community.** They are given an additional role out of their interest and talent to look after mental wellbeing and, if necessary, to keep an eye on which young people are at risk of dropping out. They are advocates of mental wellbeing and how to support it at different levels (promotion, prevention, bringing in help). Their role is not to act as mental health professionals but rather to support other youth workers when needed and/or to be a sympathetic ear for young people. This person will help involve professional support organisations or the integrity contact person (ICP) if necessary.

Usually, each (local) group already has someone who acts as a gatekeeper, automatically taking on this role without being appointed. An organisation can explicitly assign an additional role to one (or more) of the group's youth worker(s) – such as a volunteer studying social studies and taking an interest or an experienced lead animator.

On the other hand, the nature of youth information and counselling implies a look at the individual situation of every young person who reaches out to the service for person-mediated support. As mentioned, because of their position and the guiding approach, youth information workers can grasp a young person's particular concerns and worries and detect some inherent issues. Besides, youth (information) workers

cannot be experts in any matter that concerns young people, so they must develop and maintain a solid network of contacts with other assistance bodies, professionals, and organisations to fulfil their mission – this includes mental health professionals and services. **Youth (information) workers are already gatekeepers!** They provide relevant information and support to promote healthy lifestyles or prevent problems and a network of contacts to help when needed.

Whether they have a formal role or not, **it is essential to support gatekeepers** by valuing their work, building up their knowledge and skills, and helping them take the extra step to be involved in mental health services. In this way, we ensure gatekeepers' resilience and competence and avoid placing all the responsibility on them (see Chapter 6).

The (local) social map

We have found that local volunteers and youth workers often turn informally to mental health professionals they know to get their opinions on a situation. To avoid an arbitrary process, the organisation should **have agreements with one or more local mental health services and professionals or a specific protocol.** Knowing which local first-line services to contact for **particular questions** is also important. Local youth information services, umbrella organisations, and youth information coordinating bodies can facilitate this for their local groups and youth (information) workers. The 'Playfield for Mental Wellbeing' can help build bridges with mental health services and clarify everyone's role (see Chapter 4).

Examples of strategies to support young people's mental health

Portugal: Instituto Português de Desporto e Juventude (IPDJ)

Cuida-te and its services are for young people between 12 and 25 years old. It aims to promote young people's wellbeing and healthy lifestyles. In particular, it addresses mental health, nutrition and physical and sports activities, addictive behaviours, and sexual and reproductive health. Interventions mainly focus on promoting young people's wellbeing from a preventative perspective, not as a treatment programme.

Measure 1:
Personalised assistance aimed at **responding to the counselling and awareness-raising needs of young people,** comprising the following services:

- ***Mobile Units:*** Outreach service based on the mobility of suitably equipped vans, with a technical team specialised in young people's wellbeing, which travel to promote knowledge and information to young people where they are.
- ***Youth Health Offices:*** IPDJ's national services provide free, anonymous, and confidential counselling services. Staff working in the offices are healthcare professionals with specific training in the youth field, namely psychologists.
- ***Sexualidade em Linha:*** Free, anonymous and confidential helpline service on sexual and reproductive health. It aims to listen, inform, clarify doubts, and help bring light to specific problems by discussing solutions and possible paths of action and bringing in help from appropriate services whenever necessary. This service is available on weekdays from 11 am to 7 pm and Saturdays from 10 am to 5 pm.

Measure 2:
Universal **promotion of health literacy through the proactive provision of information on** youth wellbeing and health through three services:

- ***Youth Health on the Portal:*** A section on the IPDJ youth information portal covering all the areas addressed by the programme and its initiatives, including information on the main activities and interventions.
- ***Health Education:*** Promotion of wellbeing initiatives using theatre, plastic arts, music, sports or dance within the scope of the intervention areas to target strategies and experiment with ways of approaching young people's health.
- ***Capacity building:*** Training resources aiming to maintain and improve the effectiveness of preventive interventions in young people's wellbeing and health. The aim is to increase the health literacy and knowledge of the target group while improving the quality of the responses and services available.

Under this programme, health professionals specialised in youth work and supported by qualified psychologists can autonomously accompany young people – free of charge. It is available in all district capitals of Portugal. Any young person making an appointment has to indicate their age, geographic area and preference for video or face-to-face consultations.

Austria: JugendService

JugendService has plenty of employees with a background in a psychological field: mental- and resilience trainer and six staff members who studied psychology. The entire team of JugendService participated in the training „Erste Hilfe für die Seele“, a training on how to provide first hand support to people who struggle mentally.

JugendService has a long history of providing mental health counselling. The mental health consultation program was first started in 1985 and ever since adapted to modern technologies (online counselling for example since 2010, starting with E-Mail, later Zoom) and latest studies. JugendService has discovered the importance of mental health very early on and has made it its mission to contribute to the mental wellbeing of young Austrians in the best way possible.

The consultations are solution-oriented and take place in individual settings, with individual appointments, free of charge, confidential and on a wide range of psychological topics. In online settings you can even get help anonymously. The goal is to support young people in their respective situations.

Additionally, JugendService provides information about mental health on their website and in their brochures. The mental health workshop for schools „Ich schau auf mich“ is booked frequently by schools and usually takes place once a week.

Further Reading

- Coping Skills Poster - Mieli
- Ferris Wheel of Emotions Poster - Mieli
- Hand of Mental Health - Mieli
- Mental Health Power Book - Mieli
- Roller Coaster of Emotions - Mieli
- Safety Net Poster - Mieli
- Strength Cards - Mieli
- What is Mental Wellbeing - Mieli

Chapter 2:
Identifying Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing in Young People

Almost every young person goes through a mentally demanding phase when transitioning into adulthood. Although not everyone needs professional assistance to overcome these challenges, some struggle to the point where seeking support becomes essential.

Unfortunately, **mental health stigma often leads many young people to delay seeking help.** Opting for therapy is frequently misunderstood as an admission of vulnerability, and it usually takes time for young people to realise that therapy and, in some cases, medication can be beneficial. In this chapter, we discuss the critical role of recognising and understanding the symptoms associated with mental health issues.

Using the Playfield of Mental Wellbeing in Youth Work described in Chapter 1 as a basis, we explore the importance of having open conversations about mental health and dismantling the barriers of stigma. The aim is to help you identify potential warning signs of distress, be better prepared to initiate conversations and guide young people towards the support they may need (potential transition from prevention to treatment). We also discuss the distinction between **symptoms, syndromes, and disorders** – clarifying the youth (information) worker's role in symptom recognition without attempting any kind of diagnosis.

We have compiled a list of the most common **early signs of mental health distress and various mental health disorders.** We mainly focus on their early signs, symptoms and characteristics. Youth (information) workers are not mental health experts – we only intend to equip you with basic mental health literacy. As a gatekeeper, this knowledge aims to assist you in identifying when someone is struggling, which is the crucial first step to bringing in appropriate help (Chapter 4).

Stigma continues to cast a shadow over mental health discussions and help-seeking. This chapter also examines **various forms of stigma.** The aim is to shed light on the negative effects of stigma on individuals, relationships, and society. Furthermore, we provide strategies for combating stigma, fostering empathy, and cultivating more inclusive environments for young people experiencing mental health issues.

2.1 Signs of Mental Health Distress

Engaging in open discussions about mental health and emphasising the potential benefits of seeking professional help can help alleviate the stigma often associated with it. Providing young people with the contact information of mental health experts can also act as a catalyst, motivating them to seek help actively. As a youth information worker, it is crucial for you to identify when young people are fighting against mental obstacles and to initiate a conversation on the matter proactively. To effectively support young people struggling with mental health issues, recognising and interpreting symptoms is an essential first step. Here, we aim to provide you with an overview of the most common symptoms and how to provide first-hand basic support.

Recognising symptoms and providing initial support

First, it is important to understand what symptoms are, especially compared to syndromes and disorders. Symptoms are observable indicators that may have a deeper issue or illness as a cause. In the context of mental health, a symptom is a single manifestation of distress, such as social withdrawal, anxiety, or mood swings. However, while suggestive, these clues do not automatically indicate the presence of a mental health disorder. For example, feeling sad is a very normal human emotion. **Symptoms only offer valuable insights that should prompt further exploration and support.**

On the other hand, a **syndrome involves a collection of interconnected symptoms** that frequently occur together. It signifies a more complex pattern of distress. In contrast, **a disorder represents a broader, clinically recognised condition** beyond individual symptoms or syndromes – characterised by a consistent pattern of symptoms that cause significant distress or impairment in daily functioning.

Ultimately, you may be able to observe symptoms and syndromes and act as a gatekeeper (see Chapter 1). **Diagnosing a disorder requires the expertise of mental health professionals,** such as psychologists or psychiatrists (see Chapter 4). They evaluate symptoms and syndromes within a general framework to determine the presence of a clinically recognised mental health disorder and develop appropriate treatment plans. Your role is to identify warning signs as they appear, initiate conversations to clarify their underlying reasons, and

potentially assist in bringing in help from a mental professional or service.

"As a youth worker, I am just the middleman between young people and the professionals. All I can do (as a general rule), is to listen, support, provide information and develop new competencies for young people."
Kyriacos, Youth worker - Cyprus

Next, we explore **some common symptoms** that can indicate mental health issues. Keep in mind that these symptoms are not exclusively associated with mental health disorders and can also indicate other issues or conditions. Additionally, there are many more symptoms beyond this list.

Here are some of the most common ones:

- Increased anxiety
- Frequent outbursts of anger
- Displaying a sense of despair
- Appearing lethargic and unmotivated
- Exhibiting increased sadness
- Losing interest in activities once enjoyed
- Withdrawing from social interactions and seeking solitude
- Displaying unusual introversion
- Acting irritable and quick-tempered
- Behaving aggressively
- Expressing thoughts that are hard to understand
- Conveying unfamiliar emotions
- Talking about not wanting to live anymore

Taking Proactive Steps

Careful observation and open communication with young people can help identify deviations from their usual behaviour, mood shifts, and changes in their appearance. Recognising such changes is critical to identify potential warning symptoms correctly.

If a young person shows signs of a mental health issue, it is advisable first to seek a second opinion from a colleague. Before initiating a dialogue with the young person to clarify the observations, it is important to create a secure environment and reassure them that conversations will remain confidential. At the start of the conversation, you can address what you observed and express your concerns. For more information on effectively leading the conversation, see Chapter 3.1.

Engaging in **open dialogue and providing a platform for young people to feel heard** and understood can significantly improve their situation and mood. Moreover, such conversations offer you valuable insights into assessing the seriousness of the situation – whether the young person is going through a challenging phase, experiencing temporary mood disturbances, or if they are enduring persistent mental distress that suggests an underlying mental illness. Signs that the situation is particularly serious include the mention of issues such as substance abuse, violence, financial difficulties, or thoughts of suicide during the conversation. Chapter 4 provides some guidance on evaluating the conversation and determining your next steps. However, keep in mind that **not every symptom necessarily points to a mental illness!** Some symptoms are natural reactions to life's unusual situations and challenges. Therefore, referral is not always necessary. As mentioned in Chapter 1, a wide range of possibilities exist between promotion and treatment, especially in prevention.

Your role as a youth (information) worker goes beyond mentoring – it involves recognising and addressing the mental health obstacles that young people may encounter. First, promote wellbeing and prevention at the core of your work with young people (see Chapter 1). Then, as a gatekeeper, be alert to identify early signs, create a supportive atmosphere, guide, and bring in help when needed. Understanding **your playfield and its boundaries** will significantly improve young people's wellbeing and personal development. Remember, your role is crucial in facilitating access to the necessary support and promoting their wellbeing through offering your youth (information) centre or service.

2.2 Understanding Most Common Mental Health Conditions

The WHO defines a mental health condition or disorder as a clinically significant **disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotional regulation, or behaviour.** These disturbances are often associated with distress or impairment in crucial areas of daily life. In other words, if a young person is experiencing a mental health issue that interferes with their daily life, a professional may diagnose the person with a specific mental health condition. Keep in mind that with treatment and care, some mental health conditions can be cured or we can develop healthy coping mechanisms to live with them.

This section will equip you with basic mental health literacy to identify several common mental health conditions.

In your role, you may find yourself in a situation where you might suspect or identify signs of a mental health condition in a young person. **Remember, you are not making the diagnosis or providing mental health treatment.** However, you are on the frontline, so follow your national regulations and internal protocols, establish solid partnerships, and bring in professional help if needed (see Chapter 4). Do not worry about being unsure or overreacting, as it is better to take preventative steps to support the young person – and active listening is a key competency of youth (information) workers.

Here are some examples of common mental health conditions and disorders. This is not an exhaustive list, and mental health matters are as complex as human nature.

Anxiety Disorders

Everyone experiences anxiety as it is a natural response that helps us to avoid dangerous situations and motivates us to solve everyday problems. It can vary from mild uneasiness to terrifying panic attacks and can last for a few moments to years. An anxiety disorder differs from normal anxiety because it is more severe, long-lasting, and disruptive to a person's daily activity or relationships (e.g. out-of-control anxiety that prevents a young person from taking part in the activities of the group or taking an exam). Of course, there are many different types of anxiety disorders and symptoms.

What are the general symptoms of anxiety?

Physical effects:

- palpitations
- chest pain
- rapid heartbeat
- hyperventilation
- shortness of breath
- dizziness
- headache
- sweating
- tingling and numbness
- choking
- dry mouth
- nausea
- vomiting
- diarrhoea
- muscle aches and pains
- restlessness
- tremors and shaking

Psychological effects:

- unrealistic and/or excessive fear and worry (about past or future events)
- mind racing or going blank
- decreased concentration and memory
- difficulty making decisions
- irritability
- impatience
- anger
- confusion
- restlessness or feeling on edge
- nervousness
- tiredness
- sleep disturbance
- vivid dreams
- unwanted unpleasant repetitive thoughts

Behavioural effects:

- avoidance of situations
- repetitive, compulsive behaviour (excessive checking, continual seeking of reassurance)
- distress in social situations
- urges to escape situations that cause discomfort (phobic behaviour)

What types of anxiety disorder are there?

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD): A person feels anxious for a long time and is often fearful but is not anxious about anything in particular. This means having regular or uncontrollable worries about many different things in everyday life. The strength of the symptoms can vary. Because there are lots of possible symptoms of anxiety, this can be quite a broad diagnosis, meaning that the problems experienced with GAD might be quite different from one person to another.

Panic disorder: Panic attacks may sometimes occur for no apparent reason, and the person may not understand why. People with panic disorder may feel as if their mind has gone totally out of control. When they experience panic attacks that seem completely unpredictable, and they cannot identify what has triggered them, they may experience panic disorder. Because the onset of panic seems surp rising, a person may live in fear of having another panic attack. This fear can become so intense it can trigger another panic attack.

Phobias: Phobia is about irrational fear. People with a phobia see their anxiety triggered by very specific situations or objects – such as spiders, heights, flying or crowded places, even when there is no danger to them. There are different types of phobia, which are categorised into specific and complex.

Acute stress disorder (ASD) & Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): If someone has experienced or witnessed a very stressful or threatening event (such as war, serious accident, violent death, or rape), they may later develop post-traumatic stress disorder. They are likely to experience flashbacks and have dreams about the event, and these are likely to trigger strong anxiety and feelings experienced during the actual event.

The most significant difference between ASD and PTSD is the onset and duration of symptoms. The effects of ASD present immediately and last up to a month, while PTSD symptoms present slower and last longer, up to several years if not treated. PTSD can also trigger Complex PTSD.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD): Obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviour are typical for this disorder. People with OCD may have obsessive thoughts about being contaminated with germs or fear that they have forgotten to lock the door or turn off the oven which affects their behaviour. OCD thoughts ccan come in all shapes and sizes and involve lots of different types of habits and rituals. They often revolve around things like danger, dirt, contamination, or worries about sexuality or religion.

Read more about how anxiety may affect young people.

What is eco-anxiety?

The American Psychology Association describes eco-anxiety or climate anxiety as the chronic fear related to climate change and the associated concern for the future. Although not yet a diagnosable condition, recognition of eco-anxiety and its complex psychological effects is increasing, as is its significant impact on young people. According to experts, the best chance of increasing optimism and hope in eco-anxious young people is ensuring they can access the best and most reliable information on climate mitigation and adaptation. Especially important is information on how they can connect more with nature, contribute to greener choices, and join forces with like-minded communities and groups. For more tips and ideas, see Greening Youth Information Services.

Depression

The word depression is used in many different ways. Everyone can feel sad when bad things happen. However, everyday sadness is not depression. People may have a short-term depression mood, but they can manage to cope and soon recover without treatment. Clinical depression lasts for at least two weeks and affects a person's behaviour. It has physical, emotional and cognitive effects – and also interferes with being in the world, doing activities, and having satisfying personal relationships.

i) I had a black dog, his name was depression

ii) Living with a black dog

Depression is a common but serious illness. People can recover from episodes but may develop another episode later again.

What are the general symptoms of depression?

Feelings and emotional effects:

- feeling down
- upset or tearful
- restless, agitated or irritable
- guilty, worthless and down on oneself
- lacking an emotional response
- empty and numb
- isolated and unable to relate to other people
- finding no pleasure in life or things usually enjoyed before
- a sense of unreality
- no self-confidence or self-esteem
- hopeless and despairing
- helpless
- suicidal

Behavioural effects:

- avoiding social events and activities (that had previously been enjoyable)
- self-harming or suicidal behaviour
- finding it difficult to speak or think clearly
- difficulty in remembering or concentrating on things
- using more tobacco, alcohol or other drugs than usual
- difficulty sleeping, or sleeping too much
- feeling tired all the time
- no appetite and losing weight, or eating too much and gaining weight

Not everyone who experiences depression has all of these symptoms and some could be contradictory. People with severe depression will have more symptoms than those with mild depression. Depression also impacts people in different ways and manifests through different types.

What are the most common types of depression disorders?

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD): Also called seasonal depression it usually occurs during particular seasons or times of year.

Dysthymia: Continuous mild depression that lasts for two years or more. Also called a persistent depressive disorder (PDD) or chronic depression.

Perinatal depression: If someone experiences depression while being pregnant and/or after giving birth, this is known as perinatal depression.

- Antenatal or prenatal depression – while pregnant
- Postnatal depression (PND) – during roughly the first year after giving birth. Women generally suffer from postnatal depression, but it can affect men too.

While many people are familiar with postnatal depression, antenatal depression is also quite common, and some people may even experience both

Premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD): This is a hormone-related disorder that affects the body but also how a person feels. PMDD can involve experiencing depression and suffering its consequences in daily life.

Psychotic Depression: A major depressive episode accompanied by psychotic features such as hallucinations and delusions – though psychotic symptoms generally have a depressive theme such as guilt, worthlessness, and death.

Read more about how depression can affect young people.

Bipolar Disorder

People with bipolar disorder and downs that everyone feels because they cause serious impairment in everyday life functioning. Usually, a person has both 'manic episodes', with a high mood and increased levels of energy and activity, and 'depressed episodes', in which their mood is low and energy and activity levels drop. Some people with bipolar disorder only experience manic episodes with no depression.

What are the general symptoms of bipolar disorder?

During a depressive episode, a person experiences a depressed mood (feeling sad, irritable, empty) or a loss of pleasure or interest in activities for most of the day, nearly every day. Manic episodes symptoms may include euphoria or irritability, increased activity or energy, and other symptoms such as increased talkativeness, racing thoughts, increased self-esteem, decreased need for sleep, distractibility, and impulsive, reckless behaviour.

There is also hypomania – a milder form of mania. And cyclothymia – a condition related to bipolar with milder symptoms. Bipolar disorder is generally classified as Bipolar 1 and Bipolar 2, which present different balances of mood states. However, not all medical professionals agree on how to classify or diagnose bipolar disorder. More research in this area is needed. In any case, it is important to recognise that people's experience of bipolar can differ, with some alternating between moods over long intervals whilst others may experience mood swings in quick succession, also known as rapid cycling.

The transition to adulthood is challenging, with many changes involved. For young people living with a mood disorder, this time of life can be particularly difficult. People with bipolar disorder are at an increased risk of suicidal behaviour. Yet effective treatment options exist. A supportive and understanding environment is also essential for people with bipolar disorder.

Read more about how bipolar disorder may affect young people.

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a complicated and severe mental health disorder in which people interpret reality abnormally. It causes psychosis, is associated with considerable disability, and may affect all areas of life, including personal, family, social, educational, and occupational functioning. There are many misconceptions about it. Even mental health professionals do not all agree about certain aspects. Unfortunately, it is common for people with schizophrenia to be stigmatised, discriminated against, and see access to their rights violated.

A range of effective care and treatment options for people with schizophrenia exist and many people who get a schizophrenia diagnosis are able to live happy and fulfilling lives, even if they continue to have symptoms. At least one in three people will be able to fully recover.

What are the general symptoms of schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is characterised by significant impairments in the way reality is perceived, and can include:

- Fixed beliefs that something is true, despite evidence to the contrary (delusions)
- Hear, smell, see, touch, or feel things that are not there (hallucinations).
- Belief that one's feelings, impulses, actions, or thoughts are not generated by oneself, are being placed in one's mind or withdrawn from one's mind by others, or that one's thoughts are being broadcast to others.
- Disorganised thinking, which is often observed as jumbled or irrelevant speech.
- Highly disorganised behaviour whereby the person does things that appear bizarre or purposeless, or has unpredictable or inappropriate emotional responses that interfere with their ability to organise their behaviour.
- 'Negative symptoms' such as very limited speech, restricted experience and expression of emotions, inability to experience interest or pleasure, and social withdrawal.
- Extreme agitation or slowing of movements, maintenance of unusual postures.

Read more about how schizophrenia may affect young people.

Understanding Schizophrenia

Eating Disorders

An eating problem is any relationship with food that someone may find difficult, which differs from an eating disorder. Eating disorders are often, but not always, associated with negative body image and low self-esteem. The diagnosis of eating disorders is based on eating patterns and includes medical tests. Although, on the surface, eating disorders may appear to be about food and weight, they are often attempts to deal with underlying emotional and stress-related issues. Eating disorders often coexist with other mental health issues, in particular anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, personality disorders or substance misuse. People with eating disorders are also more likely to self-harm and are at increased risk of suicide.

Though there are many different types of eating disorders, we can identify four general types, each with its own symptoms:

Anorexia: Also known as anorexia nervosa, is a severe, potentially life-threatening eating disorder characterised by self-imposed starvation and excessive weight loss. Some people think anorexia is about slimming and dieting, but it is much more complex. At its core, it relates to low self-esteem, negative self-image and feelings of intense distress. Self-esteem is overly focused on body image, and despite continued weight loss, the person views themselves as 'fat'. People with anorexia often experience a lack of awareness regarding the seriousness of their condition and don't see themselves as being unwell. Anorexia is sometimes a symptom of another disorder.

What are the general symptoms of anorexia?

- weight loss, leading to a weight that is too low
- avoidance of 'fattening' foods, which may also involve self-induced vomiting, self-induced purging exercise or use of appetite suppressants and/or diuretics
- a self-perception of being too 'fat', with an intense fear of weight gain and an obsession with weight leads to this persistent behaviour to prevent weight gain/ promote weight loss
- normal hormonal function is affected, with menstrual irregularities or absence of a period in women and loss of sexual interest

Read more about how anorexia may affect young people.

Bulimia: Also known as bulimia nervosa involves episodes of excessive eating (food binges) followed by behaviour which aims to prevent subsequent weight gain, known as purging (such as vomiting, abuse of laxatives, excessive exercising or fasting). During binges, the person may feel out of control of their eating and eat well past the point where they normally feel full. The cleansing phase is often initiated by remorse or self-consciousness regarding their dietary choices. In 'conventional' bulimia nervosa, the individual may have a lower body weight, whereas 'non-traditional' bulimia, where the person maintains a healthy body weight or higher body weight, is also acknowledged.

Sometimes a person with bulimia may initially have had anorexia, or the other way around. It is not uncommon for people to cycle between these two different patterns of eating disorders, although this is not the case for everyone.

What are the general symptoms of bulimia?

- Reduce food intake or stop eating
- Spend a lot of time counting calories of everything
- Hide food or secretly throw it away
- Avoid 'dangerous' foods, like those with high amounts of calories or fat
- Read recipe books and cook meals for others, without eating them oneself
- Use drugs that claim to reduce the appetite or speed up digestion
- Spend a lot of time thinking about losing weight, checking and weighing oneself
- Exercise a lot, with strict rules about how much must be done
- Develop very structured eating times
- Make up rules about food – for example listing 'good' and 'bad' types or only eating certain colours of food

Read more about how bulimia may affect young people.

Binge Eating Disorder (BED): People with binge eating disorder feel unable to stop eating, even if they want to and often have a loss of control over eating (such as an inability to refrain from eating or a lack of control over what or how much they eat). BED is not the same as just overeating. It shares many of the symptoms of bulimia nervosa but without associated behaviours compensating for high levels of food intake (purging). A person with BED might rely on food to feel better or use food to hide difficult feelings. It is sometimes described as 'compulsive eating'. Thus, eating is common when one does not feel hungry.

Other Specified Feeding and Eating Disorders (OSFED):

OSFED covers any other eating disorder that does not neatly meet all the criteria for anorexia, bulimia or binge eating disorder, even if the person may experience any feelings, actions or body changes linked to them. This does not mean that OSFEDs are less serious. Getting a diagnosis of OSFED can help access treatment and support. Previously, OSFED was known as 'eating disorder not otherwise specified' (EDNOS).

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Around one in 20 young people in the EU have ADHD (around 3.3 million). ADHD is not a mental health condition or a learning disability. ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that significantly affects behaviour. Neurodevelopmental disorders are characterised by behavioural and cognitive challenges that emerge during the developmental stage, encompassing difficulties in learning, motor skills, language, and social functions. Neurodevelopmental disorders also include disorders of intellectual development and autism spectrum disorder (ASD), amongst others.

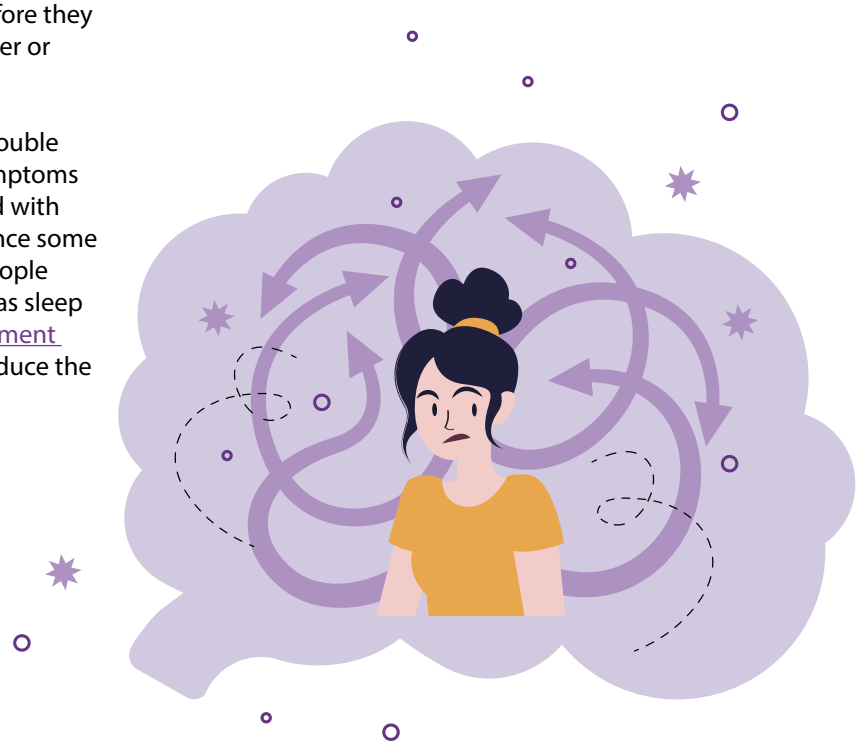
Symptoms of ADHD tend to be noticed at an early age and may become more noticeable when a young person's circumstances change, such as when they start school. Most young people are diagnosed with ADHD before they are 12 years old, but sometimes it is diagnosed later or even in adulthood.

People with ADHD can seem restless, may have trouble concentrating and may act on impulse. ADHD symptoms may subside with age, but many adults diagnosed with the condition at a young age continue to experience some difficulties at work, at home or in relationships. People with ADHD may also have additional issues, such as sleep and anxiety disorders. However, appropriate treatment and learning coping techniques will help them reduce the challenges of everyday life.

What are the general symptoms of ADHD?

- Short attention span and easy distractibility
- Careless mistakes
- Forgetfulness and misplacing items
- Difficulty following instructions
- Frequent task switching
- Organisational difficulties
- Hyperactivity, including restlessness and fidgeting
- Impulsivity, including difficulty waiting and acting without forethought
- Interrupting conversations and recklessness
- Poor sense of danger.

These symptoms can cause significant issues, such as underachievement (at school or work), poor social interactions with others, and problems with discipline. In adults, the symptoms of ADHD are more difficult to define in general. This is because of a lack of research on adults with ADHD.



Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) or emotionally unstable personality disorder (EUPD) is a mental health disorder that profoundly affects a person's ability to control their emotions and interferes with their everyday life. The struggle to self-regulate emotions can lead to impulsive actions, a negative self-image, stormy relationships, and intense emotional reactions to stressors. It can manifest in harmful behaviours like self-harm.

People with BPD have an intense fear of abandonment or instability and may have difficulty tolerating being alone. Yet inappropriate anger, impulsiveness and frequent mood swings may push others away despite their strong desire for meaningful and enduring relationships.

People with this disorder have a significantly higher rate of self-harming and suicidal behaviour than the general population. Fortunately, effective treatments are available to help individuals manage these symptoms.

There are ongoing debates about the diagnosis of personality disorders. Some people find a BPD diagnosis helpful or validating. Some find it unhelpful or stigmatising.

What are the general symptoms of Borderline Personality Disorder?

- Patterns of intense and unstable relationships with family, friends and loved ones can go quickly from idealisation to devaluation (love/hate)
- Intense mood changes over hours or days and a tendency to view things in extremes, such as all good or all bad. Interests and values can change quickly, and so can their perception of others and loved ones.
- Inappropriate, intense anger or problems controlling anger, often followed by shame and guilt.
- Extreme fear/reactions to avoid real or perceived abandonment by friends and family – such as plunging headfirst into relationships or ending them just as quickly.
- Impulsive, dangerous or self-destructive behaviours, such as substance use or misuse, binge eating, unsafe sex with multiple partners, unsafe driving, etc.
- Suicide thoughts and/or attempts or self-harming behaviour, such as cutting, hair pulling, or burning.
- A distorted and unstable self-image or sense of self-negative, which affects moods, values, opinions, goals and relationships.
- Chronic feelings of emptiness and boredom.
- Periods of intense depressed mood, irritability or anxiety lasting a few hours to a few days.
- Dissociative feelings ('out of body' type of feelings) and stress-related paranoid thoughts. Severe cases of stress can also lead to brief psychotic episodes.

Not everyone with BPD will experience all of these symptoms. Their severity, frequency, and duration depend on the person and their illness.
Read more about how BDP may affect young people.

2.3 Mental Health Taboos, Stigma, and Their Impact

Nowadays, people with mental health issues experience negative impacts on their mental health due to stigma and discrimination, which can cascade into more problems if they are already dealing with mental health issues. **Stigma may act as a barrier**, preventing a young person from recovering from, seeking support for, or even diagnosing early mental health issues. This can even manifest through self-stigmatisation.

Sometimes, even when a young person has been successfully diagnosed and is managing to cope with specific issues, they might not feel able to shift out of their stigmatised role due to the views people have of their 'original' diagnosis.

No matter the degree of stigma, prejudice, or discrimination experienced by someone with mental health issues, it can always lead to harm. Understanding how this can happen and how to address and eradicate stigma can help you in your work!

However, remember that stigma is not the only obstacle to seeking help. Not knowing what services are available, barriers to accessing support or services, and confidentiality concerns may also impact a young person's help-seeking behaviour.

What is Mental Health Condition Stigma?

The meaning of the word stigma is a mark, a stain or a blemish. Relating to mental health, stigmatisation can mark or discredit a person somehow – reducing them from the whole person to just a stereotype or labelled as a collection of symptoms or a diagnosis (e.g. psychotic).

If a person faces stigma, others may view them negatively, treat them differently or make them feel ashamed or worthless. **Stigma can also lead to discrimination and can make mental health conditions even worse.** It can also get in the way of prevention efforts for these conditions.

Stigma can lead to a **lack of support or empathy** towards people – leaving them embarrassed, misunderstood, and marginalised. Stigmatisation leads to more than just hurt feelings and could result in a young person ignoring their symptoms, leading to poor recovery and a lower quality of life due to social and physical isolation.

Other people may unfairly or inaccurately label those living with a mental health condition as 'scary', 'comical', 'unreliable' or 'incompetent'. For people living with a condition, stigma is one more stress they do not need. Some people say that the **effects of stigma and prejudice can be as distressing as the symptoms of their condition itself.**

What are the types of stigma?

There are four main types of stigma – each affecting young people in different manners and contexts:

- **Public stigma** involves the negative or discriminatory attitudes that others have about mental health conditions, often based on misconceptions, fear and prejudice. Research has demonstrated the significant impact of public stigma, such as workplace discrimination or media portrayal.
- **Professional stigma** occurs when healthcare professionals hold stigmatising attitudes toward their patients. This could be due to fear or misunderstandings of the causes and symptoms of mental illness or when professionals themselves experience stigma from the public or other healthcare professionals because of their work and connection with stigmatised disorders. Professional stigma is of particular concern as it may affect the care and treatment a person with mental health conditions receives, including treatment for physical illnesses, thereby impacting their wellbeing and recovery.
- **Institutional stigma** is more systemic, involving policies of government and organisations that intentionally or unintentionally limit opportunities for people with mental health conditions. Examples include lower funding for mental illness research or fewer mental health services relative to other health care
- **Self-stigma** refers to the negative attitudes, including internalised shame, that people with mental illness have about their condition and is sometimes called internalised stigma. Self-stigma often relates to poor outcomes, such as failure to access treatment, disempowerment, reduced self-efficacy and decreased quality of life.

Let's take a closer look at self-stigma

When experiencing complex mental health conditions, it can be a challenge for young people not to internalise these fears. They can be expressed as **shame, embarrassment, and avoidance**, all of which are symptoms of self-stigma. Self-stigma can have serious implications for the young person's self-esteem and willingness to seek help when needed. Learning to tackle self-stigma and developing the necessary skills to support oneself is crucial for improving the quality of life and maintaining young people's wellbeing.

How does self-stigma develop?

Do any of the following statements sound or feel familiar?

- *I don't want to be different/People will think I'm crazy.*
- *Other people won't understand, so it's better if I don't tell them.*
- *I'm not sick enough / I'm too sick to benefit from treatment.*
- *If I ask for help, I am weak.*

These are all examples of statements that might reflect some form of self-stigmatisation.

Self-stigma often reflects negative, culturally generated stereotypes, beliefs and emotions about a specific feature a group shares. These often include the false beliefs that members of this group are threatening, less competent than others, or that they are to blame for their conditions. Self-stigma occurs when a person with a stigmatised trait internalises these negative stereotypes and/or chooses to conceal their identity for fear of being stigmatised by others.

To avoid self-stigma, a person might not seek professional support to gain distance from a label or withdraw socially. Although these avoidant behaviours may relieve discomfort in the short term, they do not allow the person to tackle the underlying issues.

Stigma is society's problem. Those on the receiving end are not responsible for it. We can educate ourselves and others to halt the perpetuation of stigma. No one should have to deal with stigma and self-stigma. But when young people with complex mental health issues do internalise these stigmas, it is vital to defy those beliefs in our minds. Only by taking these difficult first steps can we lead the happy and healthy lives we deserve.

Because **self-stigma is often unconscious,** it can be hard to tell if it is occurring. Keeping an eye out for common signs, such as negative self-talk and social withdrawal, and beginning to challenge and reframe these pessimistic thought patterns gently is a good way to tackle self-stigma.

Concerning the statements mentioned earlier, here is some elaboration on each topic that may help dispel some common myths among young people:

- **I don't want to be different / People will think I'm crazy:** Many young people with mental health issues feel isolated by their experience. However, in reality, a large proportion of people have personal experience of mental health conditions. In 2021, more than 150 million people in the WHO European Region lived with a mental health condition. Many of the people living with such mental health conditions do not receive the care they need. In 2022, almost one in two young Europeans (15-24 year-olds) have unmet mental healthcare needs, according to the European Commission.

- **Other people won't understand, so it's better if I don't tell them:** Social withdrawal can be a serious problem for those living with complex mental health conditions. Young people often fear others will not understand their experience and stigmatise them for it. To combat the fear of rejection, many young people remove themselves from social situations to avoid disclosing their condition. This is not a productive or long-term solution. Studies show that willingly reaching out and seeking help drastically reduces loneliness. Tips you can give:
  - Be gentle with yourself.
  - Consider how you would treat a close friend in the same position.
  - Treat yourself with the same level of patience and kindness and give those around you the chance to do the same.
  - If in doubt, remember to seek help. You can always contact us. We will help you reach out to the services available.
  - Explore ways to socialise that help you feel comfortable, safe and supported.

- **I'm not sick enough/I'm too sick to benefit from treatment:** It can feel very daunting to reach out for help, especially if there are fears of being told one's experience is too mild or too severe to warrant assistance. The reality is that no two experiences will be the same. Levels of severity do not exempt a person from the right to access help. Some tips you can give:
  - You are always worthy.
  - Try to think about mental health in the same terms as physical health. For example, if you broke your leg, you wouldn't hesitate to have a professional take care of it.

- **If I ask for help, I am weak:** Seeking help is never a sign of weakness. Rather, it's a sign of courage. Everyone sometimes needs help, and learning to ask for it is never something to feel ashamed of. It's just one of many important examples of 'self-care' – like exercising, eating well and getting enough sleep. If this is something you would recommend to a young person, why not to yourself?

How does stigma affect young people with mental health conditions?

It is important to point out that a young person may experience stigma differently from others, which affects everyone differently. The following is not an exhaustive list, but it gives some examples of the impact of stigma on young people:

- **Treated differently** and excluded from many things that the rest of society takes for granted, leaving them marginalised.
- **Labelled** by the condition and become vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination.
  Discriminated against and missing out on studies, work or housing.
- **Bullied**, excluded from social groups, or becoming a victim of violence.
- **Feeling ashamed or embarrassed**, which can lead them to avoid treatment, withdraw from society, abuse alcohol or drugs, or even suicide.
  Some cultures have an inbuilt stigma against mental health conditions, and this can make it difficult for a person to seek and get help and may give rise to shame or fear of being discriminated against within the community.
- **Discouraging help-seeking** as young people fear being labelled as mentally ill. Many young people with the early symptoms of mental illness are reluctant to seek help because they do not understand what these symptoms mean or associate mental illness with negative and inaccurate stereotypes.
- **Making recovery harder.** Mental wellbeing has much to do with staying active and engaged, contributing, and feeling accepted by others as part of the community. Stigma can erode young people's self-confidence and make them shy away from engaging with others, fearing misunderstanding and ridicule.
- **Promotes discrimination.** Some people views psychosis, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and depression as lifelong labels which mark the young person as different from the rest of society. Fear and ignorance about mental health conditions contribute to discrimination, making it harder for people to find work, a place to live, and to be accepted as valued members of the community.
- **Leads to feelings of isolation.** The fear of negative attitudes and community misunderstanding can cause people to withdraw from society. As well as being distressing, social isolation and loneliness make it harder for young people to cope with the symptoms of mental health conditions or seek help to treat their conditions.
- **Effects on society.** The stigma around mental health conditions is one of several reasons why people can feel excluded or alienated by society. Like racism and other forms of prejudice, stigma suggests that people with a mental health condition are outsiders, inferior, incapable, or dangerous – and are not equal members of the community.

Helping end mental health stigma and discrimination

When it comes to self-stigma, changing how we think about and talk to ourselves can be difficult. It requires perseverance. These changes take time, and it is important to support young people as they challenge negative self-talk.

In many cases, young people may trust a youth (information) worker with whom they have developed a close relationship. **Youth information workers can help young people seek appropriate care** and support from qualified health professionals if required. Remind young people to check in with themselves reg ularly and find support among those around them.

Using straightforward methods like **starting conversations about mental health**, incorporating it into regular and ongoing chats, and sharing useful, current, youth-friendly information can have a positive impact on how young people perceive mental health.

The language commonly used about mental health can also create a barrier to truly understanding and helping young people with mental health issues. **The use of language** to describe the person experiencing mental health difficulties and disorders can be demeaning and isolating. Although the use of words such as 'crazy', 'nuts' or 'psycho' may seem trivial and innocent – they are the building blocks of stigma.

Breaking down stigma needs all our voices to create a society where we treat young people with mental health

conditions with dignity, respect and equality. Young people struggling with mental health issues require a community of caring that helps them break all kinds of stigma. Tools to tackle stigma, include:

- Educate yourself and acquire mental health literacy.
- Use your strengths to empower young people, promote wellbeing, and prevent mental health issues.
- Understand what your playfield is and your boundaries as a gatekeeper.
- Bridge the gap between prevention and mental health care by establishing strong partnerships with mental health services and professionals.
- Be attentive to early signs of distress.
- Recognise the contribution of young people with mental health conditions.
- Challenge stigma and discrimination when you hear or see it.
- Consider the language you use and how a simple change in the language you use will show your openness and acceptance.
- Start conversations with young people about emotions and mental wellbeing. You don't have to be an expert to talk about mental and emotional health.
- Talk, but listen too.
- Do not diagnose – suggest the use of professional support and bring in help.
- Keep in touch – meet up, phone, email or text.
- Don't just talk about mental health – chat about everyday things as well.
- Remind young people you care.
- Be patient as ups and downs can happen.

For more information on this topic in English, consider the following organisation's websites: MIND and SANE.

Further Reading

- Knowledge is power: tackling stigma through social contact
- World mental health report: Transforming mental health for all
- A Mental Health Resource for Youth Workers and Volunteers

Chapter 3: First-Hand Support Techniques

In today's interconnected world, where digital connections often outnumber physical ones, **personal interactions remain at the heart of our collective experiences.** These fleeting and sustained interactions are pivotal in shaping our mental wellbeing. The digital age has brought about many advantages, but it has also amplified the challenges of mental health. An unexpected message or the absence of one, comparisons on social media, or the challenges of remote interactions can affect our mental wellbeing.

Now, take a moment to imagine someone close to you is facing a mental health challenge. The statistics say it is not just likely but probable. In such crucial moments, **the right words, actions, or even a simple understanding gesture can mean the world** to them. The question arises then: would you know what to say or do? Would you be equipped to offer the support they need?

This chapter aims to provide insights into that very dilemma. By understanding the nuances of communication, recognising the signs of distress, and mastering first-hand support techniques, you can become an anchor for someone in need. It is about addressing crises and **fostering an environment of understanding, empathy, and genuine connection.**
Let's delve deeper into these techniques to empower us to assist effectively and compassionately.

3.1 Communicating Effectively About Mental Health

The foundations of understanding

Discussing mental health requires navigating a **labyrinth of personal histories, emotional triggers, and vulnerabilities.** Each individual's mental health journey is as unique as their fingerprint, melded by their experiences, background, and coping mechanisms. Venturing into this domain without a comprehensive understanding can do more harm than good, making the principles of effective communication paramount.

> *"We are there for you, we listen to you."*
> *Hanna, Youth information worker - Finland*

The essence and role of communication

At its core, communication is more than just the exchange of words. It serves as a window to the soul – letting us into their world of emotions, fears, aspirations and struggles. When the subject is as intricate and nuanced as mental health, the weight of each word, gesture, and response becomes even more significant.

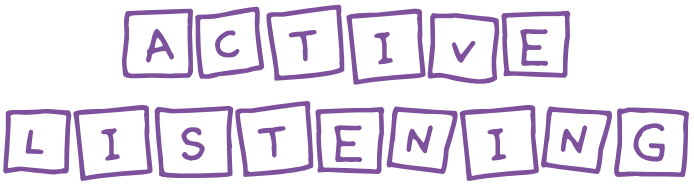
- **Opening the door to conversation:** Young people often hesitate to talk because of fear of judgement or misunderstanding. You are already taking a significant step forward by signalling your availability and willingness to talk. You are laying the foundation for a safe space where young people can express themselves without fear.
- **Active listening: an undervalued skill:** Listening goes beyond the act of hearing. It involves recognising non-verbal cues, understanding the emotions behind the words, and providing feedback that shows you are genuinely engaged. You are practising active listening by immersing yourself wholly in the conversation and resisting the urge to formulate responses while the other person is speaking.

These two elements are already part of your work! Youth (information) workers engage in meaningful group or one-on-one interactions and conversations with young people as part of their role. Thanks to your position, you build **strong connections and trust with young people,** providing valuable insights into their wellbeing and state of mind. You are a very important gatekeeper (see Chapter 1).

Empathy: The heartbeat of genuine interactions

Empathy transcends sympathy. It is not about feeling sorry for someone. It is about trying to feel 'with' them, understanding their perspective, and connecting on a human level. In the realm of mental health, empathy plays a pivotal role. However, knowing your mental wellbeing playfield (see Chapter 1) and setting boundaries is vital to preventing empathetic fatigue and maintaining your wellbeing. For strategies on establishing these boundaries, (See Chapter 6.2)

- **Staying empathetic:** An empathetic response might sound like, "That sounds really tough, and I'm here for you." It acknowledges the person's feelings and offers support without undermining their experiences.
- **Judgment-free zone:** Everyone's experience with mental health is unique. Comparing or belittling someone's struggles based on preconceived notions or societal benchmarks is counterproductive. It is crucial to approach conversations with an open mind and heart, free from biases.
- **The power of educating oneself:** We fear what we don't understand. By educating yourself and gaining basic mental health literacy, you are equipping yourself to be a better communicator and breaking down your misconceptions. Chapter 2 provides insights into different mental health disorders, symptoms, and coping mechanisms. However, you can observe warning signs and indicators as a youth (information) worker (gatekeeper), but only professionals should provide a diagnosis
- **A simple conversation can be transformative.** It can provide solace, offer new perspectives, and even steer someone towards seeking professional help. It reminds us of the profound human connection we all share and the power of words in shaping our experiences and realities.



Here are some practical examples of how empathy can manifest in various situations, especially in mental health and youth (information) work:

1. Reflective listening:

- ***Situation: A young person mentions, "I've been feeling really overwhelmed lately."***
- ***Empathetic Response:*** *"It sounds like you're carrying a lot on your shoulders right now. Let's talk about it."*

2. Acknowledgment without solution offering:

- ***Situation:*** *A young person says, "I'm struggling to manage my studies and personal life."*
- ***Empathetic Response:*** *"That must be really tough for you. Remember, it's okay to feel this way."*

3. Validating feelings:

- ***Situation: A young person expresses, "I felt so embarrassed after forgetting my lines during the presentation."***
- ***Empathetic Response:*** *"Anyone would feel the same in your situation. It's natural to feel embarrassed, but it's one moment and doesn't define your abilities.*

4. Avoiding minimisation:

- ***Situation:*** *A young person shares, "I'm stressed about these upcoming exams."*
- ***Empathetic Response:*** Instead of saying, "Don't worry, everyone gets stressed," a more empathetic approach would be, "I understand how stressful exams can be. How can I support you during this time?"

5. Sharing personal experiences without overriding theirs:

- ***Situation: A young person confides, "I'm having a tough time dealing with this breakup."***
- ***Empathetic Response:*** *"I remember how challenging my breakup was, so I genuinely understand how painful it can be. Let me know how I can be there for you."*

6. Being physically present:

- ***Situation:*** *A young person has lost a loved one.*
- ***Empathetic Action:*** *Simply being there, offering a shoulder to cry on, or even sitting in silence can be a strong empathetic gesture. Sometimes, actions speak louder than words.*

7. Offering support:

- ***Situation:*** *Your teammate seems overwhelmed with a project*
- ***Empathetic Action:*** *"I've noticed you've got a lot on your plate with this project. How about I help with part of it?"*

8. Non-verbal empathy:

- ***Situation:*** *A young person is visibly upset and recounting a traumatic event.*
- ***Empathetic Action:*** *Sometimes, a gentle touch on the arm or hand, a nod, or maintaining eye contact can convey empathy without needing words.*

9. Asking open-ended questions:

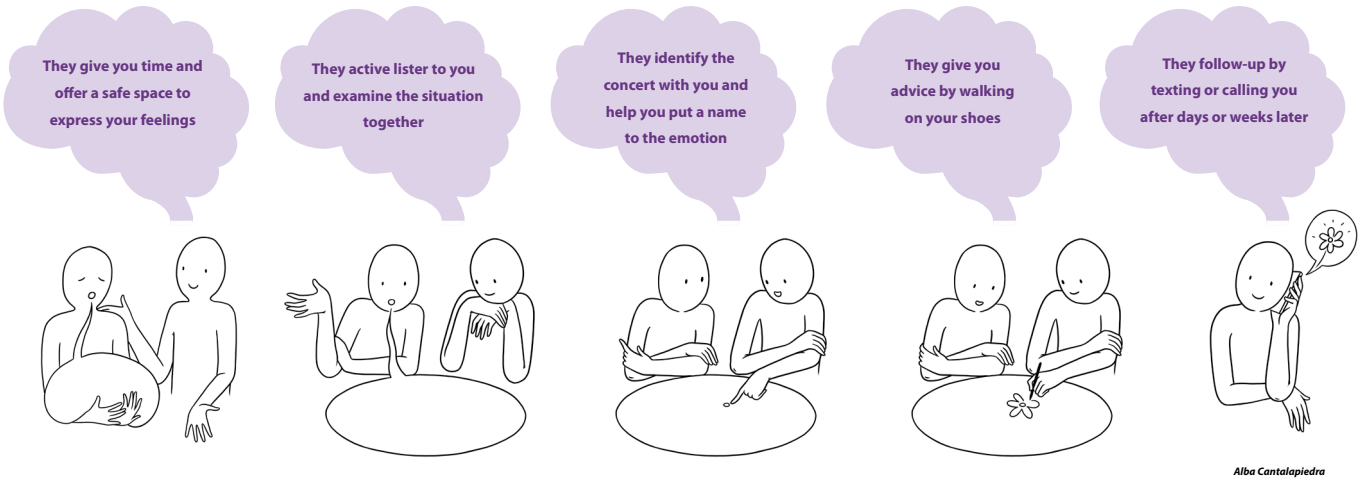
- ***Situation:*** *A young person says, "I've been feeling so distant from everyone lately."*
- ***Empathetic Response:*** *"I'm sorry you're feeling this way. Can you tell me more about what's been going on?"*

10. Avoiding assumptions:

- ***Situation:*** *A coworker has been taking frequent breaks recently.*
- ***Empathetic Action:*** *Instead of assuming laziness or lack of dedication, approach with, "I've noticed you taking more breaks. Is everything okay?"*

Steps for first-hand support in case of early warning signs

1. Show yourself as close and available to the young person.
2. Listen actively without making judgments.
3. Contrast the young person's narrative with personal experiences or hypothetical situations to validate and not detract from feelings.
4. Support in the process of naming the emotions.
5. Support in the process of identifying conflicts and needs.
6. If the problem is very serious, bring up help! If the problem is not serious, seek informal support.
7. Always keep in touch with the young person to ensure progress.



3.2 Supporting a Young Person in Distress

Understanding the emotional landscape of young people

Young people are at a crucial stage of their developmental journey. **Physical, emotional, and cognitive changes** are significant characteristics of this period, influencing their perception of the world and how they relate to it. Their brain's ability to adapt and change is at a peak, making their worldview flexible and susceptible to external influences.

The unique challenges of youth: A closer look

While young people brim with energy, curiosity, and the thrill of discovery, this period also brings challenges. The theories of renowned psychologists often underscore these:

Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory: Erikson believed that adolescence is marked by the identity vs. role confusion stage. Here, young people grapple with their self-image and continually try to find where they fit into the larger societal structure. This exploration can lead to both excitement and anxiety.

Jean Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory: According to Piaget, adolescents are in the formal operational stage, allowing them to think abstractly and reason logically. However, they can sometimes become caught up in their thoughts, leading to what he termed an "imaginary audience," where they feel as if they are constantly being watched and judged.

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory: Bandura emphasised the importance of observing and modelling the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Young people are particularly sensitive to this, picking up behaviours and habits from peers, media, and role models.

Supporting youth amidst their complex dynamics

Understanding young people's world is a journey. Amidst the chaos and challenges lies an opportunity to guide them towards clarity and balance. Given the intricate play of their developmental stages, cognitive shifts, and societal pressures, how can we provide the support they truly need?

Stay calm and embody the role model they need: Young people are at a stage where their surroundings heavily influence them. A moment of crisis is not just an event for them – it is a lesson in handling adversity. By consistently maintaining a calm and rational demeanour, you are teaching them, without words, the importance of stability in tough times. This hands-on example reflects Albert Bandura's theory, where he emphasises how people learn behaviours through observing others. So, you are laying a blueprint for them to follow whenever you navigate a situation calmly.

Offer thoughtful physical comfort: The physical touch, be it a pat on the back, a gentle hand squeeze, or a hug, can communicate volumes. However, it is essential to seek permission before offering such gestures. When granted, these gestures serve as tangible reminders that they are not alone and that they are people who care.

Celebrate their journey and highlight their resilience: In the whirlwind of growing up, young people might forget their milestones and victories. You are not just recalling memories by reminiscing about their journey and the challenges they have overcome. You are strengthening their belief in themselves, reinforcing their self-efficacy – the belief in one's abilities to navigate challenges, a concept central to Bandura's theories.

Guide them towards mindful practices: Distractions are the easiest escape during emotional turbulence. However, mere distractions can often be temporary patches. Instead, guiding young people towards mindfulness can provide lasting benefits. Introduce them to breathing exercises that can help anchor their emotions, grounding techniques that connect them to the present moment, or journaling to reflect and process their feelings. These tools do not just offer immediate relief – they equip them with skills for life.

Champion the cause of professional support: The societal view of mental health is evolving, but stigmas persist. While friends and family offer irreplaceable personal support, there are times when professional intervention becomes crucial. By openly discussing and endorsing the importance of therapy, counselling, or other professional help, you sign that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. It is about prioritising wellbeing over societal judgments.

Encourage open dialogue: Open dialogue is about speaking and fostering trust. Young people often face challenges they feel are unique, and the fear of being misunderstood or dismissed can be a barrier. Real, authentic conversations are becoming rare in an era

dominated by digital communication. By actively inviting them to share their thoughts and feelings, you reassure them that their voice matters. Furthermore, consistent open dialogue can preemptively address issues before they escalate.

Create youth-friendly and non-judgmental settings both physically and emotionally. This might mean ensuring a quiet, private space in the home or regularly setting aside time where they know they can talk without interruptions. Avoid immediately offering solutions, as sometimes they just need to be heard.

Supporting young people requires **understanding, vigilance, and proactive involvement.** With these comprehensive strategies built on renowned psychological principles, you can support them and empower them to face life's challenges head-on.

3.3 Crisis Management and Suicide Prevention

Youth workers and youth (information) workers often find themselves at the crossroads of young people's lives. They are crucial in guiding and mentoring beyond recreational and educational activities. They are gatekeepers in a community of caring (see Chapter 1). One of the critical responsibilities in this role is **recognising, understanding, and intervening in case of mental health crises,** especially when there is a risk of self-harm or suicide.

Understanding the complexity of a crisis

Every young person has unique experiences, struggles, and circumstances. **Grasping the depth and intricacies of what someone might be going through** is crucial. For instance, let's consider Isabella, a graduate student. To her peers and professors, she epitomises academic excellence and confidence. Yet, deep down, she grapples with the trauma of past personal losses and the relentless pressures of trying to maintain her image.
Key theories, like Thomas Joiner's 'Interpersonal Theory of Suicide,' highlight that strong feelings of feeling like a burden and lacking a sense of belonging are major factors in triggering suicidal thoughts. If someone like Isabella starts to feel she is a burden to those around her and simultaneously senses a growing emotional distance from her loved ones, her risk increases substantially.

Recognising the signs

Imagine a youth centre named 'Lighthouse Haven' in a suburban community. This centre attracts young people from diverse backgrounds, offering various programmes and information such as art workshops, counselling sessions, hobby clubs, and online forums for members to interact.

Lighthouse Haven has a wall where members pin up their artworks or poems. A young person called Jordan has been pinning up darker-themed artwork, with poems expressing feelings of isolation and despair. Jordan, known for his bright, vibrant work, now creates art with themes of darkness, voids, and chains. Additionally, Jordan's attendance in the weekly 'Express Yourself' dance workshops has become erratic, and they have been retreating from group activities.

Engaging empathetically with young people

One day, after an art session, Aria, a youth worker, approaches Jordan. Instead of diving directly into personal territory, she discusses Jordan's art. She mentions, "Your art has taken a different direction recently. It's quite powerful. How do you feel when you create these pieces?" This gentle and non-confrontational approach serves a dual purpose. First, it assures Jordan that his art, an extension of his persona, is appreciated. Second, it allows him to discuss his feelings without making it solely about his wellbeing. This subtle shift in focus from personal wellbeing to artistic expression can sometimes make it easier for young people to open up.

Jordan hesitated momentarily, fiddling with his brushes, then looked up, eyes filled with relief and apprehension. "It's just... things have been tough at home," he started, "and this art…it's the only way I can scream without making a sound."

Aria nodded, indicating she was listening. She did not push for more details. Her primary goal was to ensure Jordan felt seen, heard, and safe.

Over the next few weeks, Aria made it a point to check in on Jordan periodically. Not always delving into deep conversations, but small gestures like saving him a seat in the art room, passing a book on artistic expression, or sometimes just a nod acknowledging his presence. This **steady, consistent support often speaks louder than any grand gesture**, reminding Jordan that he had someone in his corner.

In such scenarios, it is only sometimes about immediate solutions. Sometimes, it is about **building trust, showing consistent concern**, and ensuring they have someone to turn to when they are ready to share.

Supporting youth in a digital age: Proactive interventions

Murad, a diligent youth (information) worker, understands the power of online communities, especially in the modern age where the digital realm often becomes the first point of contact. These platforms offer anonymity and security, making them an attractive outlet for young people like Liam to express suppressed feelings.

While monitoring one of the online forum sessions, a post from Liam, a frequent member of Lighthouse Haven, caught Murad's attention. The content was subtle yet alarming. Liam mentioned feeling overwhelmed and hinted that the world might fare better without him.

For Murad, it was an immediate red flag. **In the digital age, words on a screen may lack tone, but they carry weight.** Recognising the gravity of Liam's admission, he promptly and privately messages Liam, emphasising his concern and urging him to share more if he feels comfortable. Murad's approach is non-invasive yet caring, ensuring Liam feels valued but not pressured. Aware of the potential risks, Murad calls in the centre's in-house counsellor, briefly explaining Liam's post. **Collaboration between professionals is vital** in such scenarios.

Following the immediate concern, Murad, in partnership with the team at Lighthouse Haven, recognises the need for a more structured programme addressing mental wellbeing. They roll out a workshop series titled 'Brighter Tomorrows'. This series does not just address clinical aspects of mental health and integrates **personal experiences, coping strategies, and group activities.**

Liam and other members are now part of a platform that aims to offer a space where feelings of isolation and despair may find a counterbalance in camaraderie and hope. Guest speakers who have navigated diverse challenges share their journeys, underscoring that seeking help is a courageous step, though not a weakness.

Working with young people, especially in digital spaces, necessitates a nuanced understanding of the medium and the unique challenges young people face. Youth (information) workers like Murad operate at the intersection of care, vigilance, and technology. Their roles go beyond mere administration and information provision – they are often the first line of defence and gatekeepers, ensuring that vulnerable young people like Liam are identified, supported, and steered towards appropriate help.

In the complex tapestry of wellbeing, the threads of recognition, immediate action, and sustained support are interwoven tightly. Each action, be it a prompt message or organising a workshop, contributes to the larger goal – **ensuring a safe and nurturing environment for young people to flourish.**

Effective crisis management and suicide prevention is an ongoing endeavour. It requires continuous learning, adaptation, and collaboration (see Chapter 4). The wellbeing of the youth rests on collective efforts and fostering a community of caring that values mental health.

"The young people I work with can lead quite chaotic lives and have complex and challenging family circumstances. Because of this, we are sometimes faced with critical incidents and child protection concerns. Mental health and suicidal ideation is the biggest concern amongst the young people I work with. We're lucky because the young people seek our help and we can link them in with the right service, counselling and so on. It can be emotionally draining but it is all worth it when you see the young person begin to feel better again. Staff have the option of seeking support and supervision from outside agencies which can be really helpful."

Linda, Youth worker - Ireland. (Guide to Youth Work)

An 8-step guide for proactive and informed crisis management

1. Be proactive, not reactive

- *Establish a safe environment that encourages open dialogue from the start.*
- *Foster trust through regular, non-intrusive check-ins with young people.*

Example:

Create weekly open forums or safe and youth-friendly spaces where participants can discuss any topic, ensuring they understand it's a judgement-free zone.

2. Stay updated and informed

- *Regularly update yourself on current trends, challenges, and issues.*
- *Ensure that all digital platforms linked with your organisation have community guidelines promoting mental wellbeing.*

3. Develop a quick response protocol

- *Have a clear procedure or protocol for immediate response to any signs of a crisis.*
- *Include steps to ensure the young person's safety, seek professional help, and post-crisis support.*

Example:

If someone like Liam posts concerning content online, have a two-step verification process where two youth workers assess the situation and decide on the best course of action together.

4. Collaborate and delegate

- *Establish a network of peers, colleagues, and professionals for collective action.*
- *Share responsibilities and ensure that multiple individuals can respond to crises, avoiding a single point of failure.*

5. Use resources wisely

- *Have a directory of helplines, counsellors, and community resources at hand.*
- *Develop and share an online resource and information hub for the youth, ensuring they know where to seek help, even outside organisational channels.*

6. Create awareness campaigns

- *rganise events, webinars, and sessions on the importance of mental wellbeing, resilience, and seeking help.*

Example:

A monthly event called 'Mental Health Mondays' where professionals share tips, and individuals can share their stories.

7. Reflect and review

- *Periodically review protocols, strategies, and interventions to ensure they remain relevant.*
- *Learn from each crisis to better tailor your approach in the future.*

8. Self-care and support

- *Recognise the emotional toll this role can have on you.*
- *Ensure you have avenues for support, reflection, and decompression.*

Example:

Organise monthly debrief sessions with colleagues to discuss challenges and seek support.

Further Reading

- Communicating About Mental Ill-Health - Mindframe
- Suicide - World Health Organization
- Suicide Prevention - CDC
- Crisis Management - PACER's National Parent Center on

Chapter 4:
When and How to Bring in Help

Where we used to speak of 'referring', we now talk more about 'bringing in'. This shift in language reflects a broader change in how we approach youth mental health and youth services.

Bringing in help requires coordination and collaboration among youth workers, youth (information) services, mental health services, local authorities, and other stakeholders. This is a new approach in which each organisation or sector has a distinct role in the playfield of mental wellbeing and is part of a caring community (see Chapter 1).

Youth work and youth (information) workers can be gatekeepers by engaging and/or collaborating with different intermediaries, agencies, and stakeholders. In essence, it means **a move from a one-way referral process to a more collaborative and inclusive model** in which the young person feels accompanied and supported by a caring community.

The main aim is to ensure that young people receive the specialised help they may require in a **respectful, empowering, age-appropriate and culturally sensitive** manner. This cooperative approach aligns with the demands of today's rapidly changing world, where cooperation is increasingly vital, especially in areas like mental health. Youth workers and youth information services play a crucial role in supporting young people, but they may not possess expertise in every relevant field. Hence, cooperation with experts from various domains is essential to provide young people with high-quality, reliable, verified information and guidance.

This **collaborative approach helps achieve the general goal of youth information services** – empowering young people with the knowledge and skills needed to make informed choices.

In this chapter, you will gain insights into the **significance of cooperation between youth (information) services and mental health professionals**, along with practical tips on establishing and maintaining effective partnerships to benefit young people's wellbeing. Throughout, we will emphasise the importance of collaboration as we explore the shift from 'referring' to 'bringing in' in youth mental health services.

Furthermore, this change in terminology reflects evolving practices in youth work and mental health services:

1. Collaboration and partnership: The term 'bringing in' suggests a collaborative effort between youth (information) workers, mental health professionals, other players, and young people. It emphasises the active involvement of all stakeholders in the process, fostering a sense of partnership and shared responsibility for the young person's mental wellbeing. It refers directly to the idea of community of caring introduced in Chapter 1.

2. Holistic support: Bringing in implies a more holistic approach to mental health support. It goes beyond a mere referral and involves providing comprehensive assistance. This approach considers not only the immediate mental health needs but also the overall wellbeing of the young person, addressing social, familial, and environmental factors contributing to their mental health challenges.

3. Reducing stigma: The shift in language helps reduce the stigma associated with mental health referrals. By framing it as bringing in support, it normalises the process and enhances the idea of accompanying the young person in this process. This can encourage young people to be more receptive to receiving support, as it feels less clinical and more like a natural part of their supportive relationship with youth (information) workers.

4. Empowerment and choice: Conveys the young person's notion of empowerment and autonomy. It suggests that they have a role as active participants in the decision-making process – enabling them to take charge of seeking the assistance they require (see Chapter 5). This method respects their independence and fosters a sense of responsibility for their mental wellbeing.

5. Long-term relationship building: Bringing in emphasises continuing the relationship between the youth (information) worker and the young person even after introducing specialised mental health support. It implies an ongoing support network, a community of caring where youth workers remain a consistent and trusted presence in the young person's life, even as they receive specialised assistance.

4.1 Understanding When Bringing in Specialised Help is Necessary

As we explored in Chapter 1, youth (information) workers play a crucial role as a source of support and guidance for young people. They are gatekeepers acting in a community of care – establishing a warm and welcoming environment and creating a safe space for young people to talk about their issues and struggles openly. Also, providing information empowers their decision-making, promotes their wellbeing and plays a preventive role in most cases. As a youth (information) worker, you should consider bringing in professional help for a young person experiencing mental health difficulties under various circumstances.

Recognising the need

Recognising a young person's struggles with mental wellbeing is the first step (see Chapter 2). In certain cases, the young person is already aware of a discomfort and may express it directly or indirectly. As mentioned in Chapter 3, your role as a gatekeeper is to:

- facilitate the expression of their feelings
- validate them
- offer resources adapted to their specific situation and needs
- approach the young person with empathy, understanding and support
- encourage open and non-judgmental communication
- offer assistance in finding an appropriate mental health professional or service, when needed

Early intervention can greatly improve the outcomes of mental health issues, so do not hesitate to seek help when needed.

In any case, you must be **attentive to the young person's warning signs** that require support and/or bringing in specialised help. Sometimes, you might observe signs of distress persisting despite individual prevention and promotion efforts. The young person could be grappling with persistent negative thoughts, appearing out of character, seeking assistance, or experiencing difficulties within the group or in individual one-on-one sessions. In such cases, seeking external assistance becomes crucial.

You can find more information in Chapter 2, where we have outlined a comprehensive list of potential signs and behaviours that could signify underlying mental health distress or issues. Familiarise yourself with these signs to identify the need to bring in help as soon as possible.

While warning signs indicate a young person may be struggling, other explanations are possible. Thus, it is essential to recognise that not all young people with mental health difficulties need bringing in a specialist. Some may find effective support or solutions without it.

While warning signs indicate a young person may be struggling, other explanations are possible. Thus, it is essential to recognise that **not all young people with mental health difficulties need bringing in a specialist.** Some may find effective support or solutions without it.

Example scenario where specialist help is needed:

Let's consider Emma, a 16-year-old high school student. Recently, her friends and teachers have noticed significant changes in her behaviour. She was once very outgoing and engaged but has become withdrawn and uncommunicative. Her grades have dropped drastically, and she has isolated herself from her friends. She has mentioned feeling hopeless and engaging in self-harm. Despite efforts by her friends and teachers to support her, these signs persist. In this case, bringing in a mental health specialist is crucial. Emma's symptoms are severe, persistent, and impacting multiple areas of her toe, indicating that professional help is needed.

Example scenario where specialist help may not be immediately necessary:

On the other hand, consider Alex, a 15-year-old who has been feeling stressed due to upcoming exams. He's been a bit more irritable than usual and having trouble sleeping. However, Alex still participates in his favourite activities, maintains good relationships with his family and friends, and has not shown any drastic changes in behaviour or academic performance. In this scenario, while Alex is experiencing some mental health challenges, they are not severely impacting his daily functioning or posing any immediate danger. Instead of bringing in a specialist right away, supportive measures like talking to a trusted adult, engaging in stress-relief activities, or seeking guidance from a counsellor might be sufficient. If these measures do not help and Alex's symptoms worsen, then considering professional help would be the next appropriate step.be sufficient. If these measures do not help and Alex's symptoms worsen, then considering professional help would be the next appropriate step.

Gathering relevant information

When considering bringing in help, gather relevant **information about the young person's signs, challenges, context, and specific support needs.** Understand how their mental health issues affect various aspects of their life and daily functioning. This information is important for making informed decisions about bringing in professional help.

If the young person's **symptoms impact multiple areas of their life and daily functioning,** you will see the need to bring in help. Working closely with a service with the knowledge, means, and experience on the issue or providing more specialised treatment is essential to speed up the young person's recovery.

When there are signs of immediate danger, persistent and severe symptoms, significant impact on daily functioning, concerning behavioural changes, feedback from others or openly expressed need for help, you should bring in mental health professionals and services. This will ensure the young person receives appropriate and timely support tailored to their needs.

Example scenario where key information is gathered:

Ali is a 15-year-old student known for his active school participation and passion for piano playing. Over the past few months, however, several alarming changes have been observed:

His performance in school has significantly declined. He used to be a straight-A student, but his grades have fallen to Cs and Ds. He has also stopped attending piano lessons, which he previously attended diligently.
He has been missing school frequently. When he does attend, he appears dishevelled and unprepared, which is out of character. He's also been avoiding meals and sleeping irregularly.
Once very social, he now spends most of his time alone in his room. He's stopped interacting with his friends and has lost interest in activities he once enjoyed.
His teachers and friends have expressed concerns to his parents. They've noticed his withdrawn behaviour, lack of class engagement, and sudden disinterest in social activities.
Though he hasn't explicitly asked for help, Ali has made several vague comments to his parents about feeling overwhelmed and hopeless.

While Ali hasn't shown immediate dangerous behaviours like self-harm, the persistent nature of his symptoms, their impact on his daily functioning, and the significant changes in his behaviour and academic performance suggest that he might be struggling with underlying mental health issues. In this case, it would be appropriate for Ali' parents to consult with mental health professionals to assess his condition and determine the best course of action. This professional help could provide Ali with the support he needs to address his mental health challenges and assist in his recovery.

Avoid attempting any diagnosis!

While identifying the need to bring in specialised help is important, remember that you should not attempt to make a diagnosis. A qualified mental health professional is the only person who can provide a proper diagnosis.

Assessing the need to bring in help

As a youth (information) worker, **you likely need more expertise, resources, or qualifications for in-depth evaluation**, making bringing in help an essential option. For example, you might observe signs of distress. The young person could be grappling with constant negative thoughts, appearing out of character or experiencing difficulties with peers or daily life. In such cases, seeking external assistance becomes crucial.

You can discuss the case with your colleagues, youth workers, educators, or professionals. Once you have gathered relevant information and understand the support the young person may require, it is time to bring in professional help.

Determine whether the young person needs a prevention and support service, an early intervention programme, or a more intensive and individualised intervention provided by community-based personnel. In cases of crisis, emotional distress, or evident severe disorders, it is vital to connect them immediately with specialised services.

It is important to recognise that **there is no universal one-size-fits-all guide for bringing in help.** Base the decision to involve other professionals on the individual's unique circumstances and needs.

Bringing in help from a specialised mental health service

The processes of **bringing in help from mental health services vary by country and region,** but generally, collaboration and referrals to public mental health services can be initiated by various professionals, organisations and stakeholders. These may include general practitioners or primary care physicians, school or youth centre counsellors, teachers, youth workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, community mental health centres, clinical social workers and even family or friends. This grouping is known as the 'community of caring'.

As detailed in Chapter 1, youth (information) services are pivotal in offering guidance and resources on mental wellbeing. However, it's crucial to understand the boundary between these services and professional mental health treatment.

Example scenario where boundaries are reached:

For instance, consider a teenager, Jabari, who approaches a youth (information) centre seeking help for anxiety. The centre initially provides Jabari with support and resources to understand and cope with his anxiety. However, as Jabari's needs become more complex, requiring clinical intervention, the centre brings in help from a professional psychologist. Jabari begins therapy yet continues participating in the centre's activities, finding comfort and community support. In this phase, the role of the youth (information) service and youth centre shifts. While they continue to offer a supportive environment and connection with youth activities, they defer to the mental health professional for Jabari's treatment. This delineation ensures that each professional contributes with their expertise where it's most effective whilst keeping the young person's wellbeing at the forefront.

Obstacles to bringing in help

Some youth centres and youth (information) services have qualified staff members who can provide first-hand psychological support, such as a professional counsellor or psychologist. However, this is only the case in some places. For example, a youth centre in a small municipality or youth information services in rural areas will certainly have a different capacity and resources from those in a larger city or capital facility.

In certain areas or countries, someone can only access mental health services through referrals from specific professionals, such as general practitioners or other healthcare professionals. These restrictions aim to ensure efficiency whilst ensuring that people receive assessments and care from qualified healthcare providers with the expertise needed to diagnose and facilitate treatment. The idea is to maintain the quality and appropriateness of care while streamlining the referral process. Though these approaches may ensure efficiency and avoid intrusion, they affect your role and may create bottlenecks for bringing in help at an early stage.

If this is your situation, your margin of manoeuvre as a gatekeeper will be, by default, more limited. While you might not be qualified for formal professional referrals, you can still **explore alternative methods to seek assistance.** The concept of bringing in help is more versatile than formal referral processes and should be adapted to various circumstances.

Even in this scenario, you can still follow your playfield and act as a gatekeeper by **activating your extensive network of multidisciplinary partners.** This highlights the importance of forming a community of care, which relies on strong partnerships and collaboration with stakeholders. Building relationships with mental health experts, service providers, civil society organisations, and public services ensures that young people in need can access the right care and treatment as soon as possible.

4.2 Steps for Bringing in Help Successfully

Bringing in specialised professional help is vital to supporting young people's mental wellbeing and involves a sensitive approach. Here are some general steps you may follow in the cooperating process with specialised services

1. Map your resources

We refer to this in Chapter 1 when discussing the need to know the (local) social map and context. This involves identifying accessible services and creating a comprehensive directory. Your objective is to research and gather information on specialised services and professional contacts at local, regional, and national levels, enabling you to provide the necessary support to meet the needs of the young people concerned. Also, knowing **the social map of the neighbourhood and the context** in which the young person lives may help you understand certain issues.

Focus on **identifying internal, local and community resources**, including in-house professionals and support groups, services and networks. Assess how welcoming, accessible, and affordable services are and ensure the confidentiality and privacy of young people seeking assistance. Remember that young people often may avoid seeking further assistance if they have a negative initial experience.

Example:

Mental health care system and healthcare providers, mental health services, healthcare facilities, local mental health professionals, governmental programmes, community-based care centres, civil society organisations specialising in mental health and wellbeing.

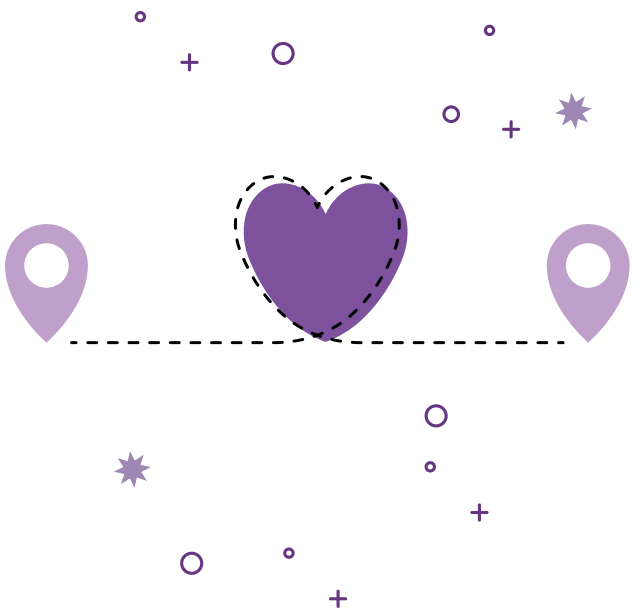
Consider including in the list of resources **existing support groups** (support groups and peer support groups). Support groups may be of great help for young people facing specific challenges such as coping with grief, LGBTQ+ issues, or bullying. Besides offering practical information, guidance, encouragement and coping strategies, these groups may provide a sense of belonging.

Peer-led support groups create safe spaces where young people can connect, share experiences and receive support from their peers. Remember that while support groups provide valuable emotional and practical support, they are not a substitute for healthcare.

Consider incorporating a wide array of **resources that address the diverse needs of young people.** This includes youth employment programmes, which provide valuable opportunities for skill development, confidence building, and fostering a sense of purpose. These can be a significant part of supporting mental wellbeing for those ready to engage in such activities. Alongside these, it's important to include resources like substance abuse and prevention programmes, suicide prevention and crisis intervention services, mental health hotlines, and reliable online-specific resources. Each plays a crucial role in addressing different mental health and wellbeing aspects, ensuring we offer comprehensive support tailored to various challenges and preferences.

Besides, do not forget that the **youth information offered by your service** or centre will be useful in promoting wellbeing, preventing mental health issues, and supporting young people. Engaging in activities involving social interactions, physical and mental exercise, fostering creativity, or connecting with nature boosts wellbeing and positively impacts mental and physical health. Yet, you must tailor this information to the young person's situation.

Compile the information into a **comprehensive resource directory** or map, including contact details, operating hours and descriptions of the services offered. This resource guide will be of great value for ensuring that young people receive appropriate care tailored to their needs and circumstances.



2. Building a supportive network (community of caring)

Once you have identified and classified the resources available, you focus on **building a local and community network of contacts** to improve access to services and resources. This network will ensure you can connect young people with the right services while staying updated on programme or service changes, eligibility criteria, operating days, available services and staff.

3. Bringing in effective help

Having a **clear procedure or protocol** will support you to bring in help effectively. If your organisation does not have one, consider developing it. Also, consider establishing agreements with one or more local mental health services and professionals.

Here are some general tips you may consider:

Engage the young person in the decision-making process

Before connecting a young person with professionals, you should engage them in a conversation about their needs and fears regarding professional help (see Chapter 3). This will help you to understand their needs and gain their consent. You may also need parental or guardian consent if the young person is underage. It is crucial to involve the young person in decisions about their need for treatment and recovery and discuss potential alternative options, if any.

Clearly explain the process of bringing in help

Provide a thorough explanation of the process to the young person. Describe what they can expect when seeking help from a mental health professional or service. Clarity and empathy help to alleviate any uncertainties or fears they may have. Young people need to feel in control of the process they are at the centre of.

Select an appropriate assistance

Choose the most suitable mental health professional, service, or support group based on your assessment and the young person's specific needs and preferences. Consider the nature and severity of their challenges when making this decision.

Imagine a 24-year-old student Nadia, who is experiencing moderate anxiety and occasional panic attacks. These symptoms interfere with Nadia's academic performance and social life. Nadia is open to therapy but is hesitant about medication. Since Nadia's anxiety is moderate but not debilitating, a psychiatrist (who can prescribe medication) might not be necessary at this stage. However, if the anxiety was severe or accompanied by other mental health issues, a psychiatrist's evaluation could be more appropriate. A psychologist or a licensed therapist specialising in anxiety disorders and cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) would be suitable. CBT is effective for treating anxiety and could provide Nadia with strategies to manage panic attacks. If Nadia prefers a more expressive or creative approach, you might consider an art therapist or a counsellor. Ensure the professional or service you advise is accessible to Nadia, considering factors like location, session timings and cost. However, keeping the option of a psychiatric evaluation open in case therapy alone is not sufficient.

Facilitate a supportive and warm connection

Strive to establish connections that are as warm and empathetic as possible. Enhance the young person's engagement and trust in the support by directly connecting them with the service provider or professional. This direct link increases the likelihood of their active participation and helps them to build trust. Facilitate this supportive connection by physically accompanying them to the service or connecting them with a service worker over the phone or other means. The more supportive and warm the connection, the stronger the bond with the specialised professionals, fostering a more positive and effective experience for the young person. This approach also enhances the idea of a community of caring that young people need to feel they are part of.

Contact the chosen assistance source

Initiate the process by contacting the selected assistance source, whether a mental health service, professional, or support group. Communicate with the professional or a worker from the service and confirm the young person's eligibility. It will be helpful to introduce the young person to someone familiar with the service or professional before they attend.

Protect their privacy and confidentiality

Safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of young people. Store files and personal information securely in a system or electronic file with restricted access. Inform young people about their right to privacy and confidentiality before getting their consent and sharing their details with others.

If you or your service has the necessary means, focus on ensuring a smooth process by facilitating contact between the young person and the assistance source or providing them with all the information needed to make contact.

Additionally, having a specific form to bring in help can enhance the process and become a **tool for recording and monitoring** all processes you have prompted, the services you cooperated with, and the assistance you have provided. After assisting in reaching out to mental health professionals, consider conducting follow-ups with the young person to ensure they have successfully connected with the professionals and are receiving the necessary support. Receiving feedback from stakeholders you cooperated with on how the process went will also help you improve your interventions in the future.

It is important, if possible, to provide **ongoing support and encouragement** throughout their mental health journey. As mentioned earlier, youth work activities and your youth information can also contribute to the young person's mental wellbeing and recovery process.

Successful cooperation with key stakeholders and clear protocols can significantly impact a young person's life by ensuring they access the expertise and resources needed to deal with their mental health challenges.

According to our YIMinds survey, while some youth centres and youth (information) services have well-defined protocols guiding their actions, a significant majority do not, despite being considered crucial by youth (information) workers. These **protocols contribute to timely intervention, close collaboration and constructive feedback** from professionals and institutions brought in for help. Their absence may create a sense of uncertainty and lack of direction among youth (information) workers, which may hinder support for young people in need.

Always **prioritise young people's wellbeing, confidentiality, and comfort** throughout engagement with specialised services and professionals. Your role as a youth (information) worker is not just about recognising when bringing in help is necessary but also about guiding and supporting them through a process they steer.

4.3 Cooperation with Mental Health Professionals

Cooperation is more than working together. It is the need and will to do something collectively that otherwise we could not achieve alone. It is also a desire to reach common goals and use knowledge and skills purposefully and in line with professional principles and quality standards. It is also cost-effective and helps increase levels of outreach.

As mentioned in previous chapters, it is not the role of a youth worker or youth (information) worker to diagnose, treat, or provide professional health-related advice. Of course, as gatekeepers, youth (information) workers can help with initial problem-solving, give first-hand advice (see Chapter 3), and bring in help from specialised services. But even in this context, you must know the various cooperation possibilities and existing partnerships with other services before sharing information with a young person and giving first-level advice.

Cooperation with mental health specialists in youth work or youth (information) work is essential in comprehensively supporting young people. It is a shared duty and responsibility.

Share reliable, updated, and quality information. By cooperating with mental health specialists, you can be sure that the information you share with young people supports their independence and is qualified, reliable, evidenced, and science-based.

When creating information for young people, always use information recognised by qualified authorities. You can also share workshop or training offers, counselling services, videos, forums, guides, or other resources endorsed or recognised by competent mental health organisations or institutions. Remember that the information you gather and share in cooperation with any partner should respect the principles of the European Youth Information Charter.

Enhance partnerships and cooperation with mental healthcare and services. Strong partnerships increase the awareness of the different possibilities and options offered to young people. According to this, young people could access help quickly and be accompanied more efficiently and comprehensively without requiring a formal referral system.

Contribute to strategies. Find out how and whether mental wellbeing and health are part of local, regional, national, and international strategic frameworks and objectives. You can map and think about how you can help these objectives by cooperating with mental health professionals and other stakeholders.

Promote efficiency and effectiveness. By working together, you harness mental, physical, and financial capabilities, significantly boosting efficiency and effectiveness. Sharing workload, time investment, expenses, and responsibilities allows for a more streamlined and impactful approach to youth mental wellbeing.

Professional strengths and roles. As mentioned in previous chapters, youth information services and workers mainly act as information gatherers and gatekeepers. They constitute a community of caring in which mental health professionals bring expertise, knowledge, and skills. Always stick to your role and playfield – promoting wellbeing, facilitating access to reliable and youth-friendly information, choosing suitable and attractive channels and language, and providing first-hand support. Aim for collaborative activities with specialised partners and professionals, such as joint workshops and seminars on stress management, coping strategies, and resilience-building. Youth centres and services in some countries have in-house mental health counselling support, though the vast majority rely on solid partnerships to bring in specialised help.

Never stop learning. Continuously develop and improve your mental health literacy. Numerous resources and training opportunities, both online and face-to-face, are already available at European and local levels. You can also be proactive and foster learning opportunities for you and your colleagues, e.g. open calls for grants or Erasmus+ funding. Be aware of trends that are spreading among young people that may affect their mental wellbeing, such as cyberbullying, grooming, isolation, etc.

Advocate and promote. Work together with colleagues and networks to promote mental wellbeing in youth work, reverse the mental health stigma, and support young people in need within your boundaries. Endorse advocacy initiatives to raise awareness about mental health issues, improve policies and actions within your service that facilitate young people's access to mental health support, and raise funds.

4.3.1. How to foster cooperation

Establishing cooperation with mental health professionals and services is an important step for your organisation and youth (information) service. Here, you can find some steps to initiate solid partnerships and ensure productive cooperation:

Goal Definition and Needs Assessment: Start by setting clear goals for the partnership, like offering mental health information to young people or organising educational events. Understand any regional or national mental health plans and tailor your strategy accordingly. Assess your audience's mental health needs, considering diverse perspectives from various age groups, interests, and challenges. This ensures a comprehensive and effective approach.

Resource Identification: Gather information about potential mental health professional partners, including local organisations and national bodies. Assess the financial resources available for this collaboration and explore funding opportunities, whether local or Europe-wide.Consider other resources like meeting spaces and digital tools for larger activities.

Building Connections: Reach out to professionals and organisations to discuss mutual benefits and establish cooperation. Arrange meetings to finalise goals, roles and tasks. Share your partnership plans with your network, including schools and youth clubs, to foster a unified information platform.

Action Planning: Develop a detailed cooperation plan outlining activities, roles, responsibilities, and timelines. Allocate resources effectively and communicate openly with your partners to discuss progress and evaluate outcomes.

Communication Strategy: Create a joint communications plan using various channels, such as social media, forums, and local media. Include your network in these activities to ensure widespread awareness. If necessary, develop a common visual identity for the partnership.

Ethical Considerations: Adhere to ethical standards, especially regarding confidentiality and rights in digital and face-to-face interactions.

Feedback and Evaluation: Regularly collect anonymous participant feedback to refine your activities. Handle sensitive feedback discreetly and take necessary actions in urgent situations. Finally, assess the outcomes of your cooperation to ensure it meets your goals and effectively supports young people.

Cooperation with mental health professionals can be successful if you plan carefully, discuss expectations and objectives, set boundaries, and maintain open and effective communication with your partners.

Further Reading

- Self-paced Learner's Guide
- Support Groups - HelpGuide.org
- Understanding Referrals - Anna Freud Centre
- Promoting Adolescent Health and Well-being: Current Overview, Resources, and Proposals - WHO

Chapter 5:
Youth perspectives

A key role for youth (information) workers is to customise counselling sessions and mental health services to meet the unique needs of young people. This involves assessing individual needs, using adaptable methods, and ensuring age and cultural sensitivity.

To best guarantee that something suits the needs of your target audience, it is essential to incorporate their voices and feedback into your products and services. You can achieve this **through youth advisory groups, feedback loops, or surveys.** These approaches ensure that services remain responsive to the evolving needs of young people, which is especially important on a topic as sensitive as mental health. You can learn more about these methods in 5.1 and hear directly from young people about what is important to them when being guided or counselled on mental health issues.

In addition to tailoring services to the needs of young people, it is vital to empower them. This ensures they feel confident enough to seek professional help and tackle their mental wellbeing challenges. **By empowering young people, you can promote early intervention,** reduce stigma, enhance personal growth, prevent isolation, and foster peer support. 5.2 addresses the importance of empowering young people and guides how to achieve it.

Finally, 5.3 talks about advocacy, a process aiming to influence public policy and decision makers, which is crucial in mental health support. It bridges the gap between research and practical application, ensuring we hear the voices of young people. Youth (information) workers can support advocacy efforts by providing training, developing advocacy skills, offering mentorship, facilitating collaborations, assisting in advocacy campaigns, engaging with policies, and evaluating advocacy efforts. **Proper advocacy can lead to a more informed and empathetic society,** supporting young people in their mental health journeys.

Placing young people at the centre of services, embracing peer-to-peer approaches, and promoting advocacy, help ensure they feel comfortable opening up about their issues and feel empowered to tackle their challenges. In this chapter, you will gain some insights to promote and support mental wellbeing putting young people at the centre of your work.

5.1 Incorporating voices

Central to your mission is the European Youth Information Charter and the principle that young people should be at the heart of your services. When designing and offering services tailored for young people, it is imperative to incorporate their needs, voices and opinions. Young people should not merely be recipients but active contributors to the design, delivery, and evaluation of services. Young people's participation is essential to ensure the quality of your youth information services. This empowerment enables them to shape services and activities that enhance their mental wellbeing.

Tailoring information and counselling to meet young people's needs

A fundamental aspect of your role as youth information workers is the customisation of one-on-one youth information and counselling sessions to align with the specific needs of individual young people. This customisation ensures that your support is not one-size-fits-all but relevant, meaningful, and effective for each young person. **Listen attentively to the young person's challenges and unique needs,** then adapt your advice and language to what you think best meets the needs. Some people might prefer you to open up about yourself to be more relatable, while others may prefer to get extensive information on the open questions they pose. Your initial approach might not immediately lead to success, and it might be necessary to adapt it throughout the conversation. Just be open and try to understand the young person's feelings, and you will eventually build the young person's trust.

Cultural and age sensitivity & relatability:

When asked, young people preferred counsellors with similar cultural and religious backgrounds. This inclination stems from the belief that such counsellors have likely navigated comparable challenges and struggles in their own lives. As a result, you perceive these professionals to possess a deeper understanding and empathy towards their specific issues. It may not always be possible, but cultural and age awareness are important to young people.

Ways for young people to share their voices:

ERYICA and Eurodesk have always promoted the integration of young people's voices into youth (information) services and have already put a lot of thought into these aspects in previous publications. In the Guide on Youth Participation in Youth Information Services (p. 20), the following four ways are listed:

Creating youth information with young people: This group of methods focuses on how young people can influence decisions about the type of youth information created.

Involving young people as peer-to-peer educators: This method enables young people to deliver youth information actively. Young people practise their active citizenship and experiential learning by taking on roles in disseminating youth information to other young people.

Young people co-steering youth information services: This group of methods focuses on how young people can influence decisions about running youth (information) services and their projects.

Evaluation, assessment and feedback: This involves putting in place simple, systematic approaches that enable young people to express their views on the quality of the information they receive. They sit lower down on the ladder of participation but are a vital part of enabling a youth (information) service to listen to the views of young people and to adapt the service accordingly.

We suggest studying the Guide on Youth Participation in Youth (Information) Services to learn more about these methods. Young people can, for example, be asked about their mental health needs and how youth (information) services can best support them. Young people may also act as gatekeepers. They can be co-creators for campaigns to meet young people's needs and raise awareness, or be trained to be peer-to-peer educators and promoters of mental wellbeing. A step further may be to provide first-hand advice to other young people in distress or at risk. The possibilities for the inclusion of youth voices into services are numerous, and you can come up with your own ideas on how to engage young people into creating and delivering your services!

Peer-to-Peer Approach: Unlocking the Benefits

Implementing the peer-to-peer approach is an invaluable strategy for addressing mental health issues among young people and providing timely support. This method empowers young people to become gatekeepers in a community of caring. It involves young people seeking guidance and support from peers who have faced similar challenges. The benefits of this approach are manifold, according to Timelycare:

- **Relatability:** Peers can deeply relate to each other's experiences, creating a non-judgmental and empathetic environment that fosters trust and understanding.
- **Reducing stigma:** Peer support can contribute significantly to reducing the stigma associated with mental health challenges. It sends a powerful message that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- **Increased comfort:** Many young people may feel more comfortable opening up to someone their age or someone who has navigated similar challenges.
- **Building resilience:** Peer support empowers young people to develop resilience and coping strategies as they learn from their peers' successes and setbacks.

To fully harness the advantages of the peer-to-peer approach, it is essential to establish structured programmes that facilitate meaningful connections among young people. Consider creating peer support groups, online forums, or mentoring programs where young people can share their experiences, offer guidance, and find solidarity in their journeys toward better mental health.

Lastly, we would like to set a good example by incorporating the voices of young people who have shared with us what they consider important when receiving guidance on mental health.

"For me it's important that a counsellor actually wants to help me and isn't only doing it because it's their job"
Lisi (19 years old)

"For me it's important that after opening up to someone I'm not treated any different than before"
Martha (14 years old)

By prioritising young people in your services, customising information and counselling to their specific needs, and embracing the peer-to-peer approach along with its associated benefits, you can empower a generation of mentally resilient youth. Continually seeking their feedback will further enhance their readiness to face life's challenges.

5.2 Empowering Young People

Empowering young people to cherish their mental health is crucial for their overall wellbeing and resilience, as well as the wellbeing of society. However, empowering young people to enhance their mental health requires a multi-faceted approach. This involves a variety of actors, like parents, educators, healthcare professionals, youth (information) workers and the broader community – a community of caring.

Empowering and equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills to recognise and manage their levels of mental wellbeing and emotions is crucial. This empowerment also includes practising self-care, supporting their peers, and speaking up about mental wellbeing for the development of resilience and confidence to navigate life's challenges and maintain good mental health. As mentioned in Chapter 1, as frontline professionals, youth (information) workers play an important role in a community of caring by promoting young people's wellbeing, preventing mental health issues, and supporting those needing specialised support.

By empowering young people regarding their mental wellbeing and health, you:

1. Promote early intervention and reduce stigma:

Adolescence and early adulthood are times when young people are more likely to experience mental health distress due to physical, emotional, and social changes and the difficulties of handling life transitions. Equipping young people with skills to recognise their mental state and emotions and encouraging open conversations on mental health helps them be more open to identifying potential issues. Youth work and youth (information) activities on mental wellbeing contribute to reducing stigma, increasing mental health literacy, and encouraging help-seeking

2. Enhance personal growth:

Learning to understand and support their wellbeing is not just about addressing mental health challenges but also about personal growth and self-improvement. By learning to identify and navigate our emotions, practising self-care, and communicating effectively, young people develop essential life skills. For example, they become more resilient and can better cope with life's ups and downs. Taking control of their mental health fosters young people's empowerment and increases their self-confidence and a sense of control over their futures. Acquiring these skills when we are young can have a lasting impact on mental health throughout our lives.

3. Prevent isolation and promote peer support:

Struggling with mental health issues can be isolating. However, empowering young people to speak up, encouraging open conversation about emotions and mental health, especially with their peers and close circle, and seeking support when needed can prevent them from feeling alone in their struggles. In addition, when young people have the skills to give first-hand support to their friends or peers in distress, it creates a more caring, empathetic and overall healthy community.

4. The power of youth (information) work, see Chapter 1

Empowering young people with the essential skills and abilities to realise their talents and maximise their potential benefits their mental health and has broader societal and community-wide advantages. It creates more informed, empathetic, and resilient young people who can contribute positively to their wellbeing and those around them.

As a youth (information) worker, you can play a vital role in supporting young people in developing the above basic skills related to mental health awareness, emotional management, self-care, peer support and speaking up. Chapter 3 also provides some tips and insights that you can also convey to young people when it comes to peer support.

You can use tools, techniques, and methods to create an appropriate environment for prevention and boost young people's confidence to speak up to break the stigma and seek help when necessary. For example, some strategies and methods are:

1. Educate and raise awareness:

a. Comprehensive mental health education is essential, but unstructured sessions or single-event activities may turn ineffective. School programmes, interactive workshops at youth centres involving mental health professionals, or online resources may be more effective. For example, you can:

- Organise regular workshops at your youth centre on mental health topics, such as stress management, anxiety reduction and depression awareness.
- Train young people in advocacy skills, such as public speaking and storytelling, to help them speak up about emotions and mental health issues and advocate for community change.

b. Educating and training youth (information) workers with evidence-based programmes and resources like Youth Mental Health First Aid so they can better support youth.

c. Encourage open and non-judgmental discussions about mental health at home, in schools and in youth centres and clubs to reduce stigma (See also Chapter 3).

d. Empower young people to lead workshops or presentations on emotional intelligence and mental wellbeing topics for their peers, which can be more relatable and engaging.

2. Teach coping skills:

a. Teach young people coping strategies such as mindfulness exercises and relaxation techniques to help them manage stress and emotions. In addition, activities like deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, and guided imagery can be effective.

b. Encourage them to keep a journal or diary to express their feelings, moods and thoughts. More specifically, you may encourage them to keep mood journals to help them recognise patterns in their emotions and identify triggers.

3. Foster resilience:

According to the Mental Health Foundation, "empowering children and young people to make healthy choices is more effective than telling them what to do. 'Own It' helps them notice what they're doing and how they're feeling - and then make decisions themselves." Therefore, part of your role is to support them in developing skills like critical thinking, problem-solving and other social skills which allow them to become more resilient. For example, you can:

a. Promote resilience-building activities, like engaging in hobbies, sports, or artistic pursuits that provide a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem.

b. Encourage problem-solving and decision-making skills to help young people navigate challenges.

4. Healthy lifestyle:

a. Promote regular exercise and a balanced diet, as physical health is closely linked to mental wellbeing.
b. Emphasise the importance of adequate sleep and good sleep hygiene.

5. Supportive relationships:

a. Teach effective communication skills, empathy, and active listening to help them with peer support and to build and maintain healthy relationships (see Chapter 3). To support them in developing those skills.
b. Encourage the development of healthy relationships and social connections. A step further would involve parents and caregivers in workshops and discussions about mental health with specialists to create a supportive network at home and in the community.

6. Access to resources:

a. Ensure young people know about available mental wellbeing resources. You may maintain a list of local mental health resources, crisis hotlines, and support organisations (e.g. mental health clinics).
b. Recommend credible online resources and apps that provide information, support and tools for managing mental health.
c. Advocate for accessible and affordable mental health care options.

7. Self-care:

a. Promote self-care practices, like setting boundaries, saying no when necessary, and prioritising self-esteem.
b. Encourage self-awareness and self-reflection to help young people understand their emotions and needs. You can assist them in creating personalised self-care plans that include activities they enjoy and that promote wellbeing, and you can provide resources like self-help books and apps.

8. Monitor and check-in:

a. Encourage regular check-ins with young people to assess their wellbeing and offer support.
b. Ensure you are aware and trained in recognising signs of distress or crisis, bringing professional help if needed and knowing how to connect youth to appropriate resources and professionals.

9. Create Safe Spaces:

a. Establish safe and inclusive spaces in youth centres, youth (information) services, schools and communities where young people can openly discuss their thoughts and feelings. In those spaces and your interactions with young people, create ground rules for respectful and confidential conversations.
b. Use positive reinforcement and praise to acknowledge young people's efforts in managing their mental wellbeing and emotions.

These tools, techniques, and methods may help you create an environment that promotes mental health awareness and equips young people with the skills they need to thrive, support peers, prevent mental health challenges, and identify issues in a timely manner.

5.3 Advancing Advocacy

Advocacy is a process led by an individual or group that aims to influence public policy and decision makers within political and social systems and institutions. Effective advocacy can lead to a more informed and empathetic society, supporting young people in their mental health journeys within a community of caring.

In terms of mental health, advocacy refers to the key strategy for public health promotion and prevention. It is particularly important for reducing stigma, enhancing access to care, fostering awareness and education, and influencing legal changes that benefit individuals and communities. It also serves as a vital bridge between scientific research and practical application and facilitates meaningful relationships between young people, support services, and decision-makers. It aims to ensure that their voices are heard and their mental health demands and needs are considered. Advocacy also helps underline the needs of organisations at the forefront and those providing mental health assistance by stressing the importance of resourcing them adequately.

Therefore, it is essential to promote youth advocacy initiatives for mental health awareness. Youth (information) workers can significantly contribute to the advocacy work of young people by offering advice, training, resources, and a network of allies. You may consider the following approaches:

a. Education and information:

- Provide young people with information about mental wellbeing and mental health literacy, including coping skills, emotional intelligence, information on common signs, and available resources and support services.
- Stress the importance of mental health awareness and its impact on individuals and communities through your information sessions and youth work activities.
- Help them understand their role in a community of caring and among their peers.

b. Advocacy skills development:

- Support young people's advocacy skills, including public speaking, writing, effective use of social media for campaigning, and engaging with policymakers and the media. Youth work activities can provide a very convenient ground to develop these skills.
- Help young people develop research skills to gather data and evidence to support their advocacy initiatives as part of your non-formal education activities.

c.Self-care:

- Promote self-care and mental wellbeing (see 5.2), ensuring young people care for themselves while advocating and supporting others.
- Encourage them to seek professional help or support when needed and to prioritise their wellbeing and mental health.

d. Mentoring and guidance:

- Offer mentorship and guidance on advocacy strategies and campaign planning to young people who are very interested in mental wellbeing and wish to become mental health advocates.
- Share your experiences and insights and connect them with experienced advocates in the field.

e. Collaboration and networking:

- Connect young advocates with mental health organisations, mental health professionals and experts, other like-minded individuals, and community leaders.
- If possible, facilitate partnerships with schools, colleges, and other youth organisations to increase their advocacy efforts and impact.
- Encourage young advocates to participate in local,national or international youth mental health events, conferences, and seminars to expand their network.

f. Advocacy campaigns:

- Assist young people in developing and implementing effective advocacy campaigns that raise awareness about mental health by showing how to:
  - ▶ Set clear goals,
  - ▶ Create concrete action plan
  - ▶ Identify target audience
  - ▶ Evaluate the outcomes
- Advocacy campaigns can include events, workshops, social media campaigns and awareness walks. At this point, it's worth mentioning that youth advocacy campaigns on mental health rely heavily on media-based prevention to raise awareness about effective interventions. However, false role models and negative images can perpetuate harmful behaviours, so promoting positive ideas and emotions is more beneficial.

g. Policy engagement:

It's crucial to collaborate with the relevant policy makers or other stakeholders, as well as appeal to public education and the use of the media to get your message out, influence public opinion and achieve the change they desire. Therefore, you should:

- Help young people understand how policies and legislation affect access to and use of mental health services.
- Encourage them to engage with decision makers through meetings, letters, and petitions to advocate for better and more accessible mental health care.

h. Evaluation and feedback:

Evaluation is an essential part of any advocacy campaign because it's an effective way to measure the campaign's impact and effectiveness, but also a way to learn and improve for the next campaign. Therefore, it is essential to:

- Teach young people how to measure the impact of their advocacy efforts through data collection, surveys, and feedback mechanisms.
- Help them adjust their strategies based on feedback and outcomes to increase effectiveness.

Youth (information) workers can empower young people to advocate more effectively and contribute significantly to mental health awareness by mobilising communities, reducing stigma, providing educational resources and activities, and advocating for policy changes. These efforts create a more informed and effective community of caring better resourced to support youth mental wellbeing.

Further Reading

- Professional Resources - Young Minds UK
- Harrison Riedel Foundation
- Mental Health Foundation UK
- Resources for Young People - Mind Organization
- Advocacy for Mental Health - WHO (Geneva, World Health Organization, 2003, from the Mental Health Policy and Service Guidance Package)
- The Activist Network Manual - ERYICA (Guide to Youth Participation in Youth Information Services)
- DIYouth Advocacy: A Guide to Mental Health Advocacy for Young People - DesYIgn Toolkit

Chapter 6: Motivation and Wellbeing: Twin Pillars of Youth (Information) Work

Throughout this guide, you explored the role of youth (information) workers in promoting young people's wellbeing and preventing mental health issues (Chapter 1). You learnt about warning signs of mental health distress amongst young people (Chapter 2) and read about tips and techniques to become an effective gatekeeper in the youth work playfield (Chapter 3). You read about the importance of knowing your boundaries, bringing in help when needed, and cooperating with mental health professionals and other stakeholders (Chapter 4). Besides, we also stressed the importance of considering advocacy and young people's perspectives in any discussion on mental wellbeing and support (Chapter 5).

Supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing is an endeavour with far-reaching implications for young people, communities and society. Young people face many challenges, from academic pressures to social media influences, that can significantly impact their mental health and change according to the societal and individual context. This chapter stresses the importance of enriching your mental health literacy and remaining engaged in continuous learning, monitoring youth trends, and skills development. After all, ensuring service quality also requires proactivity and professionalism, which are key pillars of the European Youth Information Charter.

Finally, this guide would not be complete without addressing the importance of ensuring your wellbeing and **self-care as a youth (information) and youth worker.** You play a pivotal gatekeeper role in connecting young people with the support they need. You serve as a bridge between young people and the available resources, offering guidance, information, and a listening ear. However, you must also recognise the significance of taking care of yourself. At the end of this chapter, you will also find some tips on prioritising self-care and maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

6.1. Remaining Engaged in Continuous Learning

Keep up your mental health literacy

As a youth (information) worker, you need to stay updated on all the topics concerning young people, and mental health is no exception. **The field of mental health is continuously evolving.** Concepts, disorders, approaches, and shifts in stigma and perceptions differ from 20 years ago. In a dynamic environment marked by non-stop evolution, pressure, and significant global challenges, new sources of concern and mental health distress impact the lives of young people.

The importance of mental health is increasingly acknowledged worldwide and features within the Sustainable Development Goals. Mental health is also at the core of the European Youth Goals, where the goal 'Mental Health and Wellbeing' underscores its significance in the broader context of young people's wellbeing and societal development. Indeed, depression ranks among the primary causes of disability, while suicide stands as the second leading cause of death within the 15-29 age group, according to the WHO.

Perceptions of mental health have changed recently – it is now easier to talk about mental health struggles and conditions than it was ten years ago. Several key factors have marked this transformation, each contributing to **a more open and accepting dialogue about mental wellbeing** and issues:

- **Increased public awareness:**
Over the past decade, there has been a notable increase in public awareness campaigns, educational initiatives, and advocacy efforts aimed at destigmatising mental health issues. Celebrities, influencers, and public figures have openly discussed their struggles with mental health.

- **Social media and technology:**
The rise of social media and digital platforms has played a crucial role in reducing stigmatisation. Young people are now able to share their experiences, seek support, access mental health resources online, and create a virtual community that empowers those facing mental health challenges. We know that young people get mostly informed online and how impactful it can be for them. Youth (information) services support young people's critical thinking, autonomy, and access to quality online information. Promoting media and information literacy is essential to youth (information) work nowadays.

- **Media representation:**
Contrary to the past, movies, TV shows, and literature are increasingly portraying characters dealing with mental health issues in a more realistic and empathetic manner.

- **Educational initiatives:**
Schools, universities, and youth work initiatives have recognised the importance of educating young people about mental health and emotional intelligence. Curriculum changes, workshops, and awareness-raising campaigns in educational institutions and youth centres have helped reduce the stigma associated with discussing and dealing with mental health issues.

- **Peer support and advocacy:**
Peer support groups, youth organisations, and advocacy organisations provide safe spaces for young people to share their stories, gain peer support, and seek basic

guidance. These groups have demonstrated the power of collective action in breaking down stigma.

• Professional recognition:
Mental health professionals and organisations have tried to improve public understanding of mental health issues. They have worked to ensure that mental health is seen as a legitimate field of medicine and psychology, leading to more people seeking professional help when needed. For instance, the World Health Organization set out clear actions for Member States, the WHO Secretariat and international, regional and national partners to promote mental health and wellbeing for all.

• Context:
The evolution of our socio-political context has put mental health in the spotlight, in a process that the voices of young people have particularly led. New tools to support wellbeing and address mental health issues have emerged. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple mental health support resources were made available as an answer to the impact that the situation was having on mental wellbeing. Besides, young people face other contextual triggers of mental health distress, such as eco-anxiety, labour precarity, or never-ending economic crises. Being continually informed by everything happening worldwide is also a big difference from previous generations. The constant exposure to bad news may harm the mood and emotions and can even lead to the appearance of physical symptoms. In this sense, information avoidance has become common for young people today. Besides, individual challenges or discrimination on any ground (e.g. gender, age, origin, disability, religion) are also important sources of distress among young people. Thus, it is not a coincidence that young people advocate today for a more prominent consideration of mental wellbeing and more accessible mental health support.

However, as a youth worker or youth (information) worker engaged with young people from multiple backgrounds, age groups, gender identities, origins, and cultures, you should bear in mind that **challenges and stigma persist in some communities and cultures** and that mental health may not always be easy to tackle. Moreover, if our knowledge and perception of mental health have been constantly evolving, there is no doubt that it will continue to change over time. So, never stop learning!

Knowledge, skills, and attitudes to support mental health and well-being

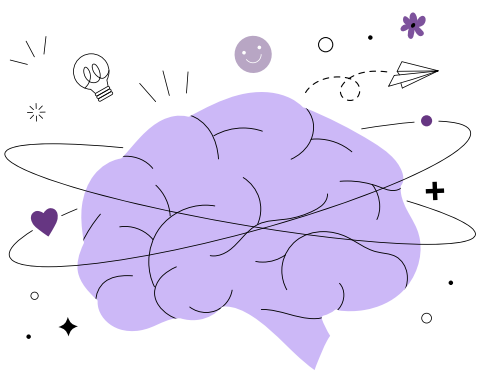
The European Youth Information Charter already underlines the importance of youth (information) workers proactively engaging in lifelong learning activities, key partnerships, and coordinated cooperation with other services, are vital to ensure high-quality services.

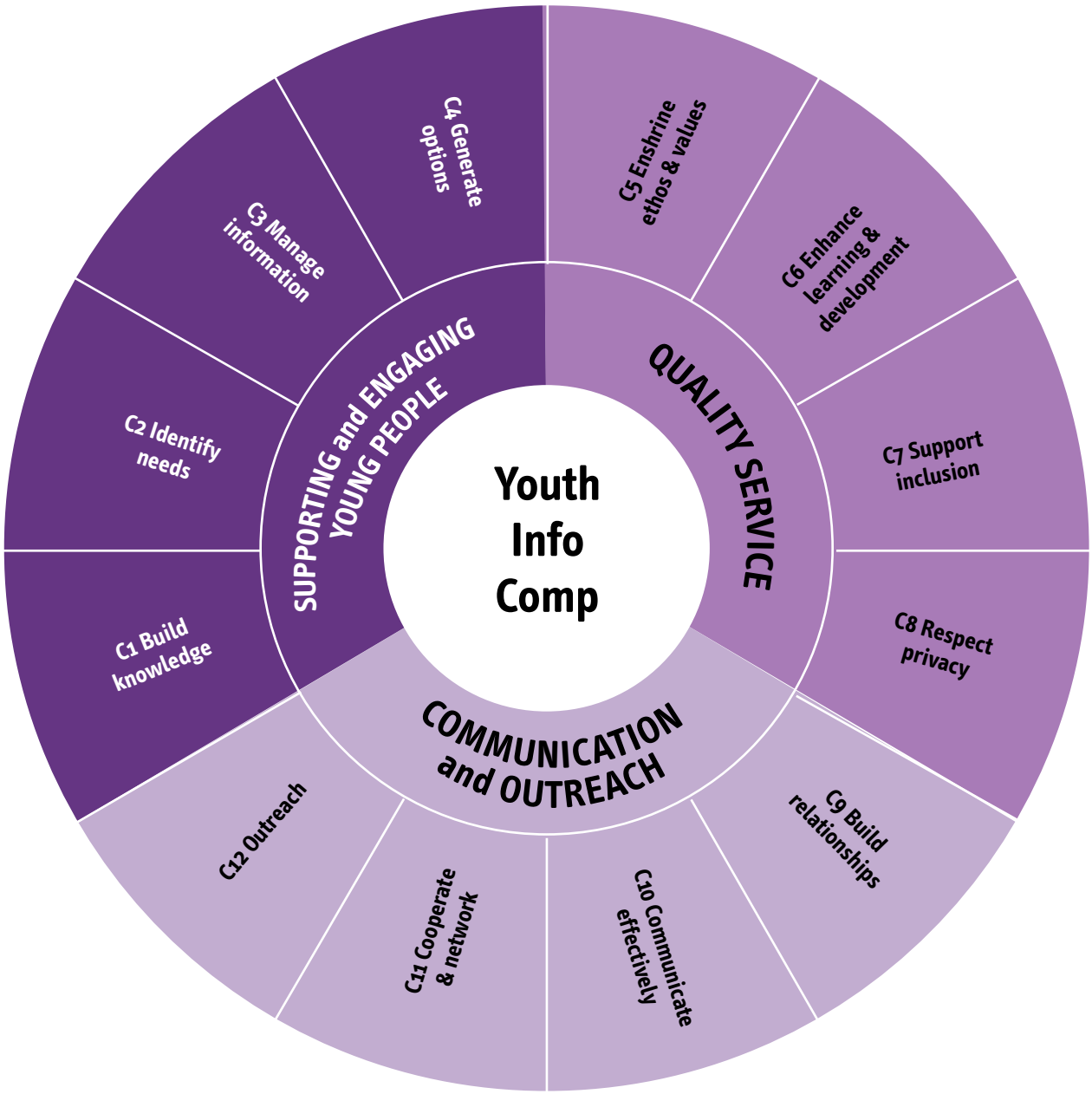
The European Competence Framework for Youth I(nformation) Workers (YouthInfoComp) is a professional compass. It defines the knowledge, skills and attitudes that youth (information) workers must have to assist young people and deliver high-quality services. YouthInfoComp stresses the importance of building and updating knowledge, actively listening to and engaging with young people to understand their needs, embracing continuous learning, and ensuring effective cooperation.

More information about youth (information) workers' skills can be found in Compendium on national youth information and counselling structures.

As youth (information) workers, you may not always know how to react or assist young people in distress. There is no shame in that. Remember that every young person is unique and that there is no magic mental health formula. It's better to wonder about the best attitude to adopt and ask yourself the right questions rather than acting without reflection or consideration. Chapters 3 and 4 provide tips and recommendations for asking yourself the appropriate questions, providing first-hand support, and bringing in help in case of need.

If you are not confident, don't forget you are not alone. You are part of a community of caring embedded in a mental wellbeing playfield (see Chapter 1). Talk to other colleagues, ask the opinions of your mental health partners, and never stop learning. There are different resources and training opportunities provided by youth work (e.g. Salto, Positive Mental Health) and mental health providers (e.g. Mental Health Courses UK , MHTTC, MindED, Young Minds) -to help you improve your mental health literacy. We recommend you stay informed about specific resources and learning opportunities in your country, region or language.





#youthinfocomp - [A European competence framework for Youth Information workers]

6.2. The Importance of Self-Care for Youth Information Workers

Regardless of whether you hold a formal role, supporting youth (information) workers as gatekeepers is crucial. Through these efforts, we enhance your resilience and competence in your role while preventing an undue burden of responsibility.

"It's important that youth (information) workers are given the support needed as well because it can be very daunting for them after listening to such realities many young people face."

Sarah, Youth information worker - Malta

Why is self-care important and how to implement it?

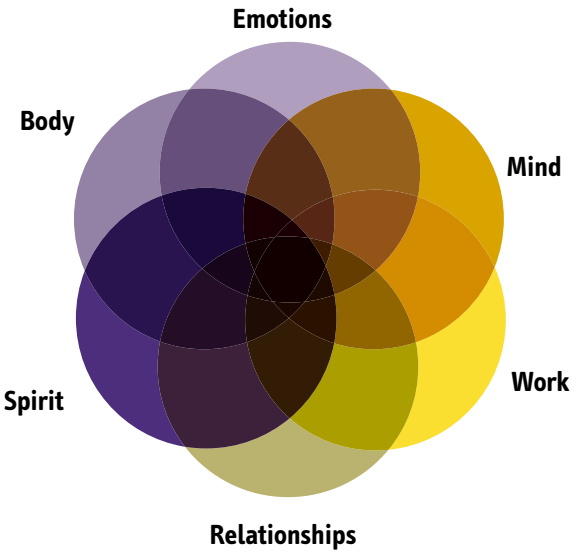
You probably work with young people facing many issues regarding intensity, duration, origin, background, etc. Chapter 3 discusses understanding, empathy, and genuine connection as key aspects of your gatekeeper's role. However, setting proper boundaries prevents empathetic fatigue and maintains your wellbeing and resilience.

What is self-care?

Self-care covers physical, psychological, emotional, social, and professional health. As you may guess, caring for yourself is very important for your work and personal life.

- Taking care of physical and psychological health
- Managing and reducing stress
- Honouring emotional and spiritual needs
- Fostering and sustaining relationships
- Achieving an equilibrium across one's personal, school, and work lives

From Introduction to Self-Care, School of social work, University of Buffalo (USA)



But how to implement self-care?

Here are ten tips to guide you to care for yourself:

1. Look around and figure out what is going on

The first step towards taking better care of yourself is knowing where your problem areas are. Identify what it is that is adding to your stress levels. Ask yourself what you can change and what you want to change the most. Perhaps share this with a friend or colleague and discuss strategies to minimise the stress in your life.

2. Unwind every day

Daily rituals can be a great way to de-stress. Can you find ways to take short, small breaks at work? This could be as simple as grabbing a coffee with a colleague or finding a quiet ten-minute spot to unwind and stretch your legs. Small changes can make a big difference.

3. Ask for help

If you are feeling overwhelmed with your workload, are there things that others could help you with? Do you have difficulty letting go and letting others do it their way? Do not expect other people to be able to read your mind. For things to improve, you may need to ask for support and consider new ways of doing things.

4. Create a transition ritual

It can be difficult to switch from work to non-work mode. A transition ritual is a useful way to help you mindfully put your work away when you arrive home or stop working if you work from home. Some transition rituals include

listening to music, changing into comfortable clothes or walking. Being accessible 24/7 is one of the quickest ways to burn out. It would help if you create boundaries between your personal life and work, and those you work with need to be aware of where these are.

5. Learn to say no (or yes) more often
Youth work attracts people who are naturally giving. Being the person your colleagues, friends and family rely on can be very draining. Being able to say no or at least not saying yes straight away is an important skill that stops you from taking on too much. Practise this and use statements like "I need to think about taking this on. Let me get back to you". If you feel you are not good at setting limits, perhaps this is something that you need to explore. Can you think of areas where you could say no more often? On the other hand, you may have stopped saying yes because you have been feeling drained. This may mean that you are missing out on new opportunities. Take some time to consider if you would be better off saying yes or no more often.

6. Minimise your distress exposure
When you work with young people who experience difficult situations or distress, it's important that you protect yourself from other external sources of negativity and stress where possible. Consider where you absorb negativity and stress. Do you see it on the news or on other TV shows? Do you listen to it on the radio? Do people close to you work with people who suffer or are in distress, and do you debrief with each other about your experiences? There is a lot of additional trauma that you may be exposed to outside of your work that you do not necessarily need to absorb. Consider ways that you can reduce your exposure.

7. Understand more about burnout and ways to recognise and prevent it
Some common signs of burnout include withdrawing from work or personal relationships, constantly feeling exhausted, losing motivation, or experiencing physical symptoms. Workplace supervision or debrief sessions may provide an opportunity to discuss burnout risks and identify prevention strategies for your workplace. From your side, you may consider taking some time off, ensuring enough sleep, and scheduling time for fun.

8. Organise or join a support group
Not all workplaces have opportunities for formal supervision and support, especially small organisations. Consider organising or joining a small group of people to get together regularly to debrief and offer each other support and guidance.

9. Commit to regular professional development
Regular professional development helps build skills and makes you feel like you are on top of your game. There are also many other benefits, including connecting with other youth (information) workers, learning new skills and hearing about new resources and tools.

10. Exercise and unplug
Find something you enjoy that helps you unplug and is easy to do, as you are more likely to do it regularly. Physical activity is one of the best ways to reduce stress. It does not have to be high-powered running or gym work. Can you park further away from work and walk? The idea is to start small, enjoy it and turn it into a habit. Activities involving social interactions, physical and mental exercise, development of creativity, or contact with nature enhance our wellbeing and contribute to our mental and physical health. So do not hesitate to discover your painting skills, take out your guitar, practice meditation, or watch a theatre play with friends.

Adapted from: Mathieu. 2007. Transforming Compassion Fatigue into Compassion Satisfaction: Top 12 Self-Care Tips for Helpers."

"I had a good relationship with one of the young people on the project who was living in a high risk situation, and was going through a bad patch and was suicidal. That was tough and I was very worried about them. We were lucky to have a part time therapist in the project and together we all put a plan in place, and thankfully the young person came through. For me, outside of work I'm an active person, and I went out walking a lot, and I was doing a little meditation at the time, and those activities helped to keep me balanced."

Maura, Youth Worker - Ireland (Guide to Youth Work, p.13):

Do not forget to check stress indicators and pay attention to the signs:

- Are you tired?
- Do you sleep and eat well?
- Do you have physical pain?
- Do you forget things more than usual?
- Don't ignore comments from your colleagues, friends or family, as they might notice things you do not see yet!

What are the consequences of not taking care of yourself as a youth information worker dealing with mental distress?

Do you know the oxygen mask analogy? When you board a flight, the flight attendant explains the safety procedures before take-off. They always say, "should an emergency occur, put your oxygen mask on first before attempting to help those around you." The message is clear. Put yourself first! **To support others, you need to start with yourself**.

"My motivation to start taking out more time for myself was due to feeling burnt out and stressed from work. I was tired of letting my work life affect my personal life. I didn't want to bring my issues from work home.[...] You have to take care of yourself first, before you can take care of others. "

Ameera McIntosh, Youth worker - Canada (Caring for yourself is a radical act, p2)

Not taking care of yourself can have consequences for you and people around you too. Bear in mind that burnout and vicarious trauma are amongst the main risk factors of working with youth experiencing difficulties or mental health distress.

Burnout:

"A state of emotional, mental and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It reduces productivity and saps your energy."

Self-care. Making it work for youth workers

Vicarious trauma:

"Vicarious trauma is a normal response to the ongoing exposure to other people's trauma. Working to support people who have experienced trauma, and hearing, seeing and learning about their experiences, can have a cumulative effect on you and many aspects of your personal life."

Vicarious trauma: Self-care to manage the impact of other people's trauma

Vicarious trauma can have consequences for your perception of the world. You may feel guilty about your situation and disconnected from others. You may also be unable to sympathise with others' stories and be irritable and intolerant.

What are the risks of not taking care of yourself?

Even if you want to commit to your work as much as possible and love your job, work is only work. **The balance between altruism and self-care is a delicate one.** If you assist someone while you are already burned out, frustrated and/or with little tolerance or patience, you cannot help them properly.

Also, **excessive assistance can be counterproductive.** When a young person depends only on you for support and you begin to feel overwhelmed by the responsibility, it is normal to bring in help. Remember that you are not a mental health professional, nor are you expected to be one. Knowing your professional and personal boundaries is key to your wellbeing. That is why having a network of experts is important to support young people who need further support (see Chapter 4).

Apart from young people, your colleagues and your friends and family can also suffer from your mood and behaviour. Therefore, **looking after yourself is not selfish**, as it also influences the people around you.

Remember that many of the wellbeing promotion and mental health prevention measures you suggest to young people also apply to you!

For more practical tips, check the guide for youth workers How to Find Meaning in it developed by Agència Catalana de la Joventut (Spain).

Further Reading

- A Mental Health Resource for Youth Workers and Volunteers - Foróige
- Mental Health Power – Youth Workers' Guide - Mieli
- Mieli Mental Health Finland
- Free Mental Health Courses - MindED
- Mental Health Resources - Young Minds
- Mental Health Training - Young Minds
- Positive Mental Health
- EYID 2021 Report - MindMyMind

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