Peer Leadership Programme

SAFESPACE4YOUTH

YOUTH COMMUNITY

Why Peer Support?

Peer support is unique in the sense that it is the exchange of support between people who have 'experiences in common', and the relationships formed in peer support are based on mutual understanding and equality. This program aims to empower young people to become leaders, promoting positive mental health and supporting their peers to cultivate their own life pathways through collective social action.

Peer Leadership Program 4 Modules

1. Understanding youth mental health
2. Facilitating peer workshops
3. Social Action and Youth
4. SafeSpace promotion

MODULE 1:
Understanding youth mental health

LEARNING OUTCOMES

KNOWLEDGE

Learn about mental health and challenges that young people face

SKILLS

Learn activities that foster well-being and self-care; coping strategies, develop self-awareness & resilience

COMPETENCES

Learn to recognise mental health issues among young people and how to help them
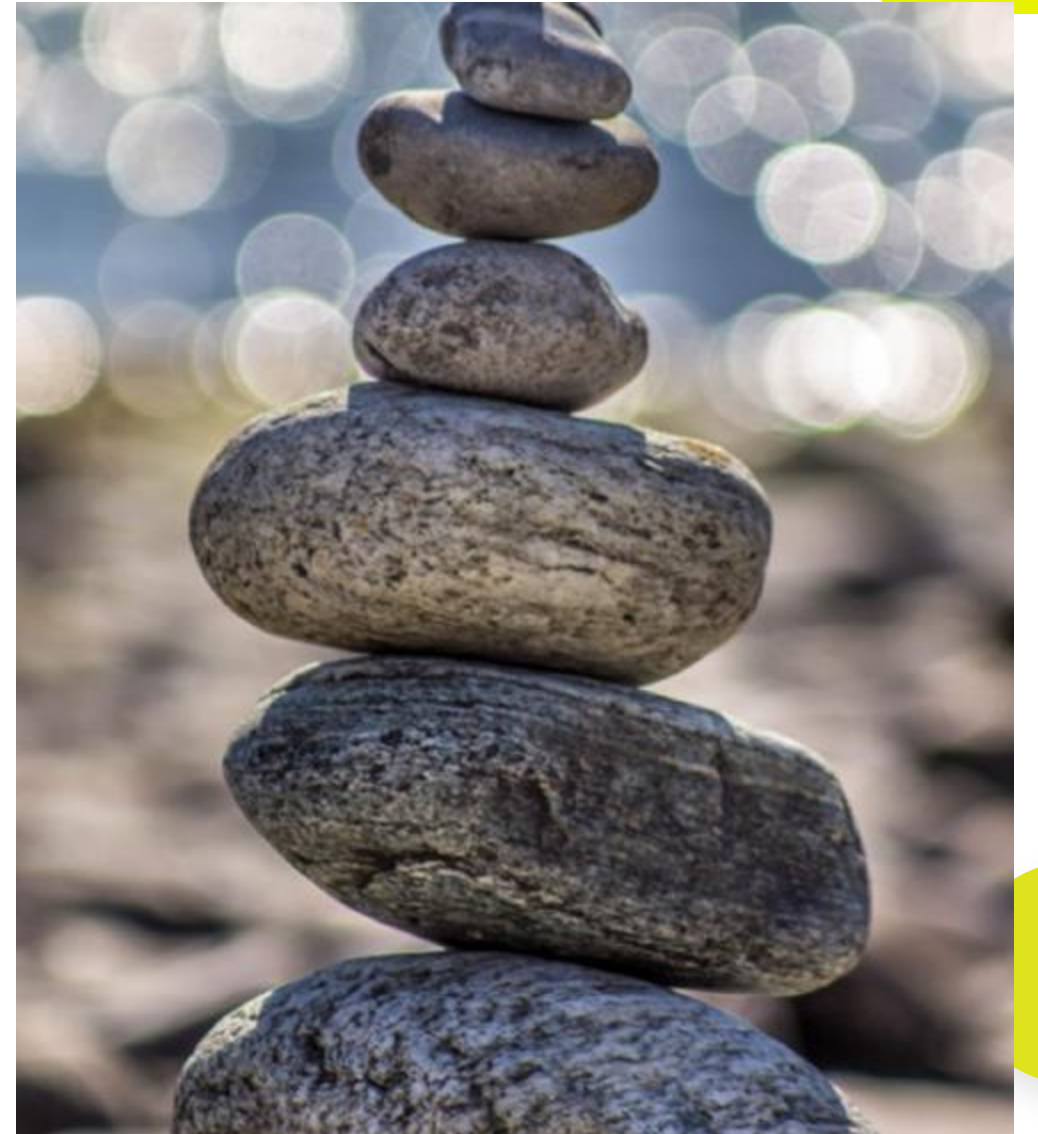
What is mental health?

Mental health includes our **emotional, psychological, and social well-being**. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine **how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices**.

What is mental health?

According to the WHO mental health is a "**state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own capabilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and can make a contribution to his or her community**". Being mentally healthy means being able to fulfill oneself, to adapt to circumstances, to be productive at work, to contribute to life in the community, as well as to relate to others. (European Youth Portal, 2022).

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Mental health of children and youth

*Some numbers from **Unicef report: The State of the World's children:** On My Mind (2021)...*

- **Three adolescent lives are lost because of mental health difficulties** in Europe every single day.
- Almost **20% of** European **boys** aged 15 to 19 suffer from **mental disorders**, followed by more than **16%** of girls the same age.
- **Nine million adolescents** in Europe (aged 10 to 19) are **living with mental disorders**, with **anxiety** and **depression** accounting for more than **50%** of all cases.
- These numbers were increased by Covid19

Most common mental health disorders among young people:

- Stress
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Eating disorders
- Social media (leading to FOMO, and self-esteem issues)

Understanding Stress Among Youngsters

Stress is a **natural response** to the **demands** and **pressures of life**. For youngsters, it can arise from academic expectations, social relationships, and personal challenges. Stress **affects** both the **mind** and **body**, leading to symptoms such as irritability, difficulty concentrating, and changes in appetite or sleep patterns.

Depression Among Youngsters

Depression is a common mental health disorder among young people, characterised by **persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and a loss of interest in activities**.
It can have a significant impact on their daily lives and overall well-being.

Some behavioral changes may be:

- Tiredness and loss of energy

- Insomnia or sleeping too much

- Changes in appetite — decreased appetite and weight loss, or increased cravings for food and weight gain

- Use of alcohol or drugs

- Agitation or restlessness — for example, pacing, hand-wringing or an inability to sit still

- Slowed thinking, speaking or body movements

- Frequent complaints of unexplained body aches and headaches

- Social isolation

- Poor school performance or frequent absences from school

- Less attention to personal hygiene or appearance

- Self-harm — for example, cutting or burning

- Planning a suicide or a suicide attempt

Case study: Jane

Jane is a 16-year-old high school student who has been feeling increasingly sad and withdrawn over the past few months. She has stopped participating in activities that she used to enjoy and has difficulty concentrating on her schoolwork. She often feels tired and has trouble sleeping at night. Jane's parents have noticed these changes and are concerned about her well-being. They encourage her to talk to a mental health professional and support her in seeking help.

With the help of therapy and support from her loved ones, Jane has been able to develop coping strategies to manage her depression. She practices self-care activities such as exercise, spending time in nature, and engaging in hobbies that bring her joy. Jane also attends support groups where she can connect with others who understand her experiences. Through these interventions, Jane has made progress in her journey towards recovery.

Case study discussion:

- What are your self-care activities?

- Do you know anyone who suffers from depression? How would you support them?

How to help a depressed teen?

- Establish a **trusting relationship** – create safe and non-judgmental space
- **Active listening and emotional support** – validate their feelings, express empathy, and provide reassurance that they're not alone
- Assist in **goal-setting**
- Support seeking **professional help** if needed
- Facilitate **peer support**
- Promote **self-care** and **healthy habits**
- Monitor and **follow up**

Anxiety and Social Anxiety

Anxiety is a common mental health disorder characterised by feelings of worry, fear, and tension.

Social anxiety is a specific type of anxiety that involves intense fear or discomfort in social situations. It can interfere with daily life and lead to **avoidance** of social situations.

Eco-Anxiety

Eco-anxiety is defined as a **fear and sense of doom about the possibly irreversible climate change disaster** that is occurring in our world. Anxiety can be too intense and **overwhelming** because the climate crisis is such a **complex issue** and lacks a clear solution.

A recent study from Germany showed that **55% of young people were concerned by the impacts of climate change on their wellbeing**.

How does climate change affect youth mental health?

- Youth may have to live through a **frightening experience** like an extreme weather event, and they may fear for their safety and have **strong reactions** that last even after the weather event is over.

- Many children and teens **follow the news** through digital connections, so they are much **more aware of changes in the broader world**.

- Many youths feel especially affected by climate change and wonder about their futures in this world and may **have anger towards previous generations** for their actions leading to climate change.

Eco-Anxiety - Timothy from Germany, 26 years old

„As young people, we tend to experience climate anxiety more intensely. We are the generation that will bear the consequences of a warming planet. Climate anxiety among the youth is often attributed to a sense of powerlessness that arises when governments do too little to stop climate change.
We have now reached a period where we're seeing the consequences of climate change unfold in front of our eyes. We have all witnessed or even been personally affected by natural disasters like forest fires, droughts and floods. There is a sense of inevitability about climate change. Too little is being done, too late. Climate anxiety in young people has shot up, as they fear for their own and the planet's future."
(www.greens-efa.eu)

Discussion

- Have you experienced eco-anxiety? If yes, what helped you to cope?
- Do you know of any organisations in your area that are tackling environmental issues?
- (suggestion: you can invite leaders from these organisations to your youth club for a discussion/workshop)

Eating disorders

Anorexia - severe restriction of food intake, leading to unhealthy weight loss and distorted body image.

Bulimia - episodes of binge eating followed by compensatory behaviors such as self-induced vomiting or excessive exercise.

Eating disorders

Anorexia and bulimia are the most known ED. There are many others such as:

- orthorexia - an obsession with eating healthy food
- bigorexie - an obsession with exercise and using steroids
- binge eating

Factors contributing to eating disorders:

- compensation strategies towards one's stresses, restlessness, suffering
- societal pressures,
- body image concerns (pursuit of an ideal body),
- genetic predisposition,
- psychological factors such harsh self-criticism fueled by low self-esteem and perfectionism.

CASE STUDY

Healing from an eating disorder

Link to the source

When a peer consultant helps

One wounded heart. One girl. One cake. One big hate.

That was the first time I fell into bulimia. Full-blown. It's like an avalanche and you fall deep down somewhere and you don't know where. Even hitting the hard ground was painful. All I had to do was hurt myself again, not physically, but mentally. When I found out he was dragging it out with another, I felt so humiliated, stupid and useless.

Instead of hating him, I hated myself. In my anger, sadness and flood of emotions, I ate one giant cake and had a few more cakes on top. I was sick of myself. "You're fat, you're ugly, that's why he cheated on you!" That phrase resonated in my head. I had to go throw up the food, the remorse was terrifying, painful and seemed so real.

Over time, I began to deal with all my ailments this way, until one day I said enough. I don't know why, but I felt I couldn't take this anymore. I contacted a peer consultant at Anabelle. She was incredibly helpful. And I thank her for that. Her courage, motivation, honesty and positive attitude changed the way I look at myself. Thank you for that!

Case study - eating disorders

- What do you find interesting about this case study?

- Have you encountered body shaming in your circles?

- How would you help someone who is struggling with an eating disorder?

Supporting someone with an eating disorder

Express interest
- mention changes that you have noticed but don't comment on the body or weight, authentically expressing that you feel concerned and would like to understand what is going on with her/him (E.g. "I have noticed that you have been exercising a lot recently, a few hours per day. Is everything ok? How are you feeling?")

Active listening
- don't say "I think you have anorexia" (it may lead to resentment)
- instead, ask questions and actively listen to what they tell you - maybe they will open up and say what is happening in life

Be patient
- it's not easy to admit that we have a problem
- express that they are not alone in their problems, express interest and care, slowly building trust

Help them seek professional support
- if they open up, we can motivate them to seek professional support

Impact of social media on body image

The media plays a significant role in shaping societal beauty standards and can negatively impact body image. **Unrealistic portrayals of beauty** can contribute to low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction, potentially increasing the risk of developing eating disorders.

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Social media addiction:

- is a behavioural addiction that is defined by being overly concerned about social media, driven by an **uncontrollable urge to log on to or use social media, and devoting so much time and effort to social media that it impairs other important life areas.**

- Studies have shown that the constant stream of retweets, likes, and shares from these sites **causes the brain's reward area to trigger the same kind of chemical reaction seen with drugs like cocaine**.

- Social media has a significant **detrimental effect on the emotional well-being of chronic users and their lives,** negatively impacting their real-life relationships and academic achievements.

Social media addiction

- An estimated **27%** of children who spend **3 or more hours a day** on social media exhibit symptoms of **poor mental health.** Overuse of social networking sites is much more problematic in children and young adults because their brains and social skills are still developing. (US data)

- A study performed by California State University found that individuals that visited any social media site at least **58 times per week** were **3 times more likely** to feel **socially isolated** and **depressed** compared to those who used social media fewer than 9 times per week.

Recognising a social media addiction

To determine if someone is at **risk of developing an addiction to social media**, ask these 6 questions:

- Do they spend a lot of time thinking about social media or planning to use social media?
- Do they feel urges to use social media more and more?
- Do they use social media to forget about personal problems?
- Do they often try to reduce the use of social media without success?
- Do they become restless or troubled if unable to use social media?
- Do they use social media so much that it has had a negative impact on their job or studies?

A "yes" to more than 3 of these questions may indicate the presence of a social media addiction.

Social media addiction

To prevent and address social media addiction, it's important to establish **healthy online habits**. This can include:

- setting limits on social media use,
- engaging in offline activities,
- seeking support from friends, family, or professionals if needed.

Effects of Social Media on Self-Esteem and Dopamine Addiction

Social media can have a significant impact on self-esteem, often leading to **comparisons, unrealistic standards, and feelings of inadequacy.**

Additionally, the constant scrolling and notifications on social media can **trigger dopamine addiction, making it difficult to disconnect and negatively affecting mental well-being.**

FOMO - Fear of Missing Out

FOMO refers to the anxiety-inducing feeling that **one is missing out on exciting experiences, events, or opportunities**.

Impact of FOMO:

- **Social comparison -** Teens compare their lives with idealized versions presented on social media.

- **Increased stress and anxiety -** Constantly trying to keep up with others' activities can be overwhelming.

- **Excessive social media usage** - Constantly checking updates and fearing being left out.

- **Restlessness and discontentment -** Inability to enjoy the present moment due to worrying about missing out.

Developing emotional intelligence and resilience

- Mindfulness practice (noting and befriending emotions)

- Grounding

- Exercises

- Regular sleep

- Support of family, friends, therapist (real connections)

What is resilience?

Resilience might have different meanings or attributes given based on the settings. When it comes to psychological or emotional resilience, it usually refers to the **ability of a person to "bounce back," recover or even thrive amidst adversities.** (Center of the Developing Child Harvard University, n.d.)

- What do you currently do for your well-being?
- **Find out, which areas of your life need more attention, which ones you are already involved in.**
- Even small steps can lead to a change.

Area of self-care	What do I currently do?	New techniques that I would like to try or the ones that work for me but I don't practice them.
Ψ Psychological		
Emotional		
Physical		
Sleep		
Social		
Spiritual		
Overall summary		
What is an obstacle for me?	What negatively affects how I feel and my overall well-being?	What can change when I adopt new habits, how will I feel?

Self-care

Self-care refers to **intentional actions** taken to promote **physical, mental, and emotional well-being**.

It involves activities that **nurture and recharge oneself**, leading to improved overall health.

What do you currently do as part of self-care activities?

Why practice self-care?

1. Improved Self-Esteem:

- Fosters a sense of self-worth and self-compassion.
- Helps teens develop a positive self-image and confidence.

2. Stress Reduction:

- Helps teens manage the pressures of school, relationships, and other responsibilities.
- Reduces the risk of burnout and promotes a better work-life balance.

3. Enhanced Focus and Productivity:

- Improves concentration and cognitive function, increases productivity and efficiency in schoolwork and other tasks.

4. Better Relationships

Emotional intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (EI) refers to the ability to **recognise, understand, manage, and express emotions effectively**.

It involves **being aware of one's own emotions and those of others** and using that knowledge to navigate social interactions and make informed decisions.

It is important that teens/young people can:

- **recognise when they're feeling heightened emotions** or
- discern when a situation may arise **where there is the potential for them to get emotional,** and
- put processes in place that will **soften the blow of these emotions**.

As a youth worker, be a good listener and show empathy.

Apps for managing emotions

MoodKit: helps to manage negative feelings, keeps track of mood shifts and promotes mindfulness activities.

Smiling Mind: provides meditation assistance to young people and encourages calmness, contentment and clarity.

Calm: offers guidance on calming breathing techniques to employ when feeling heightened emotions.

Spotify: While this isn't a specific mindfulness or wellness app, music is sometimes the best therapy for helping a teen to manage their emotions. Encourage your teen to put together playlists that will counteract negative emotions, e.g. a playlist of soothing, calm songs for when they're feeling angry or irritable.

How not to talk to someone with mental health illness?

- "Everything is in your head, try to change your mindset."

- "You should spend more time in nature, it's the best antidepressant."

- "You have no reason to be unhappy. What are people who have a terminal illness or live in poverty supposed to do?"

- "Yeah, that sounds bad. I also don't have an easy life recently."

- "With faith everything could be easier. Try to think about that."

Advice for Youth Workers on Noticing Mental Health Issues Among Teens

- Create a **safe and supportive environment**
- Observe and **document concerning behaviours**
- Initiate a private **conversation**
- **Active listening** and **validation**
- **Avoid making assumptions** or **diagnosing**
- Provide **information** and **resources**
- Encourage seeking **support**
- Maintain **confidentiality** and boundaries
- Collaborate with **other professionals**
- Follow up and **continue support**

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Suggested activities

1. Befriending emotions

Develop and enhance participants' emotional intelligence by increasing their awareness and understanding of different emotions.

2. Building resilience

Promote an open and honest discussion about mental health to reduce stigma and enhance participants' knowledge of resilience and coping strategies.

Thank You

Resources

European Youth Portal, „How much you know about mental health?", 2022. https://youth.europa.eu/get-involved/your-rights-and-inclusion/how-much-do-you-know-about-mental-health_en

Unicef report: The State of the World's children: On My Mind (2021),
https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-worlds-children-2021

'Mental Health is Wealth - So Why Do Europe's Youth Have Neither?':

https://www.greens-efa.eu/opinions/youth-mental-health/

Hickman, C. et al, "Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey".https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00278-3/fulltext

'Social Media Addiction',
https://www.addictioncenter.com/drugs/social-media-addiction/

'How to teach your teenager emotional intelligence': https://study.uq.edu.au/stories/how-teach-your-teenager-emotional-intelligence

How FOMO Impacts Teens and Young Adults: https://www.verywellfamily.com/how-fomo-impacts-teens-and-young-adults-4174625#citation-1

Jana Kyriakou, Eating disorders: yoga and mindfulness for prevention and support of treatment (webinar)

How to help a depressed teen:
https://www.healthline.com/health/depression/how-to-help-a-teen-with-depression#actively-listen