



LET'S TALK

Developing gender sensitive mental health program for young people



LET'S TALK ABOUT...

Youth mental health

HANDBOOK FOR YOUTH WORKERS



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ABOUT THE PROJECT





*Children are changed not by programs, but by interpersonal relationships
because it is from them that the student's will on whether
or not they will perceive the teacher and confide in them emerges.
And that is the teacher's tremendous privilege.*

Dejana Bouillet according to Kožić Komar, Pijaca Plavšić (2022)

INTRO

This manual was created out of the need to help the many experts who, in the course of their daily work, encounter ever-growing demands and challenges related to the overall well-being and impaired mental health of young people. These demands and challenges urgently call for the experts to develop new skills and, to some extent, alter the experts' roles. This applies to a wide range of professions that work with young people within the system of formal and informal education, community work, civil society, and various institutions — teachers, coaches, educators, psychologists, instructors, social workers, pedagogues, rehabilitators, and others. They are all aware of the problems and difficulties relating to mental health and socio-emotional development that are becoming ever more prevalent and growing in number. On the other hand, they are also aware of the limitations of their role — they do not (always) have the required professional competencies — and sometimes they are the only people the young people feel comfortable speaking openly and honestly with. Also, understanding that a young person has a certain mental health problem or difficulty and providing them with appropriate first aid in collaboration with other experts is, on occasion, a prerequisite for working with a group or individuals on other topics and in other fields (curriculum). It is especially important in these situations to be a part of the safety net that all young people need. Finally, the role of all of these educators and experts, which implies that they often interact with young people and spend a great deal of time with them, also gives them the precious opportunity to act preventively and serve as a type of safeguard in the process of development and protection of young people's good mental health.

With its general approach, suggestions of activities, and advice regarding working with youths that includes the informal education Methodology, this manual will be especially helpful to educators who have no prior education in the field of psychology and mental health protection — the teachers and school support staff as well as various activity leaders responsible for organising structured free time for the youths in their communities. Generally in our work, and especially in the "Let's Talk" project — within which this manual was developed — we advocate for a strong connection between educational work in a formal context (most often in schools) and youth work in a non-formal and informal context (most often in local associations and youth centres, sport or culture clubs and centres, youth clubs, and/or various other civil society organisations), because we believe that these two inherently different professions intertwine and complement each other. This intertwining and complementing will be of particular significance in the field of providing support and protecting young peoples' mental health.



YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH CARE

1. HOW TO SUPPORT YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH CARE?

It takes a village to raise a child.

African proverb

In the context of **working with youths in all areas** (formal and informal **education**, as well as community work — called **youth work** in literature¹), it is important to emphasise that society as a whole needs to nurture the mental health and overall well-being of its members through its values and principles that are reflected in all aspects of life. When talking about youths, we are talking about the systems in which they spend most of their time (the educational system, informal education, community work, health care system, labour system, etc.), out of which formal education has significant potential (due to the time youth spend there, so it is frequently the biggest source of stress and a risk factor), as well as community youth work because it is founded on important principles that can support mental health.

In our work, we emphasise the importance of intertwining formal, non-formal and informal education with community youth work because the latter offers a specific Methodology and approach without which the field of formal upbringing and education, as well as society as a whole, cannot claim to have a comprehensive approach toward mental health protection. The NESET² network report states that instead of a **reactive approach** toward mental health problems, **an integrated approach should be proactive, comprehensive, and systemic**, and it should focus on developing **individual competencies and policies as well as improving social relations**. So if, for example, we are talking about school, the interventions have to be integrated into the daily classroom practices (at the level of the curriculum and classroom climate), extracurricular activities, as well as activities that pertain to the climate of the entire school. They also have to include all of the employees, support collaboration with parents, and coordinate their work with other services.

With its principles and Methodology, community youth work is an important resource that all educators can use if they want to work on protecting youth mental health. In a narrow sense, youth work is a **profession** that helps youth learn about themselves, others, and society through **informal educational, social, political and/or cultural activities**. It is based on a clear set of values and the **voluntary nature of the relationship** between a young person and a youth worker (leader, mentor). Experts in this field understand how to build relationships; **they promote the personal and social development of youths** by helping them **learn about themselves, others, and society** through informal educational activities that combine enjoyment, challenges, and learning (National Youth Agency for England, 2013).

1 Youth work has differing levels of "regulation" in different countries and systems of formal and non-formal education. In certain countries, it exists as a recognized profession with prescribed qualifications and necessary competencies, fields of work, and additional documents, such as a code of ethics and similar. In other countries, this type of work is usually carried out as part of youth work within civil society organisations.

2 NESET is an advisory network which is made up of experts who work on the social dimension of education in the EU; it was established by the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture. Read more here <https://nesetweb.eu/en/>.





The holistic approach to education, which has been receiving increased support, implies that the topics of personal and social development, as well as the acquisition of civic competencies, are in many countries part of the curriculum and/or extracurricular activities; and it is precisely those activities which are inseparable from modern Methodology integral to community youth work.

The protection and promotion of youth mental health requires system-wide engagement (adequate policies and practices, provision of adequate services, etc.). However, the individuals within that system are also very important, so the youth workers, who may not have much influence over the policies and the provision of essential services in the field of mental health, can still engage in a variety of activities and, by adapting their approach, have a significant positive impact on the promotion and protection of youth mental health. This manual intends to provide encouragement, understanding, and suggest activities — primarily to individuals. In the paragraphs that follow, we will go over three crucial aspects you should bear in mind if you wish to safeguard the mental health of the youths you work with.



1.1. THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL HEALTH

The first aspect relates to the attitude and belief that general subjective well-being, which includes the interconnected components of psychological, emotional, and social prosperity, is a prerequisite for success in all facets of an individual's life and, consequently, of society as a whole.



In this regard, all youth work activities (regardless of whether they are part of formal or non-formal education or community work), and especially those that help develop certain skills and (academic) knowledge, mental health, and well-being, should be the focus of attention; that is to say, certain competencies should not be developed at the expense of general well-being.

1.2. SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The second important aspect of youth work is being aware of the importance of close and supportive relationships. Being a trusted confidant, expressing interest, being a good listener, or providing a shoulder to cry on can sometimes be enough to start fostering an environment that cares about the overall well-being of children and youths.

*Sometimes I just need someone to listen to me and make me feel better.
Not everyone needs a quick solution.*

Girl (17), from the "Let's Talk" research

Regardless of the context and primary profession, every adult in a formal (teachers, support staff) or non-formal educational system or community work (youth workers: **individuals who work with young people**) may, and frequently does, have a tremendous impact on the lives of young people. Individuals who work with youths in non-formal education and in the community certainly have a unique advantage since they have more freedom in selecting activities. Also, this type of youth work focuses on relationships that young people enter into voluntarily. However, experts in formal education can also be important individuals on whom young people can rely when facing challenging life situations, who can support them or act as positive role models from whom they can learn more than just academic competencies. We deal with this aspect in more detail further on and especially in the chapter **GUIDELINES FOR YOUTH WORKERS**.

Some of them come to me because they have no one else to talk to.

School psychologist, from the "Let's Talk" research



In the context of the relationships, the importance of being interested in the "world of youth" should be highlighted. Depending on the generational gap — which does not necessarily have to be related to the chronological age of an "adult person" (coach, youth worker, activity leader, teacher, school support staff, etc.), sometimes it has more to do with one's lifestyle, awareness, attitudes, and values — individuals who work with youths might face greater or lesser challenges while trying to understand that world. Indeed, even though they are part of the community and society in which they find themselves, youths are seen as a distinct group within a society, particularly in sociological Discussions and theories of the last couple of decades³. This is also due to the specific developmental psychological needs (especially regarding adolescents), as well as due to a specific lifestyle and interests of a person during early youth, which are usually different when compared to full adulthood. Of course, the social context within which they find themselves also has a significant influence on their lifestyles, choices, values, and attitudes. On the other hand, adults might lead completely different lifestyles, and they sometimes "take away" responsibility from youths, and sometimes even their "voice", due to their own convictions or a lack of awareness.



Adulthood (often a form of age discrimination) is the practice of adults making decisions and assuming responsibility on behalf of youths. "It is founded on the belief that adults are better experts than young people when it comes to their problems, dreams, fears, and abilities, and it includes behaviours and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement" (Bell, 1995, according to Peric 2023).

During the pandemic, we completely forgot about them (young people) when adopting measures in various areas.

Psychotherapist, from the "Let's Talk" research

These type of practices prevent young people from fully developing, especially when it comes to developing a positive self-image that includes self-respect, personal power, personal space, freedom, and own will. The "Let's Talk" research (<https://letstalk-project.eu/results/>) has revealed that youths, in particular, regard it as an issue — "Our problems are not as important, significant, in comparison to the 'life that awaits us'". Also, they are aware of the practice of someone else deciding on their behalf: "How you should feel" and "Do you have the right to feel sad, depressed, and aimless?". Furthermore, what societal roles have we assigned to you as a young woman or young man when you enter adulthood? And how you're allowed to feel. Additionally, if I am a young person who is gender fluid, can I openly talk about that with people in my surroundings? In this way, society creates erroneous interpretations and assumptions about what a young person needs, desires, can achieve, and can develop into.

At this point, it is important to provide a slightly different perspective: on the one hand, the way modern western societies view young people is changing, so we are striving to make the potential of young people a collective value and for their vulnerability to be taken into account when developing various policies. On the other hand, we are still unable to find a way how to achieve and nurture a relationship that is at the same time based on equality and mentorship, a relationship of guidance and leadership between adults and children/youths, because in "societies in which everyone wants to stay young as long as possible, those who are biologically young find it ever more difficult to find adults that can provide them with clear instructions on how to assume the identity of adulthood" (Tomić-Koludrović, 2008).

³ In the context of age, a group of youths is also defined differently in different countries — however, the majority of laws and official documents across EU define youths as an age group between 15 and 30 years of age, which also includes adolescent children (15 to 18) and young adults (18 to 21).

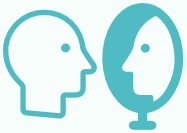


An approach that we find to be healthy and correct is the approach that sees youths as equals in terms of their own experiences and therefore partners in mutual learning, as well as a valuable societal resource — a "diamond in the rough" that needs to be polished to a high shine with a lot of interest, attention, patience, and guidance.

1.3. TEACHING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Finally, teaching about mental health is an exceptionally important aspect of caring for and supporting youth mental health. This aspect implies direct work, which may take place through extracurricular activities, school projects, and local associations or public institutions, but also through learning and teaching (other topics and contents), which is actually the biggest challenge. It involves interacting directly with groups of youths outside of regular class (workshops and lectures) to discuss the importance of mental health and teach socio-emotional skills (communication, emotional literacy, resilience, cooperation, etc.). Such activities also have tremendous potential for improving young people's resilience in regard to a variety of life problems and challenges, as well as for breaking the stigma and overcoming stereotypes that individuals with mental health issues still face.

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS



SELF-AWARENESS

The ability to recognize and be aware of one's own emotions, strengths, and virtues; a feeling of self-worth and self-esteem



SELF-REGULATION

Good self-control, successfully dealing with stress, setting goals and motivations



RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING

The ability for evaluation and reflection, your own personal responsibility and ethics



EMPATHY

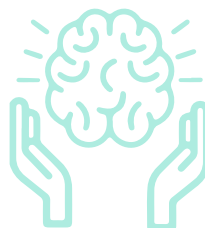
Developing empathy/ability to understand other peoples' needs, situation, and feelings, respect others, take into consideration different perspectives



RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Cooperation, asking and providing help and support, communication, assertiveness

You can read more about socio-emotional skills and how to teach them in the "HOW DO I FEEL? LET'S TALK ABOUT... EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING". Also, we recommend the website Advancing Social and Emotional Learning - CASEL (<https://casel.org/>).



Some, if not all, aspects are slowly changing the view of education, whereby work with young people can be a kind of educational and developmental partner for all young people, but also their teachers in the school environment - especially if we look at work with young people as an educational Methodology that is effective in "engaging young people who are excluded from regular education or face certain obstacles in learning" (2012, cited in Coburn and Gormally, 2015).



Principles of youth work (in the community)

- ☑ Ensure equal opportunities for youths.
- ☑ Based on a professional relationship between the youth worker and youths, which is not necessarily related to the formal education of the youth worker.
- ☑ Youths are partners, a target group with whom one collaborates (not clients, students, or patients).
- ☑ Provide support to youths in developing their own system of values and social skills in order to assist the independence process and integrate youths into society as active citizens.
- ☑ Provide services, and youths make the decision on whether they want to participate.
- ☑ Encourage youths to be critical of their own experiences and the world around them.
- ☑ Support youths in making (informed) decisions regarding personal responsibility in a society and community.
- ☑ Complementary with formal education to encourage youths to realize their own potential.
- ☑ Work together with other participants from all sectors of society so that society can respond to the needs of youths.

Do you recognize some (or all) of these principles in your work?

1.3.A. ROLE OF YOUTH WORKERS IN MENTAL HEALTH PROTECTION

Youth work is based on the idea that youths (and especially adolescent youths) are at a specific stage of development in which they require support — a turning point in life, transitioning from childhood into adulthood. The process itself carries complex changes and numerous conditions that the youths have to meet in order to achieve independence and adulthood, and from that perspective, every youth worker should exercise a holistic approach — support them in developing their own systems of value and social skills to aid them in making informed decisions, avoiding risk behaviours, taking responsibility for their own lifestyle, and contributing constructively to the development of the society of which they are part.



Social skills — defined as the ability to adapt and behave constructively that allows people to deal successfully with the demands and obstacles that life throws at them on a daily basis— **help youths avoid potentially risky behaviours**. Therefore, by increasing their self-confidence, a young person can resist peer pressure more easily, communication skills may help reduce misunderstandings, and consequently, conflicts, while emotional management can lead to greater control over the expression of anger.



A youth worker, depending on the context of their work, can play a very significant role when it comes to youth mental health. Aside from helping youths acquire social skills and values, as well as empowering youths to deal with everyday challenges (prevention), they can work on promoting mental health and stigmatisation of problems through various activities, and inform youths about services available in the local community; they can, however, notice when a young person requires professional mental health support and direct them to places where they can receive the required psychological or psychotherapeutic support.

*** How do you see your role in the protection and support of the mental health of youths with whom you work?**

1.3.B. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

The relationship between a youth worker (working with youths in a community, in a narrow sense) and a young person is based on the acceptance and validation of youths, honesty, respect, confidentiality, trust, and reciprocity (Young, K., 1999). Individuals in that profession (youth workers) play a multifaceted role; youths view them as role models, mentors, educators, and someone with whom they have a friendly relationship, but youth workers can never (and should not strive to) replace the relationship a young person has with members of their family and peers.

It should be borne in mind that through relationships we teach young people self-awareness, taking responsibility for themselves, representing themselves, their needs and boundaries, but also cooperation, respect and appreciation of others.

What is true for relationships in general is true here as well, and we need to teach young people that, but also model it through our relationship with them. Two types of responsibility are extremely important here – personal responsibility (I can recognize what I need, what I want, what I think and feel, I know how to communicate and represent myself to the environment - I take responsibility for my well-being), and responsibility for the relationship. At the same time, it is important to understand that as an adult we have a greater responsibility for the relationship with a young person due to greater power and freedom to decide on the process and a way of creating activities, which stems from the role itself.

Responsibility for the relationship implies responsibility for the quality of the relationship between two or more people. It consists in the fact that we are interested in what someone with whom we are in a relationship is like, what that person (doesn't) think, (doesn't) want, (doesn't) need, but also that we clearly show that person our interest.

Arambašić, 2021

Adults (youth workers, teachers, important adults) take care of the responsibility for the relationship in the context of youth work. Namely, adults have a greater responsibility for the quality of relationships with young people, which includes showing initiative, support and care for the young person and their needs. In this way, young people learn how to take personal responsibility and, consequently, responsibility for the relationship.



We are responsible for creating a good relationship with the young person, strengthening their capacity to stand up for themselves, to recognize their needs, but also for opening up space for the young person to learn cooperation and responsibility for the same relationship. Practicing responsibility for the relationship implies an interest in the young person, what are their needs, wishes, how they feel, involvement in decisions and inviting them to participate, by which we send them the message that they are important to us and that we respect them.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE RELATIONSHIP AND FOR THE YOUNG PERSON INCLUDES:



A genuine interest in who the young person is as a person, as well as their well-being. Listen to what they say, ask them about things that interest them, and remember what they say. Following up on what they said shows that you listened and that you care. This opens up a space of safety and trust, which is the basis of all healthy and quality relationships, but also of strengthening one's self-esteem and self-worth.



Opening space for emotions — there are no good and quality relationships if we don't talk about our emotional states. The more we share our emotional states, especially our own vulnerabilities, fears, sadness, anger, shame, but also happiness and gratitude; we open the door to young people so that they too can express themselves more clearly and provide them with space for the development of emotional literacy. At the same time, we should keep in mind that we share what is right for us, respecting our own boundaries, but also the boundaries of the young person.



Active listening — when you spend time with a young person, be fully present and give them your full attention. Remember, you can and should be the resource that a young person has. Wherever you can, actively listen to young people without interrupting. Be open, honest and authentic. Share something about yourself and ask them something interesting about themselves. Also, encourage them to actively listen to you when you share your ideas, attitudes, opinions, because in this way we teach them cooperation and responsibility for the relationship.



Checking and monitoring — the young person's development - don't be offended if they don't want to talk to you about how they are today - if they say 'No' today, it doesn't have to be true tomorrow. Try again another time, especially if you notice a change in the young person's behaviour. When we don't take their conditions personally, we give them a chance for freedom, their pace of opening and regaining trust and security.

Example: I see that you are not ready to discuss this topic now. I want to tell you that I am interested in what is going on and when you are ready to talk, I would like you to contact me.





Feedback — for building self-image, and therefore self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses, feedback from others is of crucial importance. So use every opportunity where you see it as applicable to give feedback to the young person. Also, encourage them to give it to you as well. One of the forms of feedback is the “*sandwich structure*”. This type of a feedback consists of three structured and complimentary parts:

1ST PART — we focus on the positive aspects of one's performance and results

2ND PART — we describe where we see the space for improvement

3RD PART — concrete proposal for improvement in the future

When giving feedback be as specific and concrete as possible so that the feedback itself serves the other person for their progress, satisfaction with what they have done, as well as gaining insight into a more complete picture of their own performance.

Example: I think you positioned yourself very well and stood up for yourself when deciding on the program at today's meeting. You spoke up and took responsibility. It seems to me that you could still work on concretizing your ideas and expressing more clearly what you don't like, but also giving suggestions on how you would like it to look. I suggest that we study your ideas together and help you shape them. What do you say?



Setting your own boundaries — what can you do to help the young person, when and where can they contact you and what will you do if you can't help them directly?

Setting boundaries allows others to know what to expect from you, learning what it's like to stand up for ourselves, and helps young people feel safe and know that you will treat them with respect, and that they have a right to their integrity. With boundaries, we teach young people **self-control**, **structure** and how to set boundaries themselves. Also, the boundaries allow us to see the space to which level we can help the young person, and at what point it is too much for us and we refer the young person to other specialists. You can read more about this topic in the chapter “**FIRST AID IN MENTAL HEALTH - WHAT IF I NOTICE THAT SOMETHING IS WRONG?**”



Involving the young person — Depending on your context and opportunities, consider *trying something new together* with a youth group or with a young person individually. Trying something new or challenging can create a space to talk about mental health, build a sense of accomplishment, boost confidence, and help build relationships if you participate in the activity together. Young people may also find it easier to talk about their feelings while doing activities outside of your primary scope of work.



Think about cultural background — Think about what you know about the things that influence a young person's views, attitudes and beliefs. These can be big social factors, like race or religion, or personal things, like pressure to do well at school/college/work or attitudes within their friend groups. Listening to young people is a great way for a better understanding of what is happening to them and the factors that affect their lives.

Read more about the relationship between a youth worker and the young person, especially about the potential in mental health protection, as well as the limits, in the chapter **GUIDELINES FOR YOUTH WORKERS**.



1.3.C. A GENDER-SENSITIVE APPROACH IN WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Youths are not actually a homogeneous group — there are numerous specificities and various challenges which the individuals and certain groups face (gender, especially minority gender identity, disability, geographic distance, migrant background, lower socio-economic status, etc.); and often there are multiple aforementioned challenges and obstacles, so we are also talking about the so-called **intersectionality**¹ — **the overlapping of different (minority) identities**.

When working with young people — the issue of sex (biological-social categories) and **gender**² (categories associated with inner feelings and social roles) is becoming increasingly important. The progress of societies toward **gender equality** between men and women differs depending on the cultural-geographic area. Furthermore, experts in certain fields are facing new obstacles, such as recognizing that gender is not a binary category for everyone (male or female) and that many young people cannot or will not identify with binary gender categories. Young people who do not define their gender or who define themselves as gender fluid, as well as those who question their gender identity, are becoming more visible, and due to the numerous prejudices and the gender-stereotypical system in which they are growing up, they are faced with discrimination as well as other challenges and difficulties. As a result, gender becomes a **significant factor in a variety of challenges and risks** that affects a young person's overall well-being as well as their access to different social and educational services.

In general, a **gender perspective or a gender-sensitive approach** entails approaching a subject or social phenomenon with awareness and sensitivity to **gender differences** as well as to various needs and experiences that people and groups may have regarding their gender identity. The opposite of gender perspective or gender-sensitive approach is a gender-blind approach, i.e., an approach that does not consider this category when trying to understand a certain phenomenon, or when creating policies and services. When we apply this to youth work, it will be especially important to work on **recognizing and deconstructing gender stereotypes**. Critical consciousness, which questions stereotypes and can recognize them as social constructs, is a prerequisite for gender-sensitive pedagogy (Paseka, 2004). Gender role awareness includes knowledge of one's own sex as well as knowledge of the characteristics of gender roles and the social expectations associated with said roles (Hodžić, Bjelić, Cesar, 2009).

The Council of Europe's Gender Equality Guidelines outline what gender-sensitive educational approaches look like. Therefore, *"educational teams should be prepared to observe, deal with, and, above all, respect the topic of human rights at all times, just as discriminatory attitudes should be dealt with even when the topic of the activity is not gender-related"*. This means that:

- A.** Coaches and organisers of youth activities should be aware of the existence of discrimination and the possibility that such attitudes may emerge among the participants, as well as how to deal with such situations. They should consistently value and consider the perspectives and viewpoints of minority or underrepresented groups, as well as participants' accessibility needs, and demonstrate a commitment to gender equality.
- B.** When planning, implementing, and evaluating (intercultural) youth activity, teams should examine their approach with their "gender glasses" on. For example, they should not make assumptions about a participant's gender identity. This practice should include informal time, as well as a choice of activities that allow everyone to express themselves. It should be borne in mind that certain young people may require additional preparation time and support.³

1 The term refers to the intersectionality theory developed by the sociologist Kimberlé Crenshaw. The theory is primarily focused on the analysis of discrimination as a complex system in which forms of discrimination based on different identity categories (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) influence each other. Although it was initially developed as a method for analyzing gender discrimination, the theory is now used in a variety of contexts. (Izvor: <http://struna.ihjj.hr/naziv/intersekcionalnost/25464/>).

2 For a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the concept of gender, we refer you to the chapter on gender equality, which also includes a glossary of the most important terms.

3 Izvor: Gender equality in the intercultural youth activities of the Council of Europe and its partners - Youth (coe.int) <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/gender-equality-guidelines>



1.3.D. YOUTH WORK AND A GENDER-SENSITIVE APPROACH IN THE CONTEXT OF MENTAL HEALTH

A gender-sensitive approach, first and foremost, recognizes **that both sex and gender influence us and our experiences throughout our lives** and that the way we form that identity influences our mental health. Gender perspective in youth work is important from the aspect of gender equality, but so is the understanding that certain gender-stereotypical patterns may be a complicating factor in the process of gender socialization and identity building, and thereby also risk factors for the development of youth mental health problems.

According to the available literature, a **gender-sensitive approach to mental health** entails approaching the subject of mental health by understanding and taking into account the influence of gender and gender roles on mental health. According to research, there are **gender differences** in the following areas: general emotional and mental health of children and youths, the prevalence of certain difficulties among children and youths, and coping strategies and seeking help, as well as in the response of parents, guardians, schools, and public services to the emotional and mental health needs of children and youths (Hamblin, Young, 2017).

Data shows that young men seek help to a lesser extent compared to girls (Chandra et al., 2006), and their difficulties are more often manifested through behavioural disorders, addictions, and aggression, while girls exhibit more frequent and intense internalized symptoms, such as depression (Berk, 2008), eating disorders, and suicidal thoughts (Gender and MH, 2002, Kuzman et al., 2004, Mikas, 2007, 2011 in Ključević (2016)). According to one of the more recent researches in Croatia, girls' mental health is worse than boys' mental health in terms of psychological anxiety, world outlook, concern for one's own future, and life satisfaction (Jokić, B. i Ristić Dedić, Z., 2021). These examples are accompanied by the unequal influence of socioeconomic circumstances and ethnicity, as well as gender-stereotyped norms, on their overall well-being. Youths who question, explore, or define their gender identity beyond the binary categories, or who identify with one of the sexual minorities (LGBTQIA+ youth group), are also exposed to the so-called "minority stress" and discrimination, and therefore also exhibit poorer mental health (Kamenov et al. 2016).

Some of the earlier studies' and research findings are clearly changing, as confirmed by respondents in the "Let's Talk" research — expert youth workers (psychologists, social workers, informal education leaders, etc.) as well as youths themselves. Although the above mentioned gender disparities persist, a significant trend toward equalising the ratio of girls and boys seeking treatment (or are referred to) from psychologists and counsellors is noticeable. It is still evident that girls are more prone to internalized problems (depressive-anxiety disorders, lack of self-esteem, lack of motivation, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, and panic attacks, etc.) and boys are more prone to externalized problems (issues with anger and aggression, violent behaviour, and addictions). Some of the interviewed experts, who work directly in the counselling centres, have noticed that a clear border has been erased, i.e., equalisation of the ratio (Perak, Brkić, 2022).





2. AND HOW ARE YOUNG PEOPLE DOING TODAY?

*Their sense of belonging to the world is no longer local, but global.
They are a source of information to me.*

School teacher and psychotherapist, from the Let's talk research

2.1. WHAT IS (STILL) TROUBLING THE YOUTH OF TODAY? WHAT ARE THEY PREOCCUPIED WITH?

Young people today are generally better informed about world affairs, but this also makes them more susceptible to various media manipulations, fake news phenomena, and artificial intelligence. In this context, it is vital to begin Discussions with youths about critical thinking, media literacy, civic education, and personal and social development (how topics are affected by such information), but it is also important to establish good and strong connections with youths and ensure that they create strong and healthy peer relationships and build their own positive identity in the real (as opposed to the virtual) world.

*— The youths of today have two identities: a virtual and a real identity,
and they are often at odds with one another.*

University professor, youth mental health expert, from the Let's talk research

It should be pointed out here that today's youth are fairly well informed about mental health as well as mental health problems. Consequently, while they perceive the Internet and social networks as potential sources of support, they also recognize the risk they pose due to misrepresentation of problems as well as skewed and sometimes idealized depictions of these difficulties, especially when they are presented by celebrities or influencers.

*— When we are vulnerable, if we see the wrong thing at the wrong time,
it could end really badly."*

Girl, 21, from the Let's talk research

What has been especially worrying youths since the pandemic is that they are feeling despondent about the future, which has definitely been made worse by various local and global tragedies (pandemic, natural disasters, conflicts, and so on). Anxiety disorders carry in their essence a fear of the future, which is based on the belief that the future is dangerous. Recent circumstances have been challenging for everyone (and continue to be for some), but especially for young people who are prone to anxiety and worry about the future. Therefore, it is evident that we must restore a sense of control and security to young people by increasing their self-confidence, restoring trust in significant adults, and encouraging active involvement and participation (Štrkalj Ivezic, Folnegović Šmalc, Mimica, 2007).





2.2. WHICH SPECIFICITIES OF TODAY'S "YOUTH" YOU WORK WITH WOULD YOU SINGLE OUT?

All of these modern-era specificities are important factors to consider when thinking about and supporting the well-being and mental health of youths, as well as understanding how adults' conduct toward them impacts their well-being.



Do you talk with the young people you work with about...

Ecological issues and climate change, economic crises, political events, fake news, clickbait, artificial intelligence...?

2.3. STIGMATISATION OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

The youths who participated in the project's focus groups in four countries (Croatia, Greece, Italy, and Serbia) recognize the importance of mental health and are well-versed in the terminology of specific problems and difficulties. They believe that the pandemic has severely affected them and has primarily had a detrimental effect on the mental health of their peers as well as their own. However, in all four countries from the "Let's talk" research, there were those who also pointed out a positive aspect, saying that because of the decreased social activities and closed schools and universities, people had more opportunities to reflect on their identities and themselves, as well as their interests and life goals. Although awareness of the significance of mental health has been raised during the post-pandemic period, they nonetheless have observed that young people are often stigmatized if they seek out professional help, especially young men, and this stigmatisation is more prevalent in smaller towns and rural areas than in major cities.

...As soon as you utter the words "professional help", you are immediately stigmatized and assumed to have a problem, so even if you go seek help, you will keep it to yourself. It is not normal to go to a psychologist preventively.

Female student, from the Let's Talk research

Additionally, sometimes they encounter more stigmatisation, misunderstanding, and nonacceptance from parents and other adults (teachers) than from their peers, while some youths say that their parents and certain teachers or school support staff are important sources of support for them.



2.4. TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES AND INEQUALITY

Stereotypical gender roles and **established sex/gender expectations of the environment** are perceived by young people as a source of stress and one of the causes of mental health problems, as well as a limiting factor in personal growth and development. Girls feel pressured to start a family and have children after finishing compulsory schooling, as well as to be successful in their professional lives and to always look "perfect" — in conformity with the generally accepted standards of beauty. Young men are also aware of the difficulties and pressure associated with fulfilling gender roles, and some of them specifically mention feeling pressured to find a (female) partner. Young people are hesitant to discuss their emotional state; in fact, they frequently do not comprehend the distinction between thoughts and emotions, which is especially true for unpleasant feelings and states in which they do not feel well. The cause is once again identified in gender stereotypes, which state that this is a sign of weakness that is "forbidden" for their gender role. They are also worried about their interpersonal relationships, namely how to develop intimate relationships, but also how to be successful, better, stronger, and more efficient.

2.5. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

According to the "Let's talk" research all young people are aware of the growing exposure to violence — young males are more exposed to physical violence, whereas girls are more vulnerable and, to a greater extent, victims of online violence, particularly regarding increased sexualization and extortion. Furthermore, girls (young women) and young LGBTQI+ members are more likely to be victims of discrimination and gender-based violence at home and online.

When selecting activities and approaches, especially activity methods and techniques, for working with young people, it is important to ensure that young people have the **opportunity to strengthen their self-esteem and self-confidence, positive self-image, and positive self-talk** through all types of interactions and participation; they should also have the opportunity to become aware of and manage their emotional states, as well as build resilience and develop problem-solving abilities, communication skills for personal growth, as well as improve group cohesion and participation and expand their own space for action.

The above mentioned can be accomplished directly, but also indirectly, through activities such as volunteering, participating in a school or local initiative, art and creative activities, peer support, or a specific hobby.

In the next chapters we will provide an overview of some of the most common topics related to youth mental health problems, which we have identified through research:



- * Identity and self-image
- * Emotional literacy
- * Building relationships and interpersonal communication
- * Gender equality and diversity
- * Career guidance and success

...and also, provide thoughts, advices and suggestions on how to engage with young people on these topics and what to focus on if problems arise.





3. IMPORTANT TOPICS IN WORKING WITH YOUTH



*"Today you are You,
that is truer than true.
There is no one alive
who is Youer than You.*

Dr. Seuss

WHO AM I?

LET'S TALK ABOUT...

Identity

Identity is a **collection of our internal feelings** about ourselves and answers to the questions: *Who are we? and What are we?; what is it that makes us the way we are, and what sets us apart from others?* We often form and define our identities through **relationships with others** and by **interacting with society**. In other words, identity is the perception of our own self-image that we build together with other people. Family/caregivers as the first group of people who directly influence and create opportunities or obstacles for the personal and social development of children and young people, play a key role in the development of a (non)positive self-image.

The most common determinants, or so-called pillars of identity, are as follows: age, sex, gender, first name, last name, physical characteristics (height, weight, hair color, etc.), clothing and style, hairstyle, origin (family background, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and language), school, profession, hobbies, interests, lifestyle, the area we live in, financial status, friends, romantic relationships, sexual orientation, health and fitness, personality traits, behaviour and decisions, values and goals, the moment in history in which we live... **The importance we place on these determinants changes throughout our lives**, but each of them, especially those that are most important to an individual, deserves respect.



**SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

Who am I?

Age, sex, gender, nationality, political or religious affiliation.

**SELF-EXPECTATIONS**

What kind of person am I right now? What kind of person do I aspire to be?

Information about the real (image of me as I see myself in the present) and ideal self (what I want to be, hopes and self-expectations).

**SELF-VALUATION**

What do I know? What can I do? What is my worth?

Evaluating one's own value and competences, as well as questioning one's own self-respect.¹

Furthermore, **circumstances and time can change how we perceive ourselves, and how we see and feel about ourselves may differ from how others see us.** Likewise, it is also important to understand that the way we see ourselves is largely influenced by the way society views us, or more precisely, the dominant socio-cultural context in which we are growing up (Tatum, 2000). This is especially significant for understanding the disadvantageous position in which certain groups of people (marginalized, minority, or vulnerable groups) find themselves in every society. So, **if the way I see myself (components of my identity) is not visible in society or is portrayed as bad, dangerous, abnormal, or in any other way as less valuable, it will certainly affect my self-image.**

The process of constructing an identity takes place throughout one's life; we can question, change, evolve, and reconstruct it at any time. However, the most intense period of this process occurs in adolescence and young adulthood, so it is important to understand the developmental stages and what problems young people may face during this time.

1. Text taken and adapted from the manual "Being yourself - being in balance in a virtual and media environment."



A. ADOLESCENCE AND YOUTH

Adolescence and young adulthood are times of great change because a person is slowly stepping from childhood into adulthood. It is also accompanied by feelings of fear, anxiety, and confusion, but also by a sense of strong independence, peer group affiliation, individuality, uniqueness, and self-importance.

The first romantic relationships, but also friendship breakups, occur, as do changes in the school environment, physical changes, and feelings. The image of one's own body changes, and there is now a greater preoccupation with appearance and attractiveness, but also a great desire for independence, freedom, and competency.

- * **In this period, the initial questioning of certain determinants of one's own identity and affiliation, as well as the search for an answer to the questions "Who am I?" and "What do I want?" most often occur.**



Key characteristics of adolescence:

- seeking a balance between responsibility, independence, and self-reliance
- striving for independence from adult authority
- escalating conflicts with parents/guardians/teachers
- defying authority
- questioning norms, established rules, and not accepting rules
- desire to make independent decisions.

- * **Do you know the term *adolescent crisis*? When is it just a phase, and when is it necessary to seek professional help?**

Identity is a key aspect of youths' self-concept and self-respect. The more developed and well-organised a person's identity determinants are, the more aware the person is of his distinctive qualities, similarities with others, and strengths and weaknesses. The less developed an individual's identity, the less aware they are of what differentiates them from others, which makes them rely more on external sources (friends, coworkers, instructors, coaches, etc.) in order to evaluate their own worth.

Failure or inability to define and decide who I am and what I want to be can lead to confusion and insecurity in oneself and one's own strength. Furthermore, traumatic events, such as sickness, the loss of close relatives, parental divorce, and even peer rejection, can be obstacles on the path to identity formation.



Identity development — One of the most well-known theories of identity development is the one developed by **Eric Erikson**, who believed that identity develops through eight stages of psychosocial development from birth to old age, each of which includes a **crisis or conflict** that a person must resolve in order to achieve a healthy identity. According to this theorist, **Identity diffusion** is a state in which individuals lack a clear and consistent sense of identity and begin exploring different aspects of themselves and searching for their place in the world.





The following are some of the problems and challenges that young people may face:

- Feeling uncertain about one's own self, abilities, and capabilities.
- Unclear life direction and goals.
- The conflict between one's own (internal) wishes and goals and the expectations of other individuals, family, peers and/or society as a whole.
- Adapting to changes in one's own body (during puberty) and mind, as well as changes in one's environment.
- Traumatic experiences, abuse, violence, or a variety of losses (persons, safety, beliefs).
- Discrimination or exclusion based on sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or other identity determinants.

*** What other difficulties or challenges related to the formation of identity do you notice among young people?**

These challenges and problems can have a negative impact on young people's self-esteem, self-concept, self-confidence, and overall satisfaction and well-being; they can lead to emotional difficulties, such as depression, anxiety, and the inability to successfully regulate anger or cope with grief. They can also promote harmful and destructive behaviours, such as non-suicidal self-injury, alcohol and/or drug misuse, eating disorders, and violence. This is why it is essential to encourage healthy identity development and construction as a form of prevention, as well as to recognize and address perceived difficulties, whether through group or individual work with young people or by advising them to seek professional help.



If young people suffer from more serious problems during their identity development that necessitates professional involvement, it is critical to notice this and be ready to refer them to other experts or resources that are available in the community. Read more about recognition and first aid in the chapter **"FIRST AID! - WHAT IF I NOTICE THAT SOMETHING IS WRONG?"** and **"WHERE TO SEEK HELP"**.



B. SEX & GENDER IDENTITY/IES

Gender stereotypes and **gender roles**, as well as the **societal expectations and conventions** that stem from them, are strongly connected to the creation of an identity and a positive self-image. As a result, the conventional definition of femininity is founded on the idea that women should possess communal traits; they should be gentle, humble, sacrifice themselves for others, and be extremely empathic and unselfish. The conventional definition of masculinity is associated with attributes such as action, courage, daring, strength, ambition, and rationality (Murray, 2001, according to Balabanić Mavrović, 2022). Furthermore, most societies have very strict standards regarding the "correct" way to express one's gender, and young people of all gender identities face highly unrealistic expectations and ideals of physical beauty and attractiveness.

Traditional social norms leave LGBTQIA+ identities invisible, which causes people to hide their sexual orientation, gender identity and/or expression **due to fear of non-acceptance, stigmatisation, but also discrimination, and violence (LORI.HR)**. The previously mentioned issue influences young people's perception of how they should be, and there are also limiting factors that negatively influence an individual's positive self-image as well as mental health and perpetuate issues that spill over into all aspects of their lives. Numerous studies reveal that LGBTQIA+ people have significantly worse mental health than heterosexual people and that people who belong to one of the previously mentioned groups have a two-and-a-half times greater likelihood of developing a mental condition than heterosexual people (Krašić, 2022 in Jokić Begić, Rukavina (2022).

Adolescent LGBTQIA+ youths often face a very sensitive and challenging decision about expressing their gender identity and sexual orientation. Coming out¹ is an act that heterosexual people don't even think about — they come out on a daily basis, whereas LGBTQIA+ people must carefully consider the potential negative social consequences of coming out. Being openly lesbian, gay, or transgender often exposes a person to greater societal rejection, non-acceptance, criticism, violence, and other major problems. LORI.HR.

Given that adolescence is the age when the need for belonging, security, and support is most pronounced, young people who differ in any way from the majority peer group may experience a range of psychological and emotional issues, self-destructive behaviours, and a range of social issues, such as condemnation, stigmatisation, exclusion, prejudice, discrimination, and violence. All of the aforementioned contribute to the creation of an extremely stressful environment in which LGBTQIA+ individuals live, and the root cause of all of the aforementioned psychological disorders and decreased overall well-being is the inability to properly express one's own identity.

Young LGBTI people do not often turn to teaching and support staff in schools for help, fearing further condemnation or misunderstanding. However, deciding to come out is a significant topic about which LGBTI youths consult a teacher or psychologist; this individual should be sufficiently sensitized to recognize that coming out is not the act of talking about one's sexual preferences or "a phase a student is going through" (according to a gay man's account of what the school psychologist told him), rather it is an act of opening up and discussing one's own identity. Adequate support and feedback that a person receives is critical in the coming out process. Establishing a relationship of trust with an LGBTI youth is key, as is being aware of one's own prejudices or assumptions regarding the student's sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. It is essential to create a safe environment in which students will be able to speak about their feelings and views, and it is critical that the educational staff understands the significance of coming out, so that the experience for young people is as positive as possible.

Manual for teachers and support staff, LORI, 2016.

¹ *Coming out* — a complex lifelong process in which a person goes through his own self-identification and decides when and how to reveal his identity to others (LORI.HR)



C. BODY IMAGE AND EATING DISORDER PREVENTION

One's appearance is a crucial component of a positive self-image and identity. The idea of a perfect appearance, as well as the unrealistic and unattainable image of an ideal body and appearance imposed by popular culture, can be especially harmful to one's self-esteem and general well-being. This idea and image are further emphasised through the influence of social networks, the use of filters, and the usage of various photo processing programs. According to research, this has a negative influence on self-esteem, self-confidence, and body satisfaction, which increases the risk of developing an eating disorder regardless of sex, gender, or age (Grabe, Ward and Hyde, 2008; Karazsia and Crowther, 2009 according to Ivić 2019).

Because physical appearance is very important in adolescence and forms the basis for evaluating oneself and others, adolescents may perceive not achieving the ideal of beauty, i.e., the desired weight and figure, as a personal failure and take it as an indicator of self-worth. In accordance with the above, dissatisfaction with physical appearance... has been shown to be associated with lower levels of self-esteem. Paxton et. al., 2006 according to Ivić, 2019:8.

It should be noted that the decline in self-esteem and a negative body image are a natural part of the development process, and for some youths, the abovementioned image of themselves and their appearance will improve with age. However, for some young people, a negative self-image will carry over into adulthood. This is why it is critical to discuss with young people the topics of appearance, sexuality, beauty, prejudices, and stereotypes, as well as the pressure associated with those topics, which is present in society itself through the media, social networks, and popular culture, but also in their immediate surroundings, which then affects their own pressure and pursuit of perfection.

It is widely believed that eating disorders more commonly affect girls and young women, but according to some studies, 15% of anorexia and bulimia sufferers are men, and there are an equal number of men and women who suffer from overeating disorders (Center for Eating Disorders BEA, Croatia). Furthermore, because of the stereotypical attitude toward gender identity, men face a double stigma: on the one hand, they suffer from a "female disorder," so the disorder itself is often not even recognized in (young) men, and on the other hand, men have a much harder time deciding to seek psychological help (The National Eating Disorders Association, USA). The desire, even obsession, for a muscular physique with low subcutaneous fat is more common in (young) men.

In practice, it is also observed that a considerable number of young people are increasingly facing new or lesser-known problems regarding having a healthy relationship and caring for one's body (e.g., orthorexia - an obsessive fixation with a healthy diet).

A GENDER-SENSITIVE APPROACH TO THE TOPIC

Keep in mind that eating disorders and the pursuit of a perfect and idealized appearance occur in all groups of young people. However, it manifests itself in various ways — in girls, it is primarily a desire for thinness, which is often manifested by **rigid food intake**, food abstinence, a high preoccupation with physical appearance, and correcting one's appearance in order to achieve **an ideal, unrealistic thinness and a solid, toned body** (Calogero et al., 2011; Tiggemann and Williams, 2012, according to Balabanić Mavrović, 2022). **The preoccupation with losing weight** is not as prevalent in young men, rather they strive to achieve a **muscular body** with low subcutaneous fat, which can lead to "**gym addiction**" and excessive exercise, reduction and strict intake of recommended meals (Center for Eating Disorders BEA, Croatia). There is still a scarcity of research on eating disorders among young LGBTQIA+ people. Existing research, however, indicates that the development of eating disorders among the aforementioned group of young people is common due to a variety of factors, including high levels of stress, a lack of acceptance from family and peers, fear and anxiety about the public determination of group affiliation, discrimination, and psychological and physical abuse (Center for Discovery Eating Disorder Treatment, SAD, Izvor: <https://centerfordiscovery.com/blog/eating-disorder-discrimination-lgbt-community/>.)



D. BUILDING A POSITIVE SELF-IMAGE

A **positive self-image**, self-acceptance, self-esteem, and self-confidence are linked to emotional and mental health, and they influence our relationships, accomplishments, and happiness in our daily lives, as well as our life satisfaction. It is one of the most important foundations for each individual's harmonic and balanced personal and social growth. A positive self-image, to put it simply, is how we feel about ourselves as well as what we think about ourselves or parts of ourselves.

Self-esteem is an emotional component of self-image formed by our subjective experience of self-worth based on our own assessments as well as the behaviour of others toward us. It involves a self-acceptance or self-rejection attitude, which refers to how much a person appreciates himself ("How much do I love the person I think I am?").

Self-confidence refers to our own opinion about our abilities and our perception of how successfully we can carry out a request from the environment ("How well do I think I can accomplish something successfully?").

(Ćosić, Lambešić, Novak, Bursać 2020.)

A positive self-image is not one-dimensional; rather it emerges from a variety of sources. One of the better-known classifications¹ talks about the following dimensions of self-image:



DIMENSIONS OF SELF-IMAGE

General self — a general perception of oneself as a person

Physical self — body image; how do I look

Academic/business self — image of own abilities in the context of education, formal and informal learning, and work

Philosophical self — image of one's own beliefs and values

Social self — image of one's own relationship with other people

Emotional self — perception of one's own emotions, needs, and motives

Communication self — perception of one's own communication with others

Romantic self — evaluation of oneself as a desirable partner for intimate relationships

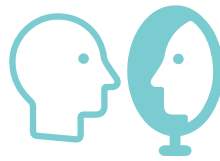
Sexual self — perception of one's own sexuality

Virtual self — evaluation of one's self on social networks, i.e., in a virtual environment .

(Ćosić, Lambešić, Novak, Radić Bursać 2020.)

¹ Text was taken from the Manual "Self-image - a framework for empowering students"





Discussing the aforementioned subjects with young people and broadening their awareness regarding the different dimensions of their identity has an impact on the construction of a broader image of their own existence, skills, and influence.

The more positive the self-image is, the greater the likelihood of preventing unacceptable/delinquent behaviour, eating disorders, anxiety-depressive disorders, loneliness, and isolation.

Building a positive self-image is a complex process that occurs indirectly through a number of **topics that should be discussed** with young people and they should be invited to participate in activities through which they can raise their awareness and adopt various socio-emotional skills that allow a young person to:



- Perceive their potential, strengths
- Receive criticism and feedback
- Stand up for themselves and their well-being, and set limits
- Discover their weak points and areas so they can work on them and grow
- Recognize and manage emotions
- Develop communication and related skills
- Maintain relationships and resolve problematic or conflictual situations
- Set realistic goals, which are integral parts of the overall self-image

Therefore, youth workers need to know how to foster these components through individual and group work.

It is important to **provide a safe and supportive environment** in which young people may freely express themselves while respecting themselves and others without fear of being judged or criticized for their personality, identity, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, or opinions.

From a developmental standpoint, it is important to praise the **effort and growth**, not just the accomplishment or result, especially through comparison with others.

Also, from the same standpoint, it is beneficial to **normalize error and failure** and to welcome and promote such events as opportunities for learning and progress.

Many different activities, depending on the context in which a person works with young people, may greatly contribute to the young person recognizing his or her own strengths, talents, and goals, thereby building self-esteem and self-confidence.

Exploring **different opportunities** in education, career development, by traveling, taking up various hobbies, or volunteering can encourage the **questioning of values and learning about others**, people who are different, and interpersonal relationships, so it is important to promote and suggest such opportunities to young people.



The belief that each individual is unique and valuable and has potential for growth is an important prerequisite for having healthy relationships with others, as well as for overall well-being and functioning well in the community. At the same time, it is often possible that young people have desires and aspirations toward life choices that are not in line with the values and goals of the environment and community. As long as these wishes and life choices are healthy, that is, not destructive for the individual and/or society, they should certainly be respected and the young person should be helped in reconciling these differences.



In the **WORKBOOK FOR YOUTH "NO ONE IS YOU"**, we suggested a series of activities related to identity. Study them and guide the youth you work with through them.

Whatever challenges, obstacles, or problems the young people with whom you work face, be there to listen, advise, and lead them. If you notice serious difficulties that are beyond your competence, refer them to appropriate sources of help in your immediate surroundings.



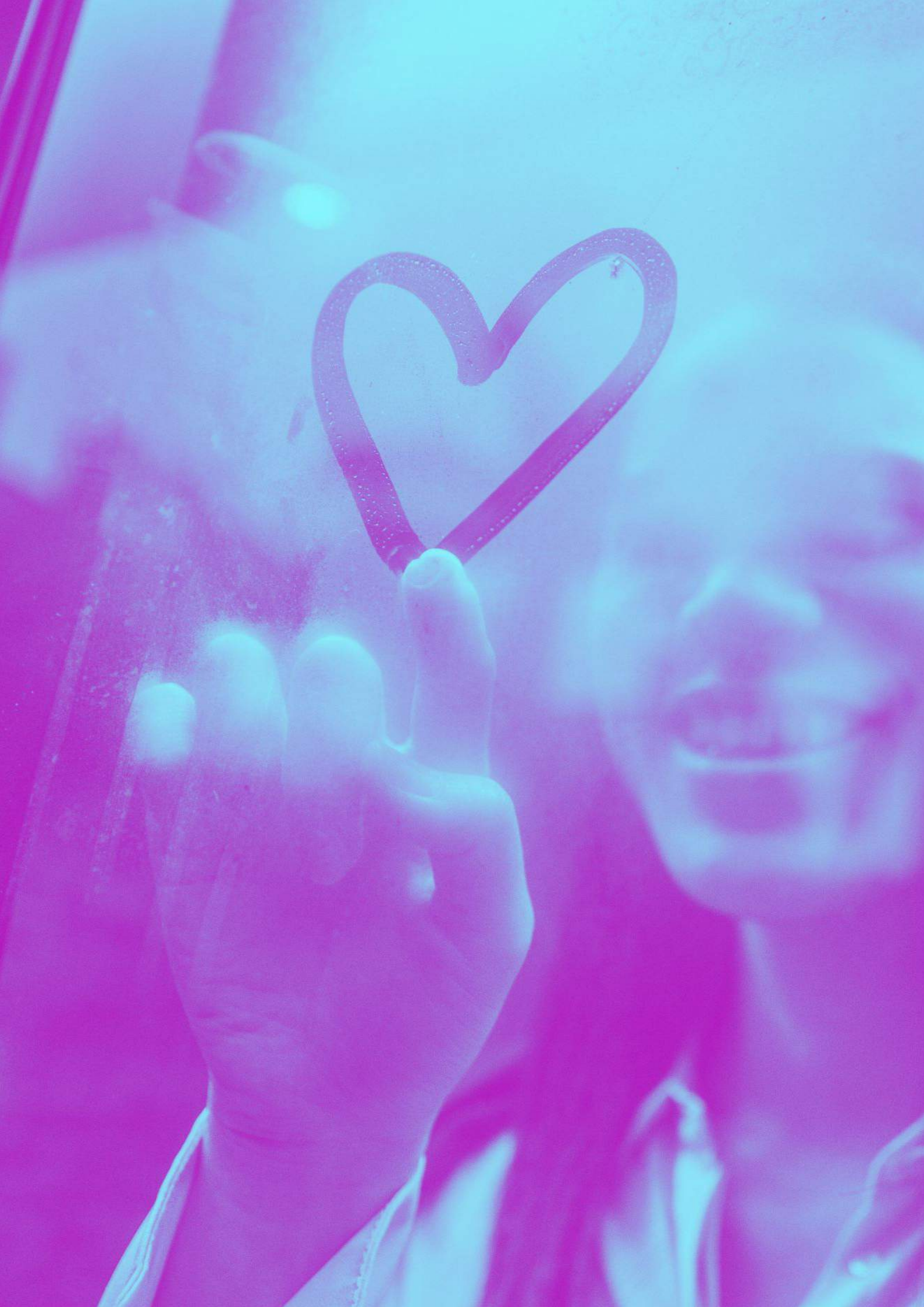
Look for inspiration in **Sir Ken Robinson's** work, particularly in his book *"Finding your element"*, where he discusses young people who defied the expectations of their surroundings and succeed.



SUGGESTIONS AND TOPIC IDEAS FOR ACTIVITIES IN THIS FIELD

- Educate and provide youths with information about the various aspects of physical health, development, and diversity, as well as the dangers of diets, extreme exercise, and substance abuse.
- Encourage youths to accept and respect their body, as well as develop healthy eating, sleeping, physical activity, and relaxation habits.
- Encourage other sources of identity and values aside from physical appearance, which may lead to the development of self-esteem and self-confidence.
- Critical thinking about messages and social beauty standards, as well as recognizing their effect on young people's body image — media literacy.
- Regarding comparisons, emphasise and encourage youths to compare themselves more to themselves and less (or not at all) to others, and to value their own skills, talents, and traits.







HOW DO
I FEEL?

LET'S TALK ABOUT...

Emotional well-being

A. EMOTIONAL LITERACY

In the context of supporting youth mental health, we cannot ignore the importance of **knowing and recognizing emotions**, their connection with **bodily sensations**, their basis in satisfying psychological and physiological **needs**, as well as learning about **regulating emotions** and the appropriate way of expressing them. Admittedly, there are cultural environments in which discussing emotions is more or less acceptable, and accordingly, people are "allowed" to express themselves differently in different environments. However, understanding emotions, or emotional literacy, is crucial in developing and supporting youth mental health, and the skills it entails are an integral part of socio-emotional learning and an important requirement for general well-being.

The first step in managing your emotions is to be in touch with them and understand how emotions, behaviours, and needs are interconnected. Then we can also understand how emotions affect our relationships and what we can do about them.

It is important to understand that there is a big difference between **managing and expressing** emotions and our emotional states. We often think that NOT expressing emotions represents good emotional management, hence phrases like: "*I am rational*"; "*Emotions have no place here*"; "*I should be guided by logic, not emotions*"; "*Emotions are vulnerabilities*" and similar. The above are examples of limiting beliefs and myths that ultimately harm and exacerbate difficulties not just for the individual, but also for the environment and society as a whole. It is precisely the suppression of emotions, or the underdeveloped skills of regulation and "letting" emotions pass through in an adequate manner, that leads to even more serious emotional problems, frustrations, dissatisfactions, as well as additional (auto)destructive behaviours that affect both the person and their environment. We will need to work harder on a personal level if we have this type of attitude because we will be unable to provide support to young people in this area.





B. SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Recognizing and regulating emotions is an important part of socio-emotional learning, which is defined as *a process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.*

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, casel.org

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING CONSISTS OF FIVE KEY COMPETENCIES THAT COMPLEMENT AND INTERTWINE WITH EACH OTHER.



Self-awareness — recognizing and being aware of one's own emotions, evaluating personal strengths and weaknesses, a feeling of self-worth and self-confidence, and understanding how thoughts and emotions influence behaviour; children and young people in this competence should develop their interests as well as find their meaning.



Independent regulation of emotions and emotional states — crucial for emotional intelligence, good impulse control, stress management, setting goals and motivations, focusing on personal skills and strengths (rather than flaws), overcoming personal problems or crises as self-management skills, and encouraging positive self-talk.



Responsible decision-making – the ability to evaluate and reflect, making personal and social choices related to ethics, safety, and social norms, considering the consequences of one's own choices, analyzing situations, and recognizing and solving problems.



Awareness of others (empathy) – accepting and respecting others' perspectives, developing empathy toward others and appreciating differences, communicating with others that involves listening and understanding others, and finding support.



Relationship skills — cooperation, seeking as well as providing help and support, communication, assertiveness, resisting negative pressure, offering help, support in analyzing one's own relationships, reflecting on how well one fits in one's community, and learning new ways of meeting and connecting, establishing meaningful connections with others that enable better recognition of one's own potential and values.





SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING HELPS YOUNG PEOPLE TO...

- Understand and manage their emotions
- Build social skills
- Feel and show empathy to themselves and others
- Establish and maintain positive relationships
- Build resilience



YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPED EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL SKILLS...

- Show greater interest in learning
- Have better self-confidence and greater self-respect
- Are less likely to drop out of school
- Are less likely to have behavioural problems

CAN EMOTIONS BE GOOD AND BAD?

Emotions are never referred to as negative, good, positive, or bad. This is a common practice in contemporary psychological and psychotherapy literature, but it is also becoming more common in the practice of working with children and adolescents. This is due to the fact that each emotion has its own role, and serves us in a variety of ways. First and foremost, emotions serve to inform us about how we are feeling and what is going on with us, what works for us and what doesn't, and to encourage us to act. That is why it is not "fair" to say one is negative and the other is positive. And it's not even correct, because such an attitude prevents us from dealing with the true source of the (unpleasant) emotion; instead, we simply want to get rid of it. If we must divide them, we divide them into pleasant and unpleasant.¹

Pleasant emotions, such as happiness, joy, elation, love, and pride, tell us about what suits us, what we strive for, and what is good for us. And we often have no problems with them. What usually bothers us is experiencing, accepting, and expressing **unpleasant emotions**, such as loneliness, shame, anger, helplessness, or fear — in ourselves as well as in the young people with whom we work. Nonetheless, these and many other emotions and emotional states provide us with opportunities for self-awareness as well as working on our relationships with others.

Shifting responsibility to others or aggressive behaviour as a way of expressing, for example, anger or rage is definitely negative when experiencing unpleasant emotions. This, however, indicates that the young person is unable to control the aforementioned emotional state and consequently requires assistance and support.

Teaching young people about emotions teaches them to take **personal responsibility**.

Personal responsibility is comprised of two parts: self-awareness and self-representation. Having "open eyes" and an "inner ear" and knowing, being aware of what I feel, thinking about what I (don't) need and what I (don't) like, and what I want and don't want means being self-aware — having self-awareness.

Taking it seriously and respectfully, and acting accordingly, as well as standing up for ourselves and not expecting others to care about our well-being, makes us a responsible person.

(Jasenska Pregrad, 2006)

¹ See "THE WHEEL OF EMOTIONS" in the Workbook for youth "No one is you".



THE MOST COMMON UNPLEASANT EMOTIONS

We have an urge to avoid, suppress, and eliminate these four major emotions because they make us feel uneasy. However, their existence is important to our functioning, and it is necessary to better understand them. They stay in us longer than they should because we believe in certain stories that accompany our experiences. This is what keeps us from being present in reality; we are unable to see the situation realistically, and as a result, we do not allow ourselves to consider other options that are available to us and around us.

These emotions encourage us to be assertive, self-confident, and self-represent.

And what do the abovementioned emotions really urge us to do?²

FEAR — Survival

- I believe I am in some kind of danger and must flee to safety.
- I believe I cannot do something because I lack sufficient ability or knowledge; I believe I cannot be successful; I lack sufficient courage or strength.
- I need to protect myself, and build inner strength and courage — either via my own efforts or by seeking assistance from others.
- I need to find resources within or around me.

ANGER — Existence and my space (*I exist; see me; I have a place in the world*)

- I want to be seen; I am here; I exist; I have a place in the world.
- I believe I lack inner strength, that I am powerless, and that I lack sufficient resources to do something/effect change; I believe that more is required of me than I can deliver; I believe that others do not wish to give me what I require.
- Anger urges us to defend ourselves, our ideas, wishes, and needs, as well as to express ourselves.
- I need to improve my ability to express myself, my needs, and my desires.

GUILT — Self-awareness about accepting responsibility and belonging (*I see you; I'm aware of you*)

- I want compassion (self-empathy) and to have good relationships with others.
- Guilt compels us to consider both ourselves and others.
- I need to connect with myself (through self-acceptance) and my boundaries, which will allow me to develop compassion for others.

SHAME — Acceptance by others (belonging) and by ourselves (*Dignity — I am complete/worthy just as I am*)

- I want to be a part of the community and be accepted both by myself and by others.
- Shame compels us to connect with our own values and beliefs.
- Before solving problems or interacting with others, I need to connect with myself, my values, and my beliefs.

*Have you ever looked at emotions in this way before?
What do you feel compelled to do as a result of these feelings?*

² Text taken and adapted according to https://baynvc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/The-Compass-Intro-August-29th-2021-Material_-On-Fear-Anger-Guilt-Shame.pdf





A GENDER-SENSITIVE APPROACH TO THE TOPIC

Keep in mind that emotions are closely related to stereotypical gender socialization and gender roles, so some are more "acceptable" for boys and others for girls. Traditionally, young men are allowed, even encouraged to express their anger, whereas girls are not. Guilt is imposed on girls more than on boys; girls are permitted to experience sadness, and it is even associated with them more, while it is somewhat forbidden for boys ("You're being such a girl? Why are you crying?").

Due to the abovementioned social prohibitions, or encouragement of some other socially acceptable way of expressing emotions based on gender roles, as well as expectations from the environment, and consequently by the person themselves, an important part of the emotional spectrum remains unspoken and "unmissed" in the way it should be expressed (when I'm sad, I cry; when I'm angry, I take a certain action, etc.), and as a result many risky and (self) destructive behaviours occur.

It should be kept in mind that in working with young people we will encounter the aforementioned problem, and it is necessary to provide a safe space, filled with a lot of patience and trust, for young people to show their vulnerability. How to recognize how we feel, how to name feelings?



We have listed a whole set of exercises in the **WORKBOOK FOR YOUTH "NO ONE IS YOU" LET'S TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH**, so please take a look at them, go through them yourself if you are unfamiliar with them, and then guide the young people you work with through these topics by using the suggested exercises.

THE LINK BETWEEN EMOTIONS AND BEHAVIOUR

How we feel is linked to our behaviour, as well as to our self-image, self-esteem, and self-confidence, how we connect and establish contacts and connections, and how we manage our goals, plans, and life decisions and choices in general. Emotions can be thought of as a type of fuel that drives us to move, act, and restore balance. However, when we are unaware of their role and how they might be regulated and "passed" through our system, we resort to behaviours that are not always productive and efficient. In fact, they can be self-destructive and environmentally destructive: the use of narcotic drugs and alcohol, irresponsible and risky sexual behaviour, psychological violence, perfectionism, eating disorders, insomnia, but also excessive politeness and helpfulness, seclusion, (self)isolation, and so on.

By regarding the behavioural component as a form of "exit" strategy for emotions and emotional states, our view of the world and ourselves, we can more clearly distinguish what is in the background and provide necessary support and assistance in seeking help.





C. YOUNG PEOPLE'S BEHAVIOURS AND STATES THAT DEMAND OUR ATTENTION

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

Many young people (and adults) face symptoms of anxiety and depression at some point of their lives. In a way, it is a normal part of the process of growing up, as young people are facing hormonal changes, new social expectations, as well as their own, and sometimes turbulent romantic relationships and friendships as well. Very often symptoms of anxiety and depression can disappear after an exam, open communication with someone, introducing some new activity or hobby, ending or starting a new relationship, or experiencing something new.

However, if you notice a change in your behaviour such as a drop in energy, withdrawing from relationships, reduced food intake, not caring about hygiene or things that usually brought you joy and this lasts continuously for a minimum of 3 weeks, it would be preferable to turn to whomever you trust for help.

Important! Not all symptoms of anxiety and depression are caused by poor mental health and not all symptoms occur because of anxiety or depression; sometimes it is also a matter of physical imbalance that manifests itself in this way. Thus, it is important to monitor your mental health and seek help in time (from your family, doctor, teacher, youth worker, friend or a psychotherapist)

Some of the symptoms of anxiety and depression (Majkić, 2023):

ANXIETY



Restlessness and impatience
 Negative thoughts about different situations and other people
 Forgetfulness and lack of concentration
 Indecisiveness and difficulties in completing tasks
 Difficulty falling asleep
 Quickly tiring
 Constant care
 Feeling of panic, fear and resistance
 Irritability

DEPRESSION



Constant sadness
 Hopelessness, lack of meaning
 Feelings of guilt and worthlessness
 Loss of interest in society and entertainment
 Lack of energy and constant fatigue
 Lack of concentration and indecisiveness
 Insomnia or too much sleep
 Frequent headaches or body aches, stomach problems, back or chest pain
 Irritability
 Thoughts of self-harm or suicide



PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism is the pursuit of flawlessness, in all aspects of life. It is about more than just the need to perfect the execution of a task or improve one's skills; it is about improving the entire self (Baer, D. 2017. according to Matičević, D. in Milošić (ed.) 2022.). It can often be noticed in the way a person speaks: *"It's not good enough", "I should have done better", "I'm stupid"*, and so on. Underlying such desire is the need to be accepted and avoid being rejected by the environment. It is important to know the difference between adaptive and non-adaptive perfectionism.



ADAPTIVE — Setting high goals and approaching them as challenges

NON-ADAPTIVE — Rigid thinking about things as either extremely good or bad; not having room for error, a strong fear of it, and harsh internal self-talk and high self-criticism

If in your profession you work with young people who have a problem with self-criticism and non-adaptive perfectionism, it is important to work on self-acceptance and compassion with these young people, as well as to strengthen a positive self-image. If you notice that it is a serious problem, be sure to refer the young person to professional help.

There are also a number of examples of positive self-talk that you can practice with the young people you work with that can help with this. Some of the examples are listed in the [WORKBOOK FOR YOUTH "NO ONE IS YOU" LET'S TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH](#).

SELF-ISOLATION/LONELINESS

Many studies and scientific research talk about the numerous health consequences of (self) isolation and loneliness, which have a number of negative effects on a person's functioning. Loneliness is an emotional state that manifests as a painful emptiness, increased vulnerability, anxiety, worry and grief, lowered mood, the belief that no one understands me, and is often associated with difficulty sleeping, slower thinking and difficult decision-making. It is not connected to the number of social connections; it is a state of mind. Loneliness is linked to mental health problems, especially depression and anxiety. People who are lonely have a weaker immune system and are more susceptible to various infections, and have high cortisol levels — the hormone responsible for stress response. There is also a stigma associated with talking about loneliness and acknowledging it; if we say we are lonely, others will think there is something wrong with us. The fact that loneliness is becoming a pandemic of our times is concerning: more than 70% of young people from the Millennial and Generation Z groups frequently feel lonely (Novak-Pukotine). Young people report shyness and introversion as the most prevalent causes of loneliness, or rather that they do not know how to connect with others and do not experience a feeling of belonging, which, among other things, stems from inadequate social skills and social isolation.

It is necessary to work with young people on the development of emotional literacy and social skills and include them in meaningful and structured activities such as volunteering, encouraging them to engage in physical activities, but also supporting them in nurturing real friendships and love relationships.

Keep in mind! The more we are in touch with our emotions and emotional states, the more we will be able to understand the young person. In practice, sharing your emotional states (fears, anger, and anxieties) with young people has proven to be very important because then they trust us more, connect with us better, and receive feedback that what they are feeling is normal and that they have a right to their emotions.







*The quality
of our life depends
on our relationships
and relations.*

Majkić, 2023

HOW AM I DOING WITH OTHERS?

LET'S TALK ABOUT... Relationships

A relationship is the way in which two or more people are connected, that is, how they behave toward each other. A relationship is a bond that is created between two or more people whose thoughts, feelings, and actions influence each other and take place in any social context (school, family, work, etc.).

From adolescence to adulthood, young people, among other things, develop their first deeper and more affectionate relationships outside the family, which will be greatly influenced by those first experiences and the quality of relationships in the family. Although as youth workers (teachers, counselors, coaches) we can have very limited, if any, influence on what happens in the family of a child or young person, what we can do is keep in mind what kind of relationships the young person has experienced in the family so far and support them through our work to overcome negative experiences, if any, and to provide an example of different, healthy relationships.

That is why the relationship between the youth worker and the young person must be based on trust and mutual respect. Young people need a support figure they can talk to without fear of their problems being minimized, unrecognized, or treated with prejudice. It is important to develop ways to comprehend the numerous relationships that the young people with whom you work have with the various people in their lives in order to assist them in understanding, maintaining, or improving them.



A relationship is a process, and while it can be very dysfunctional or even toxic, it can also be very regulating, relaxing, and lead to improved mental health and general well-being. Many young people do not have **good, supportive, and healthy relationships** in their immediate surroundings (parents, guardians, partners, and friendships). And occasionally, you will be the significant adult who sees, listens, and supports a young person for the first time, providing a new experience and demonstrating that good and healthy relationships are possible.

A. OPENING TOPICS OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

As adults who work with young people, we will inevitably be informed about or gain insight into their interpersonal relationships. If they connect with us and gain a sense of trust and security, of being seen, and that we empathise with them, as well as trust us to provide them support, guidance, and help, they may share with us their issues, struggles, and uncertainties in their family and friendships as well as romantic (sexual) relationships.

Being socially connected to family, friends, or the local community can make us feel happier, physically healthier, and improve our well-being. Social relationships are important, but so is the quality of those relationships. Strong, stable, and satisfying relationships help combat feelings of loneliness and isolation and improve our mental health.

Perhaps the most intriguing relationship during adolescence and young adulthood are the first romances and relationships, so it is important to discuss these subjects and provide them with enough information to discern between a quality and healthy relationship and an unhealthy or toxic one. Young people who did not receive familial support or grew up in households that did not support their positive self-image or nurture good interpersonal relationships may have a harder time recognizing other toxic relationships in which they find themselves. So, the role of youth workers is to build relationships with young people that will help them to critically assess their own interpersonal interactions.

RELATIONSHIP QUALITY - HEALTHY AND TOXIC RELATIONSHIPS

A healthy relationship is a safe relationship — in which we can be who we are without fear, a place where we feel comfortable and safe.

A toxic relationship, on the other hand, is not a safe place. It is characterized by insecurity, self-centeredness, domination, and control. It may involve physical and/or psychological violence. Physical abuse may be more evident (particularly if it leaves marks or bruises), but psychological abuse is frequently invisible and might be difficult to detect. Given that psychological abuse can take numerous forms that are difficult to perceive, such as violent and controlling behaviours, it can remain unnoticed for a long time by both the person and sometimes the surroundings.

Toxic relationships that young people can find themselves in can seriously harm mental health. It should be emphasised that toxic relationships do not have to be romantic; they may be any unpleasant relationship in which we do not feel good (friendship, family, or work relationship). It is important to recognize early signs of an unhealthy, bad, or toxic relationship (both personally and among the young people we work with) and to urge a young person who we feel is dissatisfied and unhappy in a particular relationship to talk about it with someone they trust. Also, it is not always easy for people who are in toxic relationships to notice the appearance of so-called red flags (warning signs); therefore, drawing attention to some of them by communicating with a young person is beneficial. You can also address this content through group educational work.





TOXIC RELATIONSHIP OR PARTNERSHIP

- Dishonest, aggressive, negative communication
- Insults, criticism, cynicism, sarcasm, passive aggression
- Envy, jealousy, controlling behaviours (always has to know where I am), humiliation
- Competition with each other in various aspects of life
- Lack of support, patterns of disrespect
- Continuous stress, lack of self-care
- Loss or neglect of other relationships
- Deception, threats, (self) isolation, blackmail
- Continuously waiting and hoping for the other person to change



QUALITY AND SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIP OR PARTNERSHIP

- Honesty, kindness, respect
- Giving compliments and praise
- Mutual listening and comfort (he makes me laugh)
- Expressing feelings of affection (saying "I love you"; "I like spending time with you"; "I feel good with you": "You are important to me")
- Showing affection by touch
- Mutual effort in understanding how the other partner feels
- Join decision making
- Providing mutual support in all aspects of life
- Mutual sharing of problems and concerns

Some BASIC GUIDELINES that can help a young person recognize, build, and maintain healthy relationships and how these relationships can affect mental health:

KNOW YOURSELF — Appreciate yourself and take the time to get in touch with your emotions so you can express yourself more clearly and effectively. Not knowing how to regulate our emotions and express them in a healthy way can negatively affect our mental health and general well-being.

WORK ON RELATIONSHIPS — Healthy and quality relationships are not merely found; they have to be built and nurtured. A healthy relationship requires commitment and a willingness to satisfy your own needs, as well as the needs of those with whom we have an important relationship. Self-respect and respect for the other person are essential for a healthy relationship.

SET AND RESPECT BOUNDARIES — Setting boundaries is about more than just what we don't want, don't like, or dislike about another person; it's also about what we admire, respect, and love about them. It also refers to the establishment of space and interest in mutual differences for shared harmonization.

LISTEN ACTIVELY — There are disagreements in every relationship, and that is okay. What is important is the way we talk and listen to each other. Do not be afraid to express your emotions and vulnerabilities in front of people who you trust. Instead of simply answering, listen to truly understand.

(DO NOT) CONTROL — A big portion of life is about how we react to our experiences, interactions, and events. Knowing that we only have control over what we do and not what others do can save us a lot of time as well as anxiety.

THINK AND LEARN — If you are in a healthy relationship, try to understand why that is so, what you are like in that relationship and what the other person is like, what is important to you, and what you cherish. Then apply this to other relationships (e.g., healthy ways of expressing your own feelings; being able to respond to other people's feelings in a healthy way). Being angry with someone stems from a sense of being hurt and upset, as well as a sense of having crossed one's own boundaries. If we can recognize and express this, we can also work on building better relationships with others.





See the chapter on **Communication** in the **WORKBOOK FOR YOUTH "NO ONE IS YOU"**. Go through the suggested exercises yourself and then guide the young people through it.

The following are suggested activities of the "Let's Talk" project partner - **CSC Danilo Dolci**:

SCENARIOS OF UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

GOAL: to examine different types of unhealthy relationships, explore the power dynamics within them and possible ways to help individuals in these relationships.

DURATION: approx. 45 min. 30/35 minutes of brainstorming and answering questions and 10/15 minutes for joint Discussion.

REQUIRED MATERIALS: A board on which you can write questions; chart paper (one sheet for each group of 4-5 people); writing markers.

PREPARATION: The leader(s) write the following questions on the board before the activity:

- *What makes a relationship unhealthy? What healthy qualities are missing in this kind of relationship?*
- *Who has the power of control in this relationship? How might a person without power or control feel?*
- *How can an individual in a relationship get help or support?*
- *Is this relationship worth saving? Why yes or why not? If so, what healthy boundaries should be set?*

IMPLEMENTATION: Divide the participants into groups of 4/5 depending on the total number of participants, ask them to stand in circles or sit around a common table and give each group paper and markers.

Step 1: Explain to the groups that they will brainstorm together to write a script depicting young people in an unhealthy or toxic relationship. The facilitator(s) can give the groups examples of possible scenarios (below). Advise the groups to be creative and think about different types of relationships (e.g. family, friendship, online, with authority figures, romantic relationship, etc.). You can also assign a specific type of relationship to each group to ensure that different situations are represented.

Step 2: Have the groups exchange their scenarios with another group to answer the questions written on the board. Advise the groups to create a safe space where everyone can feel safe to suggest ideas or share opinions.

The leader(s) will ensure that:

- *Each group writes their own scenarios at the top of the paper so that there is room for the other groups to answer the questions below.*
- *Each group understands the questions, or if there are any doubts, clarify them if necessary.*

Important notes! Do not do this exercise if you have little experience with the topic of unhealthy and toxic (partner, intimate) relationships and/or think that scenarios may arise that will be too difficult for you (personal stories of participants, particularly difficult situations of violence, abuse, control, etc.). If you are not sure of your competences, check with your more experience colleagues and/or choose more simple exercises where you feel comfortable. Make sure that at any stage of the activity any participant in the group feels safe to share ideas/opinions and that other participants respect each other's differences.

You also work on raising awareness and breaking down gender stereotypes and prejudices that may appear in the participants (e.g. girls are too sensitive; women are too demanding; men feel threatened and want control, etc.).





SCENARIO SUGGESTIONS:

Scenario 1. Rebecca has been living with her boyfriend Daniel for several years, but in the last few years their relationship has become unstable, and this significantly affects Rebecca's daily mood. When Rebecca comes home from work, she never knows what kind of atmosphere she'll find. Sometimes Daniel seems fine to her and is kind and nice to her, but often his attitude leans towards passive aggressive behaviour. Whatever Rebecca says, it's not good. When she tries to talk to Daniel about how hard it is for her to take his mood swings within hours, it turns into an argument where Rebecca is "guilty" and "ungrateful". Lately, the relationship between Rebecca and Daniel has been getting worse, and the fights are getting fiercer and occasionally turning into physical conflicts.

Scenario 2. Mila and Irene have been close friends for years, but Mila doesn't like that Irene sometimes makes mean comments about her appearance. Mila doesn't feel comfortable confronting Irene about it because she's afraid it might affect their friendship. When Mila finally makes up her mind, Irene denies being mean and says Mila is overreacting and refusing to take her advice. After the conversation with Irene, Mila feels worse and more insecure in her friendship.

DISCUSSION:

During the activity, observe how the participants interact in groups and make sure that everyone is well involved in the brainstorming and question-answering exercise. After the exercise, any participant who wants to share can answer the following questions:

- How did you feel when you read the scripts?
- Was it difficult to recognize the signs of an unhealthy relationship described in the paper?
- How did you feel when you thought about the kind of support you could suggest to the person in the scenario? Was it difficult to come up with ideas?
- And what about the boundaries that need to be set?

Notes: It is important to combine these activities with activities related to self-awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence, so we remind you of the activities in the chapter on positive self-image, as well as the activities in the **WORKBOOK FOR YOUTH "NO ONE IS YOU"**.





THEATRE FOR EMPATHY!

METHODOLOGY: Theatre of the oppressed

Note: Before doing this exercise, make sure you are competent to work using this Methodology.

GOAL: to raise awareness among participants about healthy ways of communicating with others in order to create safer spaces; to improve the social skills of the participants and sensitise them to mental health issues.

DURATION: 45/50 min. Up to 5 minutes for instructions, then breaking into groups. 25 min to prepare each group for creation and improvisation on stage and repeat twice. 5-8 min for a short performance per group. A Discussion and evaluation will follow.

REQUIRED MATERIALS: papers with written scenarios for each team.

IMPLEMENTATION: Facilitator(s) gives each group a piece of paper with a scenario (from the 4 offered below), and the groups should prepare a small theatre play based on the scenario.

The facilitator(s) explain to the participants that they should focus on the mental health of the characters in the scene and the social skills they have or have not sufficiently developed. After 15 minutes, the groups start performing their improvised performance (up to 4 performances). Each time the group plays their scene, then they have to play it a second time, when someone from another group or the leader(s) can say "stop!" and enter the scene, to change the plot in a more positive direction and help the person who is not feeling well in the situation.

The default scenarios are as follows (to adapt to the number of participants):

- 1. *A high-ranking politician admits that he hired Livia as a member of the administrative staff based on her physical appearance and the belief that it could help make the workplace a "more pleasant environment";*
- 2. *A person in a relationship puts a lot of pressure on their partner who is feeling depressed.*
- 3. *A group of new students who want to get to know each other better go out for coffee together after the lecture, and one of them says he has schizophrenia.*
- 4. *A young gender non-binary person wants to discover their non-binary identity in a new environment.*

DISCUSSION:

During the performance, the facilitator(s) will make sure to intervene and say "stop!" to make the plot more positive, in case the Discussion does not continue in a positive direction.

After the exercise, any participant who wants to share his experience can answer the following questions:

- *What was it like to put yourself in the shoes of those people in the performances?*
- *Is there anything you want to share that you noticed during the performance?*
- *Would you change something in your behaviour?*
- *What will you remember after this?*

Note: Facilitator(s) will make sure at any stage of the activity that any participant in the group feels safe in sharing ideas/opinions and that other participants respect each other's differences.





DO WE ALL HAVE THE SAME RIGHTS?

LET'S TALK ABOUT...

Gender diversity and equality

Gender equality is a fundamental human right that recognizes and values the innate value and dignity of every person, regardless of sex and gender. It involves creating a society where individuals have equal access to opportunities, resources and treatment. Despite progress in recent decades, gender inequality remains a widespread problem in many parts of the world, affecting individuals and societies in numerous ways. The history of the movement for gender equality dates back to the 19th century. These numerous movements have made significant strides in achieving legal and social equality for women. The movements for women's suffrage, the women's liberation movement and the adoption of international human rights instruments contributed to the progress of gender equality. However, despite these efforts, gender inequality remains a reality for many people, particularly women and LGBTQIA+ people, in many areas of life, including education, employment and political representation.

The current state of gender equality is mixed. While there have been significant improvements in some areas, such as education, where girls and women have made significant progress in accessing and completing school, significant gaps remain in many areas. Women continue to face discrimination, harassment and violence in many parts of the world. They are underrepresented in leadership positions in the public and private sectors and continue to face a gender pay gap. These persistent inequalities underscore the need for continued efforts to achieve true gender equality.





Talk to young people and listen to their opinion on gender equality!

Ask them: *What is gender equality for you? Why is gender equality important?*

PROPOSAL:

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY FOR WORKING ON GENDER EQUALITY

In general, it is recommended to work with young people with a **gender-sensitive approach**, to pay more attention to gender identity; being aware of, and avoiding, possible gender stereotypes.

This is especially important when you are talking about gender equality and diversity. Youth who identify as **gender fluid or transgender** may want you to use **pronouns** that you are not used to or are unfamiliar with when communicating with them. It is important to take the time to learn both the young people's names and the pronouns they use when they talk about themselves and how they would like others to address them. This helps all young people feel that they are truly seen and heard.

Before each larger unit or module, it is good to use the so-called **icebreakers** or activities aimed at introducing young people to the topic, but also making them feel comfortable with each other.

We suggest the following icebreakers:

- *Participants should introduce themselves by saying "My name is..."*
- *Afterwards, they should share with the group an experience or reflection on gender equality*

Note: The leader must explain that each person can share whatever suits them and nothing is mandatory, as well as that they can ask for clarification on what they hear from others.

A. TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES AND GENDER STEREOTYPES

Gender roles are socially and culturally **constructed expectations about how individuals of a certain sex/gender should behave, think and feel**. These roles are often based on stereotypes and reinforce gender/sex inequalities. Gender stereotypes are **oversimplified and inaccurate beliefs** about individuals based on their sex/gender. For example, as we've written about before, the stereotype that men are supposed to be strong and unemotional can prevent them from seeking help for their mental health.

The influence of gender roles and stereotypes on individuals and society is significant. These expectations can limit the potential of individuals, their choices and contribute to discrimination and violence based on sex/gender. They can also entrench and perpetuate harmful gender norms and impede progress towards gender equality. It is important to raise awareness, question, or even challenge and break down gender roles and stereotypes, both to promote gender equality and to allow individuals to live fulfilling lives independent of societal expectations. This can be achieved through education, raising awareness and encouraging individuals to question and challenge gender norms and stereotypes.





B. GENDER IDENTITY

Gender as a part of an individual, personal identity is actually a spectrum. Admittedly, our society has constructed gender in a binary way (male and female). However, certain gender options lie between the two genders "female-male" or outside the "male-female" spectrum. For example non-binary people can identify as both male and female, somewhere in between, or as completely outside of these categories. Although many of them also identify as transgender, this is not the case for all non-binary people. These people often prefer to use neutral pronouns and other language forms when talking about themselves or want others to address them that way. This linguistic aspect is different in every language. Despite all the problems we face in certain languages, it is important to strive for changes, because the correct use of language could be the key to the inclusion of non-binary people in society.

BASIC TERMS RELATED TO SEX, GENDER AND GENDER IDENTITY

Sex Assigned at Birth: the assignment and classification of people as male, female, intersex, or another gender based on a combination of anatomy, hormones, and chromosomes. It is used to divide human beings into two strict categories: "male" and "female". Interpolated persons are those whose composition of chromosomes, sexual organs or hormonal structure is such that they cannot be classified in any category, and they can belong to both at the same time.

Gender identity refers to how someone defines themselves; it is the gender they identify with. When the gender identity corresponds to the sex assigned at birth, the person is called cisgender. But it can also be different, as is the case with transgender persons (persons whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them or assigned at birth). Gender-fluid individuals are those who prefer to remain flexible about their gender identity rather than identify with one particular one. They can vary between genders or express multiple genders at the same time.

Gender expression: the way people express themselves in a gendered way, for example through appearance and behaviour. This may be, but is not necessarily, related to a person's sex assigned at birth or gender identity.

Gender nonconformity / nonconformism: refers to people whose gender expression does not correspond to their socially prescribed gender roles or norms for a particular gender identity. Gender nonconformity goes beyond social or psychological expectations of perceived sex/gender, through presentation, behaviour, identity, or other means.

Sexual orientation: Attraction to other people can be emotional, romantic and/or sexual. Sexual orientation is sexual attraction or the absence of sexual attraction towards another person. An individual can be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, etc.

Note: It is important to note that sexual orientation does not depend on a person's gender identity.





LGBTQIA+

The LGBTQIA+ acronym (sometimes just LGBT, sometimes LGBTQ, sometimes LGBTQI, sometimes LGBTQI+, or other variants) is an umbrella term that encompasses different sexualities, gender identities, and gender characteristics. The acronym refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexual, asexual, while "+" refers to all identities, orientations and expressions not represented in the acronym; in short, to all other realities. Being LGBTQIA+ is never a choice, it's a natural state. LGBTQIA+ people are evenly distributed around the world and over time, but not all individuals have the same opportunity to experience or express this.

DEFINITIONS

Lesbian: An adjective used to speak of a woman who is romantically and/or sexually attracted to women.

Gay: An adjective used to speak of a man who is romantically and/or sexually attracted to men.

Bisexual: Physical, sexual, emotional or romantic attraction to two or more genders.

Transgender/ Trans: A person whose gender identity differs from that assigned to him/her at birth according to biological sex. The abbreviation is trans. Transgender citizens can decide to make different forms of transitions, physical or not, to reach their point of comfort, that is to say, the expression and the way of living that most corresponds to their gender identity.

X To abolish the term "Transexual", as it is an outdated term dating from the 19th century, ideological, pathologizing and discriminating. Please use the term transgender instead. It is to be used as an adjective, like *gay*, *lesbian*, etc; e.g. a *trans man*, instead of a *trans*.

Queer: A person whose sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression differs from society's expectations, or is considered to be "non-compliant, non-traditional, out of the category". This term, therefore, defines all the letters of the acronym LGBTQIA+.

Intersex: Intersex people are born with sexual characteristics (such as chromosomes, genital organs or hormonal structures) that do not entirely correspond to the male or female category but belong to both at the same time.

X To abolish the term "Hermafrodite", as it is stigmatising, inaccurate word with a negative medical history.

Asexual: Asexual refers to a complete or partial lack of sexual attraction or lack of interest in sexual activity with others. Asexuality exists on a spectrum, and sexual people may experience no, little, or conditional sexual attraction.



The following are suggested activities of the "Let's Talk" project partner - **Social Action and Innovation Centre (KMOP)**.

THE PRIVILEGE WALK

ACTIVITY: *The privilege walk, also called Line of equality or Step forward.*

GOAL: To promote empathy towards "others"; Raise awareness of unequal opportunities and discrimination in society; foster an understanding of the possible consequences of belonging to certain social minorities.

Note: It is important for this activity to be led by a person who understands gender issues, and gender based discrimination and inequality in society. This is especially important because the activity must emphasise well-led Discussion and teaching before and after the central activity itself. At the same time, it is important to know the context in which you perform it, and accordingly potentially adjust the description of the roles that we propose below. Also keep in mind that some roles may be difficult for some participants (either they may recognize themselves in them or they may have extremely repulsive and discriminatory attitudes towards others).

DURATION: 60 minutes

FLOW: Make a short introduction of a few sentences, for example: *"We are all equal, but some are more "equal" than others, that is, some of us have more opportunities and "permission" to be who they are. Through this activity, we will talk about social inequality, which is often a source of discrimination and exclusivity, and about empathy and its limits."*

Give each participant a role card and ask them to think about their role and what it's like to be the person described; allow a few minutes for this if necessary.

Ask the participants to line up in a straight line with enough room to move forward during the exercise.

Give the following instructions:

- *Take one step forward if the statement applies to you. (Read the statements one by one according to the suggestions below, pausing after each one so that everyone can think about the statement).*
- *If you don't feel comfortable with the statement or aren't sure if it applies to your role, don't move.*
- *No one else will know whether the statement applies to your role or not, i.e. you don't have to share the role with anyone.*

STEP BY STEP DESCRIPTION: Begin reading the statements aloud in a clear voice, taking a short (or longer if necessary) pause after each one. When you have finished with the statements, ask the participants to remember where they are in the room in relation to others. Thank everyone for their participation and invite them to the final interview and Discussion. Gather all participants in a circle for conversation and Discussion.

DISCUSSION: ask the following questions

- *How did it feel to participate in the exercise?*
- *What do you think about the position you ended up in?*
- *Were there any things you hadn't considered before?*
- *Were any statements particularly difficult for you (your role/character)?*
- *What would you like people to know about you (your role/character)?*
- *What do you think would happen if we used our own experience?*

You can find a video of this activity on YouTube to show your participants (uploaded by "Peter D"):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4K5fbQ1-zps&ab_channel=PeterD





STATEMENTS

- *I'm not afraid to walk alone at night.*
- *I feel safe wearing the clothes I want to wear.*
- *I am not afraid that society will judge me by the way I express myself.*
- *I am under pressure to start a family as soon as I finish school.*
- *My community fully accepts my choice partner.*
- *My knowledge and opinion are not questioned when I express them.*
- *My appearance/sexuality is being fetishized without my permission.*
- *It is legal to marry the person I want to marry.*
- *I have the unconditional support and acceptance of my family.*
- *I have the same right to participate as other people.*
- *It is easy for me to seek psychological help.*
- *My country has laws that protect my gender expression.*
- *I feel comfortable going to the hospital/doctor for a check-up.*
- *People always correctly perceive my gender.*

ROLES

Examples of roles/characters (can be adjusted and certain characteristics added) according to the specific context in which you are.

- *A gay man raised in a conservative family*
- *A bisexual woman of South Asian origin, born and raised in a poor household*
- *Heterosexual man of Latin American origin who grew up in the countryside; married, has 4 children*
- *A gay man of African-American descent raised in a religious family*
- *Transgender woman, African-American descent raised in a family of middle socio-economic status*
- *Heterosexual male, Muslim, immigrated to the US as an adult*
- *A gay man of Chinese-American descent raised in a predominantly white neighborhood*
- *A gay man raised in a conservative family; works as a model.*
- *A heterosexual woman of Asian-American origin, born and raised in the USA, in a wealthy family*
- *Gay Latino male born and raised in a predominantly white neighborhood; you are in a relationship.*
- *Transgender woman of African-American descent who was raised by a single mother*
- *Heterosexual man who immigrated to the USA, his gender expression is female (feminine).*
- *Bisexual woman of Vietnamese-American origin, born and raised in a family of middle socio-economic status*
- *Non-binary person, male, raised in a family of medium socio-economic status*
- *Heterosexual Caucasian woman from a wealthy family, in a relationship with a person of a female gender expression*
- *Lesbian of Korean-American origin raised in a working-class family.*
- *Transexual man of South Asian origin, married and raised in the USA*
- *A lesbian who grew up in a poor household with seven brothers*
- *A non-binary person from Greece*
- *Bisexual woman from Italy with male gender expression.*

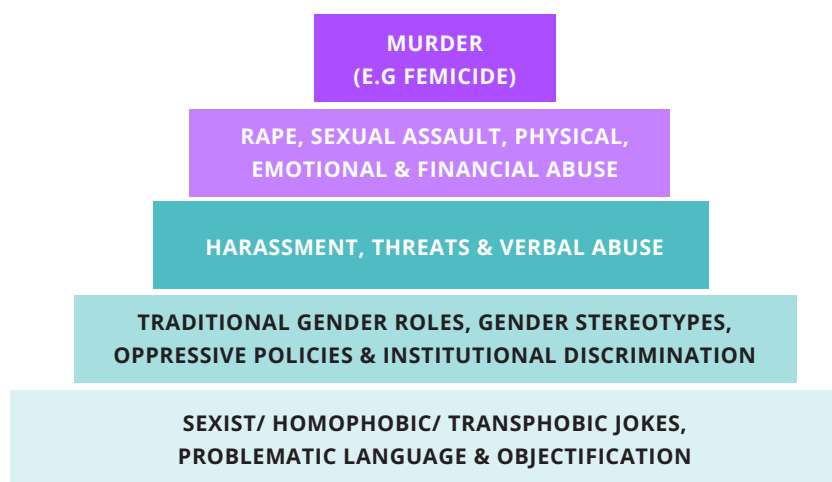


C. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV) AND DISCRIMINATION

Sex/gender discrimination refers to the unequal treatment of individuals based on their sex and/or gender. This discrimination often stems from gender roles and stereotypes and reinforces gender inequalities.

Gender-based violence refers to any form of violence committed against an individual based on their gender. This can include physical, sexual and psychological violence, and can take many forms such as intimate partner violence and sexual assault. Gender-based violence is a serious violation of human rights, and the impact on individuals and communities is significant and long-lasting.

Izvor: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2022>



The pyramid of violence

PROPOSAL:

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY : GBV BALL

GOAL: Get to know and understand the concept of gender-based violence

DURATION: 20 minutes **MATERIALS:** soft ball

FLOW: The facilitator asks the participants to stand in a circle; then introduces a small soft ball (the one that can fit into palm), passes it to one of the participants in the circle and asks that person to throw it to someone else, who throws it to another group member until the ball has been thrown to everyone. The last person who receives the ball should be the person who threw it first.

The facilitator then asks the group to throw the ball again, in the same person-to-person order as before; ask the group to do these three to four times more to remember the throwing order.

Every time that a person holds a ball should say a word or a phrase related to GBV, inclusion, diversity, or gender stereotypes. After the end of the exercise, the facilitator asks them to reflect on these words/phrases.



D. THE ROLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND SENSITIVITY

Gender inequality, discrimination, violence and stereotypes are ubiquitous problems that affect not only adults but also young people. These problems can have a detrimental effect on the physical, mental and emotional well-being of young people, hindering their growth and development.

However, young people have a unique perspective on gender equality and are often at the forefront of social change. They are passionate and committed to creating a fair and just society where everyone, regardless of sex and gender, has equal opportunities and rights.

One of the important reasons why youth engagement is key to promoting gender equality is their potential to drive positive change in their communities. Many young people have fresh ideas and innovative solutions to solve social problems. Likewise, young people may (depending on the geographical and cultural context) be less burdened by prejudices that are sometimes stronger than in adults. Also, the perspective of gender equality in mental health is important for young people not only for prevention, as mentioned above, but also for the level of intervention.

Moreover, today's youths have access to technology and social media, allowing them to amplify their voices and connect with like-minded people around the world. They can use these platforms to raise awareness of gender inequality and discrimination, mobilise support for a cause they believe in, and advocate for change. You, as a person who works with them, and potentially a trusted person, can be a strong support for them in this.





WHAT DO I WANT TO DO WITH MY LIFE?

LET'S TALK ABOUT... **the Calling,
passion and flow!**

Finding one's place in society at a professional level in the field of employment, and at the level of contribution to the community in which they live, is an important task that young people face from adolescence until adulthood.

Moreover, in the context of lifelong learning and the change in the perception of occupation, profession, work and profession from something fixed and unchanging in our life, to something that is constantly changing or searching, this task becomes important throughout life. In addition, there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of doing work in which we are not only successful, but also makes us happy and gives us a sense of meaning, contribution and enables us to live a fulfilling life. That is why it is especially important when working with young people to pay attention to this aspect of the overall well-being and quality of life of a young person and to know how to support them in their search, as well as in case of certain problems that may arise.

From the "Let's Talk" research, we learned, especially from expert counsellors and therapists, that this area of life is a big challenge for young people and represents a special source of stress for them – the imperative to *"be successful"*, *"be the best"*, *"enjoy the work you do"*. Also, considering that they have lost *"faith in the future"*, due to many changes and social crises of the last few years, they understand that they have to rely on themselves and their abilities.



In the context of the idea of success (only the result is important), a very important component of the process of getting to what we want is lost (how I got to the result, what arouses my passion, desire for action, and awareness of my own resources, strength and motivation and who can help me in this). Through the process (but also celebrating your results) it is possible to discover your creativity, identity, competences, passions, strengths and weaknesses. Self-confidence, self-esteem is built, identity is accepted and established, a sense of control, satisfaction, pride, patience is created, but also obstacles are faced, problem-solving strategies are developed and learning how to cooperate with others is developed.



Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book '*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*' (1990) talks about how to release your own creativity, through the experience of satisfaction in a certain activity thanks to something he called FLOW. FLOW is a state of complete involvement or immersion in an activity, a state of creativity and pleasure, when a person is completely immersed in what they are doing (Pavlović, et al. 2017).

Knowing where our FLOW is in relation to other states that we can feel, gives us a certain security and control to feel good, while at the same time doing what motivates us, makes us happy, fulfils us and makes us feel alive.



In the **WORKBOOK FOR YOUTH "NO ONE IS YOU"**, we have suggested several exercises on this topic: *My voice, My influence, My flow, Let's discover our own element, Let's talk....about the future*. Look at them and go through them with the young people you work with.



SUGGESTIONS AND TOPIC IDEAS FOR ACTIVITIES IN THIS FIELD

- Monitor young people and their interests, abilities and values that they adopt and develop, and accordingly, encourage them to accept and pursue various opportunities for education, internships, volunteering or employment
- Encourage young people to explore different areas and activities that interest them and in which they can show their potential and creativity
- Pay special attention and encourage young people that their choices are not based on gender stereotypes and that they do not give up on the field they are interested in, even if it is not in accordance with socially established gender norms
- Support young people in their choices and decisions and provide them with the necessary support and motivation to achieve their goals
- Help young people to recognize their strengths, talents and passions and to develop and improve them through continuous learning and acquisition of new skills
- Involve young people in various projects and programs that enable them to gain practical experience, establish contacts and cooperation with other people, and contribute to society
- Encourage youth to seek feedback and advice from other people who are role models or mentors in their area of interest or endeavour
- Help young people to find a balance between work and free time and take care of their physical and mental health and general well-being
- Support young people (through concrete help, guidance and/or advice) when they face challenges, problems or failures in their profession.



MORE GUIDELINES FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF A YOUTH WORKER

1. CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Most often, when you create workshops for young people on a specific topic from the field of mental health in an open format (a club or a youth centre or some other place where young people come on their own initiative), young people will show up for whom this topic is important either because of their own interest, but also because of their own challenges in mental health and looking for a space where they can talk about it. If you start conducting mental health workshops, young people who have mental health challenges or whose best friends are going through crisis situations that they don't know how to react to, and who already have questions ready, will often come.

Young people often speak very directly (especially if they recognize you as a trustworthy person) about what troubles them, sometimes through laughter, sometimes through tears, sometimes "cold-bloodedly" as if they were talking about the weather forecast. For people who work with young people, it is a bigger challenge not to freeze at that moment, but to take a breath and say something like:

- *Thank you for sharing that. Would you like to discuss this individually after the workshop?*
- *Do you want to share more with the group? This is a safe space, and whatever you say now will remain between us, because we refer to the "group privacy" rule. Does the group agree with that?*

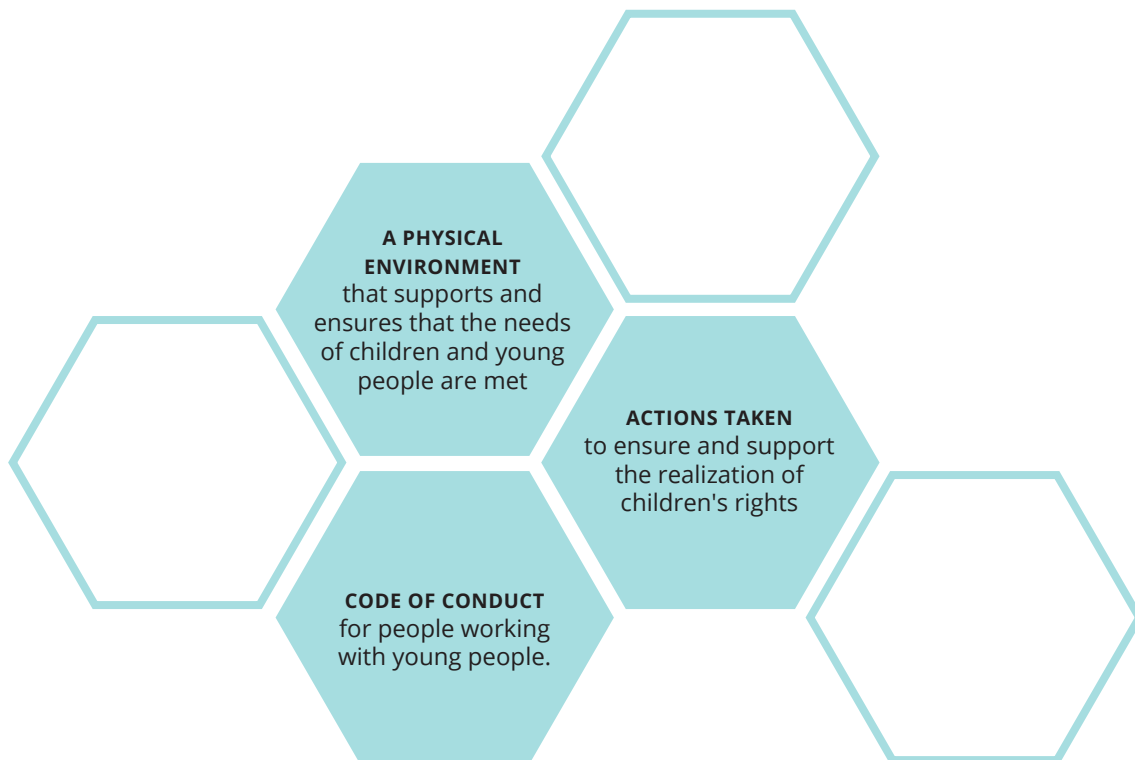
Precisely because of the above, it is necessary for people who work with young people to **create safe environments** in which there will be no judgement, disparagement, crises or other threatening behaviour. It is also important that the people who carry out such activities have sufficient skills and constantly improve their skills in working with young people and providing the necessary support.

In their relationship with young people, when it comes to the topic of mental health, youth workers must be guided by the **best interest of the young person and their ethical and professional boundaries**, defined according to the profession they are engaged in (in some countries, youth work is recognized as a profession, with its own code of conduct, precisely foreseen process of acquiring qualifications, etc.).

It is very important that youth workers are educated in the field of **protection and safety of children and young people** in the activities they carry out with them, as well as that they are familiar with the policies and procedures of the institution/organisation where they work. In addition to legal frameworks, one of the basic measures to protect children and young people in the practice of working with young people is the creation of a safe environment for children/young people, which includes:

- A physical environment** that supports and ensures that the needs of children and young people are met
- Actions taken** to ensure and support the realization of children's rights
- Code of conduct** for persons working with young people.





In addition to creating a safe environment, it is also very important that youth workers pay attention to their own behaviour in order to protect children and young people, as well as themselves, during activities.

SOME TIPS ON HOW TO ENSURE THIS:

- ensure the **presence of two leaders/facilitators** during activities with young people (the ideal situation is leaders of different genders)
- keep in mind that **your comments, addressed to young people, may be misinterpreted**, even though they are given with the best intentions
- recognize the need for caution, especially when working with young people on sensitive issues (e.g. violence, abuse, grief)
- be aware of the possible **implications of physical contact** with young people (that this contact may not be desirable and what connotation/message it may send)
- during one-on-one contact with a young person, **ensure that you are available to your colleagues** during individual work, that you inform them where you work, with whom, for what purpose, and if there is a need, that they can interrupt your work. Individual work is carried out in a **visible place** where there is a circulation of people, but to the extent that ensures peace and quiet, which is necessary for an individual conversation (the ideal situation is to work in a room with large windows or glass doors, so that you are visually accessible, but noise does not disturb your work; if this is not possible, leave the door of the room where you work ajar). Avoid unnecessary physical contact with the young person, and if you must make contact, consult first to get the young person's approval ("Is it okay if I hug you?").





2. TRUST AND CONFIDENTIALITY

A very important aspect of the relationship between a young person and a youth worker is **confidentiality**. Although a young person has the right to trust and expect that what they tell remains between them, if the situation shared by the young person threatens their physical or mental health, the youth worker is obliged to report this to the competent persons and institutions, according to the provided procedures.

It is very important to explain the difference between **secrecy** and confidentiality to children and young people before starting an individual conversation. When someone entrusts you with their secret, it means that you must not forward the received information to anyone, as well as that you can only talk to the person who told you the secret.

On the other hand, if you **commit to confidentiality**, it means that the young person is making certain information available to you because they have confidence in your judgement and that you will use the information obtained in their best interest. Furthermore, this includes that, if necessary, you will have to pass the information on and discuss it with appropriate professionals.

It is very important that, if a youth worker suspects or is informed about the abuse of a child/young person, they **NEVER investigate further on their own initiative**. When a child/young person discovers abuse, the role of a person working with young people is to support them, to let them know that they are open to listening, but that they must pass the information on to competent persons/institutions. It is important to present this information openly, but be considerate of the young person's feelings and their potential reluctance, disappointment, fear of reporting the information.

Therefore, it is important to encourage the young person in the same conversation that this is also their decision, and not just yours, and that you will be there as a support during the entire process (for example, you can report the abuse to the competent person together). If you promise to keep a secret, and then pass on the information, the young person will no longer trust you - they may retract the statement and no longer trust anyone.

INDIVIDUAL CONVERSATION

...Very often, after meeting with a client, I asked myself and them how I helped them, because I didn't have the impression that I had done anything smart and big, and they thanked me for the help. In most such situations, I received a very simple answer: "You listened to me. You let me talk about what was bothering me, you didn't constantly interrupt me, give advice, etc., like my family members, friends, work colleagues, etc. do."

Lidija Arambašić, 2021)

In most cases, a young person just needs to be heard and for someone to take their problems seriously. That is why it is important not to minimise the problems and challenges that a young person faces, however trivial they may seem from our perspective (for example, they broke up with their boyfriend/girlfriend and now feel as if they will never fall in love again).





During the conversation, it is important to:

- ☑ actively listen and participate in the conversation,
- ☑ do not interrupt the young person,
- ☑ give them space to think about how they want to formulate their sentences, without leading them to give socially desirable answers,
- ☑ follow the feelings of the young person.
- ☑ ask them how they feel about the situation they experienced/is going through, as well as about sharing it with you.

In the event that a young person starts to talk about their mental health problems on their own initiative, it is important to make it clear to them what your competencies are (especially if you are not a psychologist or psychotherapist), and that you cannot be a professional support (if you do not have these competencies), but that you are there for them to listen and provide support in relation to what your capabilities and knowledge are.

It is important that, despite the knowledge you have, you do not try to ask the young person to define the symptoms of a problem or mental disorder, in order to try (alone or with the young person) to assume or make a diagnosis. After talking with the young person, you can suggest (if you judge that it is necessary) to contact a professional (psychologist, psychotherapist, health institution) and direct them to relevant and verified contacts and addresses.

Example from practice:

In the youth club of our organization, a workshop was organized called "How are you?", where we talked about how we communicate with others about how we feel, and how often we honestly answer the question of how we are. Although the topic did not touch on "big challenges" in mental health, a girl who came to the workshop for the first time felt that the workshop was a safe space where she could share that she is in a difficult period and that she often thinks about committing suicide. She also said that she is still very happy that there is a place where you can talk about the mental health of young people, and she would like to see it talked about a lot more in our society.

The youth worker thanked the girl for sharing this at the workshop, and the group reacted in the same way - they were full of support. At the end of the workshop, the youth worker had an individual conversation with the girl, where she told her that she is welcome in the youth club every Wednesday, but that they also have activities and opportunities for volunteer engagement and opportunities for conversations.

The girl was already in contact with professionals, she went to the mental health clinic on her own accord, and in this case there was no need to refer to other experts. What was important was to provide space for the social integration of this person, which means at the same time providing a place where he can talk about how he feels, but also where he can spend his free time in a quality way, have fun, talk and learn about new topics.



If a young person refuses this, you can propose the continuation of individual work (determine some specific dates, e.g. once a week or once a month), during which, together with the young person, you will set certain goals that the young person will strive for, and you will support and monitor their development (e.g. if the young person has a fear of speaking in public, their task for the next workshop can be to volunteer to present some group work that you will design, and after that workshop, you can discuss in an individual interview how they felt in that situation).

As your relationship of trust builds, you can again, if necessary, suggest a visit to a professional (for example, if you notice that the fear of public speaking has started to manifest itself physically in the form of severe pain, panic attacks, loss of speech, etc., and that it is still necessary to work with a mental health specialist).



TIPS — What NOT to do?

- ☑ **Never diagnose** a young person, nor try to gather as many symptoms as possible to explain their condition. Even if you are at the same time an expert in mental health, that is not your role in this situation, rather schedule a special session in which you will explain your competences to the young person in a timely manner and why you think it is necessary to have a therapy session or psychological counselling.
- ☑ **Never promise** that it will get better, never say that it will all pass. With this, you diminish the importance of the young person's problem, while at the same time making it clear that they are powerless in the current situation.
- ☑ **Never share information** about a young person with other people without their consent. If you need support and consultation, please do so without sharing personal information, or seek support outside the institution where the young person attends, if you assess that sharing any information could reveal the young person's identity.

3. CREATING A GROUP DYNAMICS

Being a person who works with young people means being ready: to adapt your approach to the needs of each young person and the challenges that a young person faces.

Thus, in a group of young people, you can have one loud activist, for whom women's rights are very important, for whom it is important that you discuss the gender roles of men and women in modern society, and that women have the freedom to make decisions independently, in accordance with their affinities, and not with society's expectations.

In the youth group, you can also have a person who grew up in a patriarchal family, raised under the auspices of strict religious worldviews, who is 16 years old, and is not allowed to have a relationship with a young man, to have male friends or to talk about it openly with her sisters or mother. You can have a person who is questioning his gender identity, who realises that he is transgender, and who has great challenges in admitting this to himself, to you as a leader, and to his close environment. It is clear that each of these people requires a different approach, understanding and support, and that we should be ready to adapt to different situations.





When forming a group and starting group processes, it is very important to keep in mind the **creation of a safe environment**. The main role is played by the **group leader** (youth worker, teacher), and it is important to lay good and quality foundations for group processes.

1. **Present yourself** — your competences, experiences, also something personal about yourself.
2. **Define the rules of the group and the rules of behaviour** — highlight what is primarily important to you, safety in the group, that everyone is welcome, but also define some basic rules of behaviour. Invite the participants themselves to express what is essential and important to them and to invite them that we are all responsible for creating group dynamics as well as a safe environment.
3. **Create conditions for connecting members of the group** — through various activities of getting to know each other and opening space for sharing, conditions are created for connecting members of the group. It is certainly good to divide the participants into different groups with specific tasks in order for them to get to know and connect with each other. The more group members connect, the greater the possibility of sharing their problems as well as strengthening their socio-emotional competences.
4. **Structured activities** — although these are informal approaches, it is very important to prepare activities for young people and to understand what is achieved with these structured activities. Encourage young people to create activities for their group themselves with your support.
5. **Monitoring the individual needs of the group participants** — even though it is a group, it is important to have "open eyes" for the individual needs of the members. Which means that it is necessary to give a lot of space to the members to express themselves and give their opinion about the processes in the group. But also to give additional support to individuals if you notice that something is happening to them. Below are concrete examples that can serve as guidelines. Considering the size of the group, assess whether you need additional support from colleagues, but also to strengthen the group so that they can support each other.
6. **Feedback, self-assessment and evaluation** — when working with young people, it is necessary to keep in mind giving feedback as well as encouraging young people to self-assess, but also by giving their feedback to you as well as to the group itself. The above can be implemented through a number of different activities, but also through direct communication.



TIPS — What to pay attention to when working with young people?

- Observe the interaction** of the young people in the group during, but also before and after the activity. This will reveal to you what the group members' relationships are like, whether there is adequate peer communication and support, whether the group members are in a successful socialisation process, or whether there are reasons for concern.
- Listen to the words** the youths say during the activity, especially when they reflect on their feelings and personal observations at the end of the activity. The choice of words, the way they are spoken and to whom they are addressed also reveals mutual relationships, not only with group members but also in the wider community.
- Monitor the non-verbal communication of youths:** clothing, body position, hand and foot movements, gaze. All this can show you the feelings of a young person in relation to the topic you are dealing with, but also how they feel in social interactions





4. FIRST AID! — WHAT IF I NOTICE THAT SOMETHING IS WRONG?

Already in a group context, during various activities, a young person can behave in a certain way, which may indicate that they need additional support to overcome certain life challenges, problems, or in the development of socio-emotional competences.

If you find yourself in a situation where you suspect something is wrong:

- **Talk to other colleagues** about the young person you work with, ask about their behaviour during school hours and relationships with peers.
- **Ask the young person directly** (e.g., *"I noticed that today you were not as involved as usual, is everything ok?"*)
- **Consult with other experts.** In situations where you are unsure of the best course of action, consult with other youth work or mental health professionals without sharing the young person's personal information.



The support that a youth worker can provide in the field of mental health will depend on the professional context and competences, but can generally take the form of:

- giving advice
- mentoring/guiding a young person to recognize their own potential (guidance)
- counselling at a deeper level of emotional support or even going into psychotherapy.

WARNING SIGNS AND ADVICES

In most cases, youth workers build long-term, developmental relationships with young people, and over time this relationship takes on friendly characteristics. This kind of relationship makes it much easier to notice changes in a young person's behaviour, and makes interventions natural, continuous, so they are positively received by young people.

However, in some situations, a person who works with young people may already notice certain signs or symptoms during the first meeting with a young person that indicate that they should pay more attention to the young person or follow them a little more carefully during group work, as well as make an extra effort to establish a close relationship, in order to determine the needs of that young person through individual work.



Red flags or warning signs refer to any behaviour that deviates from how that young person normally behaves in the same context/circumstances or behaviour that deviates from the normal, expected behaviour of a young person of that age and in those specific circumstances.

The existence of red flags makes it much easier to notice that a young person needs additional support. However, it can also happen that these symptoms are not so visible or that this need manifests itself in a seemingly inconspicuous way.



For this reason, we list certain symptoms or signs/behaviours that can help people working with young people to recognize when a young person has a problem, and to react accordingly. **This list is not exhaustive and does not necessarily indicate a problem related to the young person's mental health**, but it represents symptoms that should be paid attention to in further (group and/or individual work) with the young person.



WORDS that a young person uses during activities to describe their feelings or the behaviour of others

Extremely strong and/or disturbing expressions. It is important to monitor whether the young person always has the same reactions to similar behaviours, i.e. whether the violent feelings occurred only in one specific situation (e.g. specifically during the activity two young people had an argument because they could not agree on how to complete the task) or if they are repetitive – the young person projects the feelings they have from another context (family, a situation he experiences in a peer group, etc.).

One of the signs can be the use of superlative words as well as words that have a very strong emotional component (for example, a young person describes a situation in which they are angry with a peer because of something and says: "*I hate him*").

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

When talking about sensitive topics (as violence, psychoactive substances, etc.) The young person looks at the floor or to the side, does not join in the conversation, sits with crossed arms or legs, is turned to the side, looks as if they will run away or leave the room at any moment; or very aggressive, angry behaviour, excessive humour, or downplaying the situation.

COVER /disguise with clothes

A young person wears long clothes in situations that are not appropriate for it (e.g. wearing hooded shirts in summer, at high temperatures). This may indicate that the young person is covering up signs of injury (including self-harm) or violence; or to the great shame and discomfort of showing one's body.

INJURIES in unusual places or complaints of physical pain

Injuries that are rarely caused by an accident (e.g. rib fractures, injuries to the back, cheekbones on the face, crotch, arm muscles, internal injuries, burns, cuts) may indicate that a young person is exposed to physical violence or is self-harming. Attention should also be paid to traces of injuries on the body that have not been treated or treated adequately, as well as frequent or chronic illnesses and pains, such as abdominal pain or headaches. A young person may show discomfort during activities that require physical movements (e.g. they seem to suffer pain while walking, standing or certain physical movements).

AVOIDING PHYSICAL CONTACT with other young people

The young person does not want to participate in the activity that implies touching other young people, especially if it involves harmless hand-holding and similar activities.

AVOIDING activities and workshops on a specific topic

If the topic was announced in advance, and the young person does not appear at the activity and does not have a justified reason for his absence or does not want to state it, this may indicate that the young person is avoiding the topic for some reason.

Redirecting excessive ATTENTION TO SELF

If you have a young person in the group who always has some problem that they have to talk about in front of everyone, they always want others to listen to them and help them, even though it's about very trivial and harmless situations, it's possible that they really have a more serious problem that they don't know how to talk about.





PERFECTIONISM	This can be indicated if a young person has a strong need for perfection and has violent emotional reactions when the activity does not go as planned or announced, as well as excessive emotional reactions to mistakes made (e.g. starts shouting, crying, arguing with others).
A state of FROZEN ATTENTION	This is a situation when a young person acts as if they have "no feelings" in relation to a topic, show calmness and stability in situations that are disturbing for other young people and cause an emotional reaction.
Overemphasised UTILITY	These are situations when a young person constantly offers to help, to do something, to stay longer after the activity and help you in clearing the space or carrying materials. It could be that they are trying to signal the need to talk to someone individually.
Excessive NEED FOR APPROVAL	If a young person seeks excessive attention, affection, hugs, encouragement, not only in relationships with peers but also towards the leader (a youth worker), it may indicate a lack of self-confidence, but also some more serious needs, and it is important to monitor in which situations this is manifested and whether this is a regular behaviour of the young person or if it only happens during activities.
RISK BEHAVIOUR	You should pay attention if a young person shows risky behaviour during activities or you have information that they do it in their free time: exposes themselves to physical dangers in which there is a high probability of injury, has unprotected sexual relations with many partners, abuses psychoactive substances and alcohol; here we can also add energy drinks, excessive trips to the gym, restriction and choice of food and foodstuffs, withdrawal from peers and self-isolation.
VIOLENT, aggressive or destructive behaviours towards themselves or peers	Attention should certainly be paid if a young person advocates punishment in situations when the task is not completed or not done as intended (desire to punish peers for their mistakes); if they behave destructively, aggressively towards group members and the leader; inappropriate sexual behaviour during the activity (seductiveness, unpleasant flirting addressed to peers, but also to the leader); detailed and precise retelling of situations of abuse or self-harm from the perspective of a <i>"friend who has a problem"</i> ; if during or after the activity they allude to a secret they must not reveal.
NEUROTIC (anxious), apathetic, self-destructive behaviours	This includes rocking on a chair, biting nails, pulling and twisting hair, cutting or carving signs and symbols into the skin, or piercing the skin with sharp objects; fidgeting, scratching, going to the toilet, showing tiredness, laziness, lack of interest, forgetfulness, absence during activities, weakening of school performance; the person is quiet and unengaged during activities, is often late or does not come to activities; has poor personal hygiene, suddenly loses or gains weight or shows frequent or constant hunger; self-deprecation during activities, frequent and continuous self-degradation (e.g. <i>"I didn't do this well, I don't know anything, I'm stupid"</i>) or constantly questioning one's own actions, words, etc.
RESISTANCES AND FEARS	The person demonstrates fear of new situations (changes in the environment in which you work, merging with other groups, changes in the way of working, introduction of a new manager, etc.); in situations where it is necessary to contact parents or teachers, the young person demonstrates fear and tries to avoid it by all means, in extreme cases they even threatens violence or leaving the activity.





IMMEDIATE INTERVENTION

There are situations in which immediate intervention is clearly needed, for example, when a young person cries during an activity, shows aggression (violent behaviour towards the participants or the leader of the activity), when he suddenly leaves the room without explanation.

In other situations, emergency interventions are not necessary, but in the case of greater intensity of one of the symptoms, an "intervention" can be done at the end of the activity.

"Intervention" means a conversation with a young person about their behaviour and feelings that worry us.

For example, you can ask the young person to stay after the activity, and ask about their life through an individual conversation. Try to keep the conversation in as informal an atmosphere as possible, so that the young person does not feel that they are invited to a meeting or therapy, but a friendly conversation, in which you will express your concerns

An example of how to start a conversation: ***"I noticed that today you are a bit quieter than usual, is everything okay?" "How are you feeling?"***

Example from practice:

Workshop participants discussed parental support for young people with mental health challenges, how parents usually do not provide support, because of the stigmatization of receiving a psychological support. The two young men begin to laugh, which interrupts the Discussion. The youth worker stops the conversation and asks them to be quiet, and one of them says: "Excuse me. We laugh because my dad died."

The young person obviously has certain feelings towards the topic, and it is up to the youth worker to assess how and when it is best to react to this situation. The youth worker can continue the conversation in this direction, and if the group already knows each other well and has established mutual relations and rules, the group itself can also be a source of support for this young person. On the other hand, if the members of the group are seeing each other for the first time or if the young person does not have a developed relationship with the members, this kind of conversation can demotivate them from further participation in the workshops. The youth worker can also talk to the young person after the workshop and check if they want to talk about this in private.

*In the specific situation, the youth worker asked the young person if he wanted to share anything else and to discuss it in the workshop, or afterwards, reminding that **the group is a place where information remains confidential** and where care will be taken that no-one is judgmental about what he wants to share. The young man said that he is great and that there is no need to talk about it at that moment. Nevertheless, in future work with this person, **the youth worker should be aware of this situation, be ready to provide support and encourage the young person to talk about his feelings.***



TRIGGERS

In certain situations, young people who are already empowered to talk about a topic that is important to them will recognize when the topic does not suit them and will say so clearly.

e.g., This is a trigger for me, I would like to go out for a while, I will be back in 5 minutes.

However, most often "triggers" can be recognized from the non-verbal speech of the young person (fidgeting, scratching, going to the toilet, etc.). That is why youth workers should take care of each participant, and not keep attention and focus only on the most active ones.



Example from practice

At the "Iceberg" workshop, organized in the youth club, we talked with young people about what can be invisible causes for some visible behavior. A participant in the workshop started a Discussion about how behind the rapist's profile, there are most likely traumas from childhood, or also situations of rape that the person survived. Another participant raised her hand and said that this topic "triggers" her, and that she will leave the workshop for five minutes. The risk at this moment was that only one youth worker was leading the workshop, so she had to choose whether to leave the group and follow the young person to talk, or to finish the conversation in the group.

At that moment, it is up to the youth worker to decide, taking into account all the other circumstances and information they have, whether it is more important to leave the room with the young person or they can talk to them later. One of the solutions can be to go out with the young person for a short time and suggest that they talk privately after the workshop, to let the young person know that it is okay to stay outside as long as they need, and then go back inside and continue with the group Discussion.

FINDING OUT ABOUT ABUSE

During a young person's 'opening up' (a situation where a young person shares sensitive personal experiences with a youth worker):

- ☑ Listen and stay calm, take what they are saying seriously and do not interrupt them while they are talking;
- ☑ Don't probe or ask questions about the things they state (it's not your job to gather that information);
- ☑ Reassure the young person that they were right in what they said and that what happened was not their fault;
- ☑ Do not judge the young person, the abuser, or the situation itself;
- ☑ Explain what you are going to do next;
- ☑ Be careful and aware of your own reactions, body language, touches and caring hugs;
- ☑ Don't show anger at them (why didn't you tell me earlier), or at the abuser (children/youths may still feel loyal to that person, especially if it's a family member);
- ☑ Don't make false promises - don't say everything will be fine or that the abuser will go to jail - you don't know for sure;
- ☑ After the 'opening' write down what the young person said (the facts, not your opinion about it);
- ☑ After making arrangements with the young person, forward all information to the competent person and/or institution;
- ☑ Continue to observe the young person and changes in behaviour.



After this kind of intervention, in addition to communication with competent persons from the institutions, continue to provide support to the young person (if this is also recommended by the psychologists involved).



BEHAVIOUR IN AN ACUTE SITUATION (AGGRESSION, THREAT)

In an acute situation, it is important to remain calm. If a young person behaves aggressively, it is important not to respond with aggression, and, if possible, to remove the aggressive person from the conflict situation (in a calm manner, with the suggestion of leaving the situation for their own good). If it is possible and appropriate, it would also be good to remove the victim of aggression from the conflict situation.

It is important to use non-threatening body language, speak in a calm voice, without shouting or raising your voice, avoid physical contact and be honest. When it comes to aggressive behaviours, it is also important not to put yourself at unnecessary risk, especially if a young person starts using objects as weapons.



4. WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?

If you have space and resources, it is recommended that you include a young person in whom you notice some of the symptoms or "red flags" in a longer process of individual work.

You start this process:

1. **Only with the consent of the young person and their voluntary participation** — At the very beginning, present the advantages of this process, why you think it would be good if they had this type of support, but without giving diagnoses or identifying the young person or their behaviour as problematic. You state the positive aspects of individual support to the young person (e.g. *"I think it might be interesting for you to talk a little more about you and what you want through our individual meetings"*).
2. **By referring the young person to the type of support you provide** — It is important to clarify immediately to the young person that meetings with you are not a form of psychotherapy support, to explain to them what your capacities are and where the limits of your knowledge and capabilities are. Through conversations with a young person, as your relationship of trust develops, you will naturally find out what is bothering them and together you will assess whether your support is sufficient. When the young person themselves identifies the problem and gives it a name (e.g., *"I notice that I have a great fear of being in large groups of people."*), you can start with appropriate interventions, by simply asking the question: *"How do you feel in these situations?"*
3. **By determining the topic/problem together with the young person** — Open the topic and together with a young person agree on simple tasks in which they will try to work either on acquiring specific skills or on overcoming problems: e.g. For a young person who is afraid of public speaking, one task could be to try to give a short presentation on a topic in front of their class - or to begin with, in front of their friends or parents. Your intervention, or the tasks you give to a young person, will depend on their willingness to step out of their comfort zone, the severity of the problem they are facing, and the form of support you offer them. Do not forget to explain to the young person that you are always a support for them when performing these tasks and that you will be there when they complete the task.
4. **By joint agreement on support** — It is very important that you and the young person assess which situations/tasks are something that causes discomfort, but they are able to fulfil them, and which tasks cause them "paralysis" (the young person "freezes") or physical pain. This will help you to assess whether the support you can provide (through individual work, tasks, etc.) is something that is in the domain of your abilities, or whether the young person still needs professional support.
5. **Monitoring the progress and process** — Together with the young person, take notes (portfolio, file, record, etc.), in which you will write down how the process is going, what the changes are, and how the young person reacts and feels about the interventions you are doing. It is important that the young person has an insight into these notes and can make comments together with you, and monitor their personal development.





Example of interventions/tasks you can give to a young person and how to gradually work on their development

The young person is highly motivated to participate in planning and conducting workshops for their peers, but we are noticing that they have a strong **fear of public speaking**. We can agree that their homework is to present themselves in 3 minutes at our individual meeting next week, and then in two weeks, at the workshop we have at the youth club, or at some other joint meeting with the rest of the group, to hold one shorter activity – an energizer activity or some exercise.

When we have mastered this task, we can agree whether we will move on to holding the presentation in front of the class or family, friends, and we will gradually increase the duration of the presentations, until they feel free to lead some parts of the workshop together with the youth worker. **Our goal** is for them to initiate a workshop in their class within a year, without the presence of a youth worker.

5. WHAT TO DO WHEN I CAN'T DO ANYTHING MORE?

When you recognize that the situation in which the young person finds themselves is outside of your competences, it is important to communicate this openly with the young person. This is precisely why it is important to share with the young people at the beginning of the individual process what your competences are and how your individual process differs from psychotherapy.



This should not be communicated as your lack of competence to deal with the problems the young person has (e.g., *"You are so bad that I can't help you, you need someone professional."*), but you share your opinion from the perspective of your concern for the best interest of the young person (e.g., *"What you have just told me seems very challenging for you. I think it would be good if, in addition to me, you get additional support. What do you think about it?"*). In this way, the young person will not get the feeling that they are too demanding or "too difficult", but will understand that you exclusively put their well-being first.

Considering the great stigmatisation of seeking help and showing vulnerability, as well as visiting professionals (psychologists and psychotherapists) in society, it is important that you approach this topic slowly, as an opportunity to improve the quality of life of a young person, and not as a way to solve a problem. Ideally, through the process with you, young people will recognize themselves that they need additional, professional support. It is certainly important not to impose this on them, but **to lead them to an independent conclusion and understanding of why they need the support** of a psychologist/therapist.

At this stage, it would be good if you either already have a psychologist/therapist in mind, whom you would recommend or with whom your organisation already cooperates. It is important that this is a person **who has experience working with young people**, who will be able to understand the challenges that young people face. You can also explore or choose together with the young person who this person could be, if you have more recommendations, so that the young person feels in **control and ownership of this new situation and process**.



Keep in mind that young people are often distrustful of psychologists in schools or health care facilities, because of their previous bad experiences or bad experiences of friends. It is always good to have contacts of organisations or institutions that provide free psychological support, psychologists you work with, online chats or e-mails through which psychological support is provided.



You can find some contacts in your country, and it would certainly be good to find out more about available psychological support in your city/surroundings.

When a young person uses the services of a psychologist or psychotherapist, it does not necessarily mean that they can no longer continue their individual work with you or that they must be excluded from the group processes and programs that you implement.

REFERRING TO OTHER PROFESSIONALS



Example from practice

The teacher of Serbian language and literature in the high school is always open to conversation and regularly starts classes with the question "How are you?" and listens to students when they talk about their problems. Students see her as a person they can confide in, and they often do this through essays (written assignments). A student wrote to her that she had a need to self-harm, and after that, she showed up at school with scars.

The teacher feels powerless, does not have a good cooperation with the psychological-pedagogical service at the school, and seeks support from a youth worker from a non-governmental organization with which she has established cooperation from earlier.

The teacher and the youth worker in this situation do not know if the girl is indeed self-harming or if the scars were caused in some other way, if it is an event that has been repeated several times, etc., and it is certainly not their job that they should have the competence to deal with this topic.

They decided that the teacher would suggest to her student to meet and talk to her colleague, a youth worker, who works with young people in workshops and individually.

If you decide to refer a student (if you are a teacher) to a youth worker, or any other professional that is not a therapist, this should be clearly noted in initial contact. Also, it should be clearly explained that this type of individual support is not intended as an assessment of their mental state or psychotherapy but rather a conversation between two people, in which the young person has complete autonomy.

Already in that first initial contact, the youth worker can ask the young person why they think someone (a teacher, a parent) suggested that interview. It is also good to give some examples of how individual support and this kind of relationship can work. Ideally, the youth worker will also have certain group programs in which the young person can participate in order to avoid the feeling of individual therapy. Over time, a young person can gain trust in the youth worker and in the organisation/group that participates in the activities, so participation in this program becomes a safe space for new social interactions, an environment in which they will get a sense of belonging, have tasks they can fulfill, contribute to society and feel valuable. At the same time, it will give the youth worker the opportunity to observe the young person more closely and recognize if additional support is needed.





6. HOW TO COOPERATE WITH OTHER EXPERTS?

Regardless of whether you referred the young person to the psychologist's support or the psychologist referred them to your youth work program, it is important that you carry out any intervention you have in the direction of communication with the psychologist, with the consent of the young person. The most desirable situation is that you maintain a regular relationship with the psychologist (or other mental health specialist) whose services the young person uses, in order to regularly inform and exchange information about their development and potentially receive instruction from the psychologist about what type of activity or support for a young person would be most significant. You must inform the young person about this and ask for their permission to maintain contact, while clearly setting boundaries and regularly checking with the young person:

e.g., Is it okay for you to share what you just told me with your psychologist? I think it would be good, because she could talk to you more about it, and that could benefit you.

This exchange of information and your relationship with the psychologist is a matter of internal agreement, you can exchange this information in the form of notes, regular meetings (which the young person can also attend if you think it would be good), in the dynamics that are necessary for the young person to have adequate support. You ask the psychologist for precise information about what their proposal is, how you can best support the young person in the domain of your competences, and in return provide as concrete insights as possible from the activities in which the young person participates, your observations and interpretations of what happened.



Also, it may happen that the young person leaves your program because it no longer brings them benefit, or that even the psychologist themselves recommends the removal of the young person from the program.

Here it is important to always keep in mind that **all our actions are directed and based on the best interest of the young person**, and if the psychologist's recommendation or the young person's desire is to leave the program, you must support them in this process and let them know that you do not take it seriously, as well as that you (you, your program, or even the organisation) are there if the young person changes their mind or if at some point they are well enough to return to the program.



Important! Also, if the young person is part of a group, don't forget that you have to go through this separation process with the group, communicate openly (up to the limits of what the young person has allowed you to communicate) and take into account the feelings of the whole group.

A potential challenge can be when a young person, despite the psychologist's recommendation, does not want to leave the program or group. At this point, it is important to maintain open and honest communication with the young person, emphasise your support, but make it known that for their health and well-being, it is most desirable that you listen to the advice of experts and act according to their instructions, and that you and the group will be there when they are well enough to re-join. Ideally, you will also be able to organise a joint last meeting of the group where everyone will get a chance to say hello, share their feelings and show their support as a group. Of course, take care that all this happens with the consent of the young person in question and within the limits in which it is acceptable to them. t the feelings of the whole group.







WHERE TO SEEK HELP?

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[Advancing Social and Emotional Learning CASEL](#) - <https://casel.org/>

<https://www.centarbea.hr/en>

[LORI.HR](#)

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/>





ABOUT THE PROJECT

The *“Let’s talk”* project carried out by a consortium of organisations from Croatia (Forum for Freedom in Education), Greece (Social Action and Innovation Centre), Italy (Centre for Creative Development “Danilo Dolci”) and Serbia (Centre for Youth Work) within Erasmus+ programme aims to strengthen youth workers' capacity to support young people's mental health, focusing on gender sensitive approaches to mental health.

The specific objectives of the project are:

Providing Policy analyses and recommendations related to young people's mental health on the EU and national level, with a focus on the gender perspective;

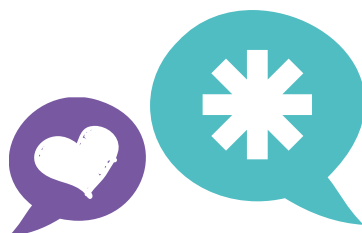
Strengthening capacities of partner organisations and youth workers to support young people's mental health adequately;

Developing the gender-sensitive tools for understanding and supporting mental health for young people, and Disseminating the acquired knowledge and resources in 4 partner countries and on the EU level, especially through the platform *“Let’s Talk”*.

More information and results developed are available at the project website.

[HTTPS://LETSTALK-PROJECT.EU/](https://letstalk-project.eu/)





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LETsTALK

Developing gender sensitive mental health program for young people



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