Positive Mental Health

Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work

Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field

Edited by Thomas Albers & Oda Salomons

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Erasmus+ Project: Promoting Positive Mental Health in the European Youth Sector

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Foreword by Editors

In a time where young people's health and wellbeing is being challenged more than ever before, the role and importance of youth work is indescribable. As you will probably know, the youth work sector has the resources and expertise to support young people in their personal growth and development, providing them with safe and supportive learning environments in which to flourish.

This publication is a collection of articles and aims to share youth workers' expertise gathered over the past decades with regards to the promotion of positive mental health. The articles are written by youth workers from Europe. They clarify and offer a deeper context to a theoretical framework on the promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing that has been developed as part of an Erasmus+ funded project.

Personal growth and the experiencing of wellbeing are only possible in symbiosis with the environment. Young people learn from the youth workers and the youth workers learn from the young people. The authors of the articles have aimed to share their insights, gathered over their many years of experience within the European youth sector in which they learnt with and from young people.

This Erasmus+ project is called 'Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing' and aims to promote the **wellbeing** and **flourishing of young people**. It seeks to do this through providing a theoretical framework, sharing emerging perspectives from the field and a practical manual offering learning opportunities for both young people and youth workers. In the manual you can find guidelines, practical exercises and narratives on how to promote positive mental health in your daily work as a youth worker. All publications can be downloaded from the project website: **www.positivementalhealth.eu**.

We are grateful to the young people for being teachers and for the youth workers for devoting themselves to creating a better world. We especially want to thank the authors and the project partner organisations for sharing their insights, knowledge and expertise.

May this publication inspire you to enrich and deepen your youth work practices.

With loving kindness,

Thomas Albers & Oda Salomons

Keywords overview

Here you can find an overview of the keyword and a reference to the chapter.

Attention: 11
Autonomy: 7
Awareness: 11, 13, 16
Basic needs: 7, 8
Body awareness: 6, 11, 13
Body intelligence: 13
Brain, body and environment: 3
Common humanity: 8
Compassion: 8, 11, 14
Competence: 7
Connecting with nature: 2, 3
Conscious breathing: 11
Coping with disabilities: 5
Daily rhythm: 15
Dealing with challenges and stress: 10
Decision making: 9
Emotional competences: 10
Emotional regulation systems: 8
Engagement: 7
Environmental wellbeing: 2, 3, 4
Experiential learning: 4, 16
Flow learning: 3
Forest bathing: 9
Goal setting: 9
Good sleep habits: 15
Healthy lifestyle: 15
Identity: 16, 17
Interconnectedness: 13, 14
Learning cycle: 16
Meditation: 13
Mindfulness: 9, 11
Mindset: 9
Motivation: 7
Nature: 2, 3, 9
Need to belong: 1, 4
Need to challenge oneself and reach goals: 4
Need to discover: 4
Non-violent communication: 14
Observing self: 4, 11, 14

Outdoor activities: 3, 4, 9
Pathways to mental health and wellbeing: 2
Personal growth: 7
Polarities: 13
Positive and negative emotions: 12
Positive relations: 14
Positive thinking: 11
Power of music: 13
Presencing: 4, 11
Presencing versus absencing: 4
Pressure: 1
PTSD: 6
Resources: 12
Reflection: 16
Relatedness: 7
Resilience: 10
Rites of passage: 17
Role modelling: 5
Safe spaces: 1, 3, 4, 5, 6
Self care: 15
Self-criticism: 8
Self-determination skills: 7
Self-kindness: 8
Sense of self: 17
Sleep: 15
Sleep-wake cycle: 15
Social competences: 10
Social engagement: 12, 14
Social support: 5
Stress: 1, 6, 10
Supportive environment: 6
Survival system: 8
Transition: 17
Values: 9
Well-being: 7
Youth exchanges: 5

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What is positive mental health and wellbeing?

Positive mental health is a state of wellbeing in which the
"individual realizes his or her own abilities, can manage the normal stresses of life, can work effectively, and is able to play a role in his or her community" [1]

"Mental health is, therefore, more than the absence of mental ill-health. It relates to a person's ability to enjoy life, have positive relationships, function effectively and cope with challenges. Positive mental health incorporates the concept of resilience, the ability to manage negative feelings and life events and to bounce back in the face of adversity [2,3]. Positive mental health is a value in its own right and contributes to an individual's overall wellbeing and quality of life. Keyes [4] conceptualises positive mental health as flourishing and feeling good in a life that one functions well in." [5]
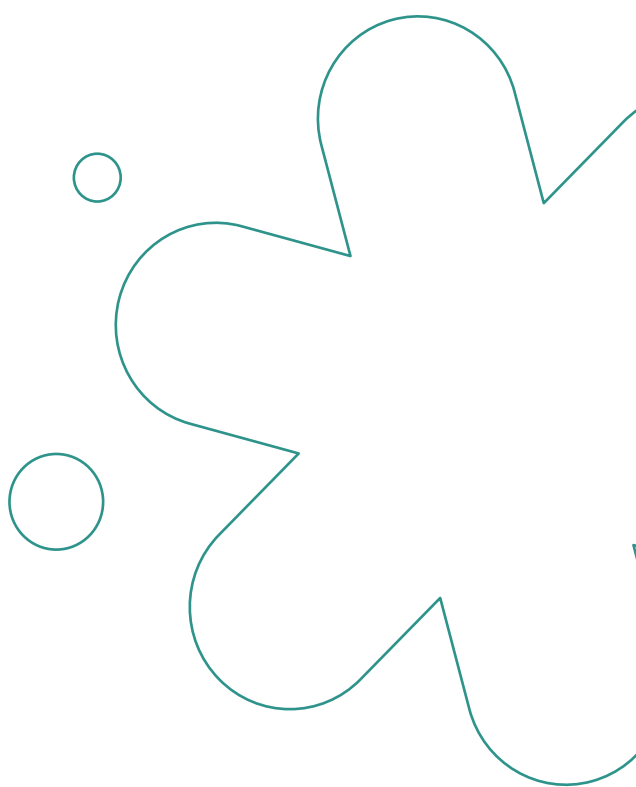
[1]   World Health Organization (2001). Mental health: new understanding, new hope. The World Health Report. Geneva: World Health Organization. Page 1.
[2]   Friedli, L. (2009). Mental health resilience and inequalities. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe.
[3]   Huppert, F. A. (2009). Psychological well-being: Evidence regarding its causes and consequences. Applied Psychology: Health and Well-being, 1(2), 137-164.
[4]   Keyes, C.L.M. (2007). Promoting and protecting mental health as flourishing. American Psychologist, 62(2), 1-14.
[5]   Excerpt from: Kuosmanen, T., Dowling, K. and Barry, M.M., (2020). A framework for promoting positive mental health and wellbeing in the European youth sector. Page 11.

How can Youth Workers use this Publication?

In the field of Youth Work there is an increasing focus on positive mental health. This means that the perspective is shifting from prevention and treatment to promotion and development of resources. Promotion of positive mental health is not about finding what is wrong with a young person but focusses on opportunities, it is about empowering youngsters to develop social and emotional competencies and learn how to live a meaningful live. The question is: what promotes mental health? This publication aims to provide a context to the theoretical model of positive mental health promotion by sharing perspectives on this subject from the field of youth work.

BUILDING BLOCKS

The articles were written to inspire youth workers to get a deeper understanding of this shift and deepen their knowledge about Positive Mental Health. These articles provide background reading and are divided into four building blocks to support this change. You can start reading where you are most drawn to.

There are seventeen articles that are clustered around these four building blocks. The first step of any youth programme is to create a safe and supportive space for learning, being followed by the three core action areas - *Connecting, Engaging and Empowering* - of the 2021-2027 European Youth Strategy. [1]

Building Block 1: Creating Safe and Supportive Spaces for Learning
Aim: Connecting

Building Block 2: Engaging Young People in Social and Emotional Learning
Aim: Engaging

Building Block 3: Empowering Social and Emotional Competencies and a Healthy Lifestyle
Aim: Empowering

Building Block 4: Building Reflective Spaces for Young People
Aim: Transforming

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[1] European Commission (2018). *Communication from the commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Engaging, connecting and empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy.* COM/2018/269 final. Retrieved 14th April 2020 from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/ legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0269

KEY MESSAGES

At the beginning of every article, you will find a few key messages that reflect the essence of the article.

KEYWORDS

The keywords are ideas and topics that define what the content is about. At the beginning of the publication you will find an overview of keywords and a reference to the chapter this topic is addressed in.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

All the articles are connected with the main theoretical framework, developed for promoting positive mental health in youth work. In the articles is explained how they relate to this framework. See for more information the chapter: Theoretical Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health in the Youth Sector.
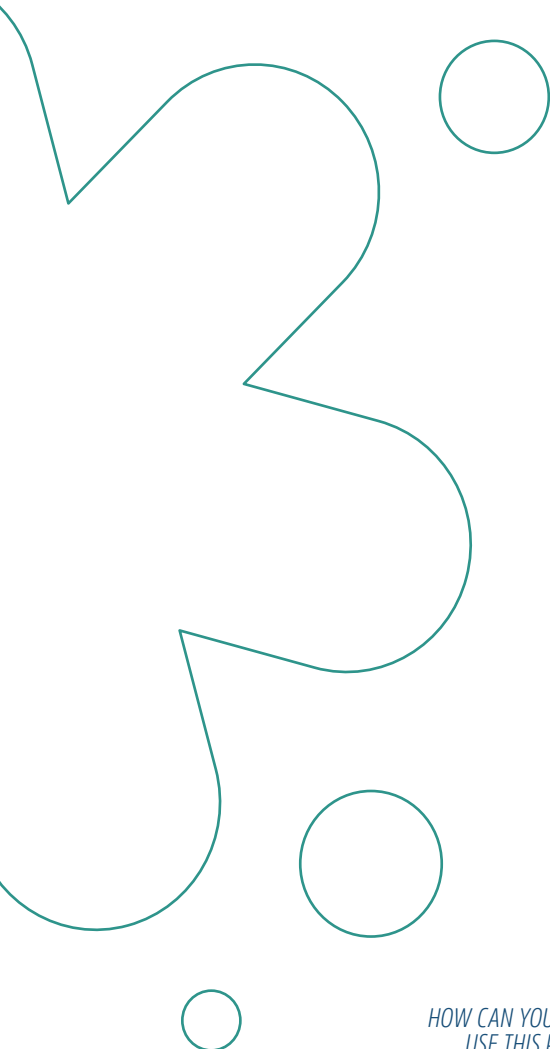
Theoretical framework for promoting positive mental health in the youth sector

In the project 'Positive Mental Health; Promotion of wellbeing and flourishing in the European youth sector' Kuosmanen et al. developed a theoretical framework [1]. The framework outlines the social and emotional competencies that should be promoted in young people in order to support their positive mental health. The competencies are divided into six domains: How I think, How I feel, How I relate to others, Values, Mindsets, and Identity.
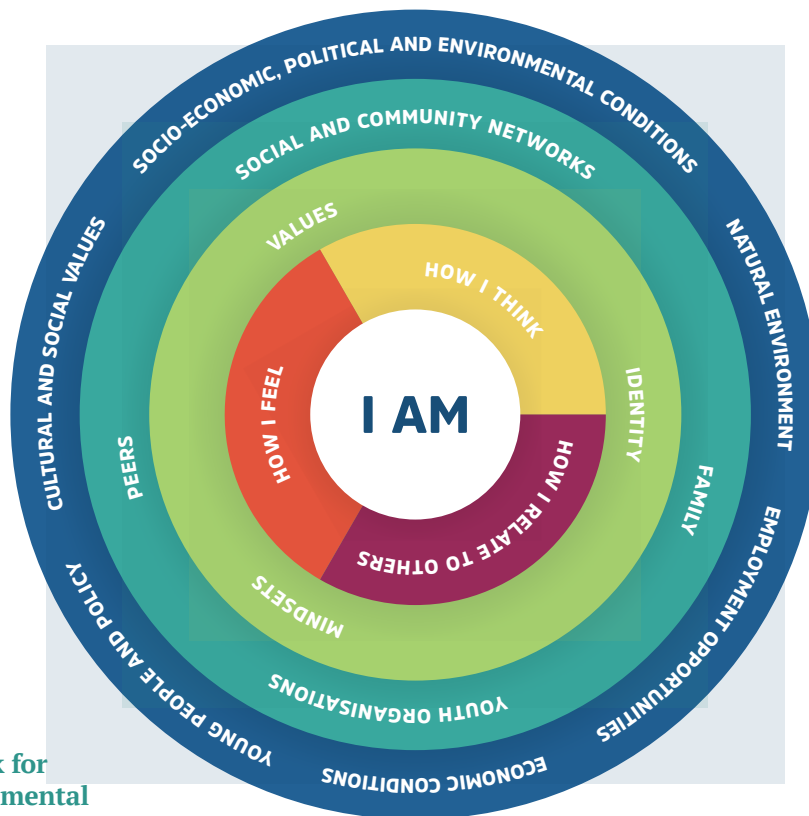
Figure 1: **Framework for promoting positive mental health among young people [1].**

'These domains are centered on the core concept of the observing self (**I am**), an awareness of oneself, one's thoughts and feelings. The observing self does not change, but simply experiences, without judgement, what is happening within and around oneself. This awareness is crucial for taking a step back, and not identifying with unhelpful emotions or thoughts regarding private events and for promoting contact with the present moment. Becoming aware of the observing self is the core focus of mindfulness-based strategies.

[1]   Kuosmanen, T., Dowling, K. and Barry, M.M., (2020). *Practice Brief: A Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Youth Sector.* Page 3. A Practice Brief produced as part of the Erasmus+ Project: Promoting positive mental health in the European Youth sector. World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Health Promotion Research, National University of Ireland Galway. www.nuigalway.ie/hprc

The cognitive, emotional and social domains are presented at the core of the framework, as the development of these domains starts in childhood and early adolescence and forms the basis for the positive development of values, identity and mindsets. However, all of these domains are interlinked, where for example, valuing diversity affects how we relate to others, and on the other hand, developing social awareness can facilitate the development of more prosocial values'. [1]

The articles in this publication are intended as a deepening background readings to offer context to this framework. In the articles the authors indicate how the information relates to this framework. Here below you will find a brief overview of the framework.

Framework for promoting positive mental health among young people.

THE 6 DOMAINS OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

HOW I THINK • COGNITIVE DOMAIN
Includes the psychological skills that are needed for setting and achieving goals. These skills relate to, for example, memory and planning, concentration and focus, critical thinking and creativity.

HOW I FEEL? • EMOTIONAL DOMAIN
Skills needed for successfully managing one's feelings as well as understanding and empathizing with others. This requires skills related to recognizing, expressing and regulating one's feelings and the ability for perspective taking and empathy.

HOW I RELATE TO OTHERS? • SOCIAL DOMAIN
Social skills are crucial for building positive interactions and relationships with others. Such skills include interpreting other's behaviours and understanding social cues, conflict resolution and social problem solving, and prosocial behaviour and working collaboratively.

IDENTITY
Having a positive sense of identity includes knowing and feeling good about yourself, feeling that you have a purpose and having confidence in the ability to learn and grow.

VALUES
The skills, character traits and habits that support us in living and working with others and being a productive member of the society. This requires understanding, caring about, and acting upon core ethical and civic values.

MINDSET
Perspective relates to how we understand and approach the world, and interpret and deal with situations. Having a positive mindset can help us overcome challenges, achieve goals and deal with others more successfully. [2]

[2]   Ibid. Page 11.

BUILDING BLOCK 1
CREATING SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SPACES FOR LEARNING

AIM: CONNECTING

Creating safe and supportive environments is essential for promoting an engaging learning environment for the youth. Safe environments provide a positive emotional climate that is free from bias whereby all young people feel supported, respected and comfortable.

A supportive environment is one where young people feel welcomed and where they are encouraged to learn and grow. Staff provide young people with opportunities for active learning, developing new skills and building healthy relationships.

Nature supports connecting with yourself, others and the environment.

Chapter 1: Creating Safe Spaces for Young People

By Dragan Atanasov

Keywords

• SAFE SPACES • • NEED TO BELONG • • PRESSURE • • STRESS •

Key Messages

- **Feeling safe means that you do not anticipate harm or hurt, either physically or emotionally. It is in this kind of state that you can learn, grow, be creative, connect with others and truly flourish.**
- **According to the UN, "Youth need safe spaces where they can come together, engage in activities related to their diverse needs and interests, participate in decision making processes and freely express themselves.**
- **The growing pressure coming from work, school, peers, home and other social contexts makes the need for securing safe youth spaces ever more important.**

Introduction

When speaking of safety, what we usually mean is being physically safe, or free from physical harm or danger. The need for physical safety is deeply rooted in the evolutionary development the human species, and our brains are pretty good at recognizing signs of danger. In fact, it is our automatic response to threats that has kept us going over millions of years. Safety is still an essential human need, expanding into more dimensions over time - safety of family, employment, financial resources, property etc. Our approach to safety and our reactions to potential dangers have changed, particularly in the social context, and it is thanks to that we don't perceive every stranger as a potential danger. With time, we have developed the ability to recognize the cues that provide us with a feeling of safety, which allows us not to be in a constant state of alert.

Being safe is generally defined as "not in danger or likely to be harmed" [1]. It is this understanding of safety that we usually have in mind when we ask our loved ones if they are safe, or when we mark ourselves as safe on Facebook. But instead of consciously assessing our level of safety, what we normally rely on is our feeling of safety in a particular moment. This is an emotion that we don't often think about consciously, yet it is very important for our well-being. It is also something we don't discuss often with others, regardless of whether we feel safe or unsafe.

Feeling safe means that we do not anticipate harm or hurt, either physically or emotionally. It is in this kind of state that we can learn, grow, be creative, connect with others, and truly flourish. When we fear for our safety, our responsive system activates and survival takes precedence over anything else. This may seem very basic and logical, but it is often overlooked. It affects the youth field as well. When we work with young people, we often forget that we need to start by creating safe space so that they can engage and benefit from the activities. Often the reason for this is that we don't consciously think about safety in the first place. And even when we do, we usually see it from our perspective, failing to recognize that different people need different conditions to feel safe. It is not uncommon that some of those conditions are determined by an individual's background and past experiences, making safety a particularly essential aspect when working with young people with fewer opportunities.

In 2018, the United Nations chose "Safe Spaces for Youth" as the theme for the International Youth Day. According to the UN, "Youth need safe spaces where they can come together, engage in activities related to their diverse needs and interests, participate in decision making processes and freely express themselves [2]". So, providing safe spaces for young people goes beyond ensuring that there is no threat for physical danger. It goes without saying that physical safety is important, especially when using methodologies that entails considerable risks for achieving personal growth in young people, such as hiking, camping, or doing sports. Another aspect of physical safety is ensuring that there are mitigation strategies in place for realistic risks – theft, fire, earthquake. But as we already noted, our brains are quite good at noticing and reacting to physical threats. In addition, many youth spaces (frankly, in some countries more than in others) have solid safety rules and procedures. The task becomes more challenging when we expand our understanding of safe spaces to include emotional safety, and when we start considering the conditions that need to be put in place to ensure not only that young people are safe, but that they also feel safe.

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines safe space as "a place (as on a college campus) intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations [3]". In the youth work setting, among other things, this also means that young people have a place where they can freely express themselves, interact with others and build social relations without the fear of being attacked, judged or discriminated against. Unfortunately, there are not many such spaces where young people can go. On the contrary, schools, sport clubs, bars and other places where youth spend their time often nurture competitive and aggressive environments. According to the 2017 Global Youth Wellbeing index, 49 percent of young people surveyed said that their lives are too stressful [4]. The rate of youth suicide has fallen compared to 25 years ago, but only by 10%, remaining a huge challenge for our societies [5]. The growing pressure coming from work, school, peers, home and other social contexts makes the need for securing safe youth spaces ever more important.

In 2018, the International Youth Foundation asked young people what safe space meant for them [6]. Some of the responses include:

- *"Safe space" refers to an environment whereby the youth can contribute or participate in economic, social, and political issues without any discrimination, harassment, or bias.* – Obedi, 20 years old.
- *To be in a safe space is also not to be afraid of someone else's condemnation. A person feels more calm and confident.* – Illana, 17 years old.
- *A safe space is a meeting place where you can have a dialogue between people who hold different views.* – Leonardo, 25 years old.
- *Safe spaces are places where I can be comfortable in my own skin, where I won't be attacked for the things I say or do."* – Camiera, 18 years old.

According to the Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Youth Sector published as part of this project, creating safe and supportive environments is essential for promoting a learning environment for youth. The Framework makes a reference to the Pyramid of Youth Program Quality developed by the Weikart Centre for Youth Program Quality, which puts a safe environment at the bottom of the pyramid, and supporting environment as the second level. While the first layer relates to physical and emotional safety, the second one has to do with creating a warm environment, promoting engagement and reframing conflict, among the other aspects. Both are important not only for promoting learning, but also for supporting the overall well-being of young people.

ENGAGEMENT

**PLANNING
CHOICE
REFLECTION**
RESPONSIBILITY

David P. Weikart
CENTER FOR YOUTH
PROGRAM QUALITY

INTERACTION

**LEADERSHIP
BELONGING
COLLABORATION
ADULT PARTNERS**
MANAGING FEELINGS   INTERACTION WITH ADULTS

**SUPPORTIVE
ENVIRONMENT**

**WARM WELCOME
ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT
ENCOURAGEMENT**

**SESSION FLOW
SKILL BUILDING
REFRAMING CONFLICT**
CHILD-CENTERED SPACE

**SAFE
ENVIRONMENT**

**EMOTIONAL SAFETY
EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS
ACCOMMODATING ENVIRONMENT**
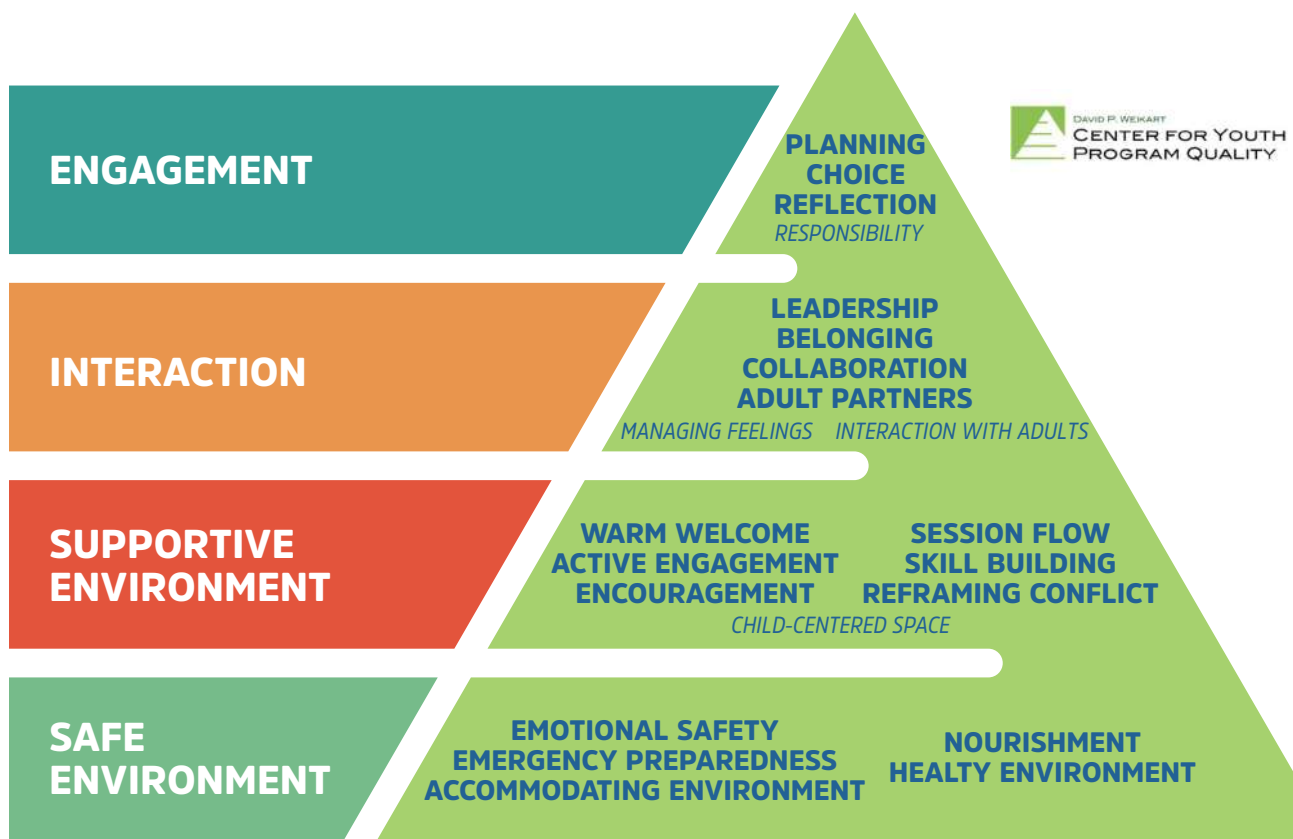
**NOURISHMENT
HEALTY ENVIRONMENT**

Figure 1.1: **Pyramid of Youth Program Quality** *(adapted from Smith et al., 2012)*

So, what can we do to ensure that youth centers, youth clubs and other youth spaces provide the proper conditions for young people to feel safe enough not only to spend their time there, but also to participate in the activities you have planned, and engage in healthy interactions with youth workers and other young people? If safety is a feeling as much as it is a state of being, and if different things help different individuals feel safe, then how do we make sure that we respond to everyone's needs? And how can we use the youth spaces to actively promote positive mental health and well-being in young people?

The reality is that a lot will depend on your local context – the type of youth space, the profile of the young people you are working with, any specific challenges that you are facing etc. Hence, it makes sense to start by analyzing the current state and exploring the needs of young people related to safety. You can do that by conducting interviews and focus groups, or even by having informal talks with them. Whatever the format, it is essential to conduct those talks in a safe environment, so that young people will feel comfortable to share their needs and fears. You can then plan concrete measures and actions based on the feedback you receive. Examples of things you can do include:

- **Establish basic rules.** It is very useful to have a set of basic rules written and presented in a visible place in the youth space. It is even better if those rules were co-created with the young people. Having common rules is important because it sets the expectations of young people about their behavior in the place, of what they can and cannot do. It also provides youth workers with a basis from which to act whenever they notice actions that shouldn't be tolerated.

- **Implement the rules.** Even though it is logical, it should still be stressed that rules are there to be respected. It is not enough that a set of rules is on the wall, since the rules lose meaning if they are not implemented in practice. This means that youth workers will need to react accordingly whenever they notice that a rule has not been respected. Only in that way will young people feel protected from harmful actions and words. In an ideal environment, young people themselves can also intervene if they notice rules are broken – but that requires an even higher degree of feeling of safety.

- **Be a role model.** A lot has been written about youth workers being role models, as one of the essential roles of their profession. This extends as well to respecting the rules of the place and showing the desired prosocial behavior that supports the feeling of safety in others. It will be easier for young people to follow the rules if they have an example to follow.

- **Give timely feedback.** It is another essential element of youth work – young people need feedback and youth workers should care to provide it timely and in a respectful, supportive manner. If you want to build a safe space, you will need to communicate with young people about the issues that jeopardize safety, even if sometimes it is not comfortable.

- **Reframing and resolving conflicts.** Conflict has a great potential to threaten the feeling of safety, and thus it is very important that you react as soon as you see a conflict arising. Whenever possible, conflicts should be reframed, meaning that you should help young

people to remove the lens through which they are stuck viewing the conflict and help them move into a more positive or productive way of viewing it. Whenever needed, you will have to take on the role of a mediator, moving the conflict towards resolution while reinforcing the feeling of safety.

- **Do regular check-ins.** Regardless of the types of measures you undertake, you will never be completely sure if all young people feel safe in the space. Hence, regular checks can be useful. If you have a healthy and trustful relation with a young person, they should be able to express their concerns and fears, as well as propose actions that will reinforce the feeling of safety.

- **Look through their lens.** This one was already mentioned but it is worth repeating – don't forget that you are creating safe space for your target group, and not just for yourself. Think about the background of the young people you are working with and consider any particular experiences they might have, as individuals or as a group, that might affect their feeling of safety. Think of potential triggers that you may want to avoid, and any particular elements that may positively influence young people.

At the end of the day, it is always useful to remind ourselves of the definition of safety. Cambridge dictionary defines "safe" as "not dangerous or likely to cause harm [7]". What we need to do is remember that this definition includes a lot more than just physical safety. Harm can take different forms – psychological, emotional and so on. If we believe in the holistic approach of positive mental health, then we should also understand safety as a holistic concept. And if we accept that safety is also a feeling, then we should be proactive about creating conditions that will reinforce it.

References

[1]   Cambridge dictionary, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/safe

[2]   United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/international-youth-day-2018.html

[3]   Merriam-Webster dictionary: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/safe%20space

[4]   https://www.youthindex.org

[5]   Ibid

[6]   International Youth Foundation: https://www.iyfnet.org/blog/young-people-tell-us-what-safe-spaces-mean-them

[7]   Cambridge dictionary: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/safe

Chapter 2: Nature and Positive Mental Health

By Thomas Albers

Keywords

• ENVIRONMENTAL WELLBEING •   **• CONNECTING WITH NATURE •**

• PATHWAYS TO MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING •   **• NATURE •**

The benefits of nature[1] on youth's positive mental health and wellbeing have received an increased attention in the youth setting in the recent years. Connectedness with nature and nature's wellbeing are also of importance to the future of Europe as they are part of the European Youth Goals (Goal 10).

For nature to be beneficial to the mental health and wellbeing of young people, the quality and type of interaction are important. Just being in contact with nature already has positive effects on the levels of wellbeing, but nature-connectedness on the other hand, in which there a psychological, emotional and spiritual connection with nature, offers even more possibilities to promote mental health and wellbeing. [1, 2] Spending a weekly amount of at least 120 minutes in a nature-rich environment is considered a healthy "dose" for the wellbeing of young people. [3]

In general, it is assumed that the effect of nature on mental health and wellbeing follows at least three pathways (see figure 2.1). Multiple pathways are likely to be engaged simultaneously and the benefits are intertwined.

Being in nature has direct effects on the wellbeing levels through *a harm reduction pathway*, which means that the harmful effects of exposure to environmental stressors such as air pollution, non-natural noise and heat are being reduced (pathway 1).

Being in nature also offers the possibility to restore affective, cognitive and physiological capacities (pathway 2), after for example being very stressed, emotionally or cognitively exhausted. [4]

The third pathway refers to the possibility that nature not only promotes the restoration capacity, but can move young people from a standard or good state to an even better or optimal

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1   Since it can be quite challenging to define what nature exactly is and given that this definition is culturally sensitive, it is here considered as green and blue spaces. Green spaces are places with predominantly green features, such as forests, parks or gardens. Blue spaces are predominantly water bodies, such as lakes, rivers, seas, or the spaces along these bodies.

state. Examples of this capacity building effect of being connected with nature are increased levels of personal growth, self-esteem, self-regulation, social competency and an increased sense of autonomy. [2, 5]

Recognising and integrating the beneficial capacities of nature in youth interventions that promote youth mental health can improve their quality and effectiveness. Given that today more and more young people live in urban areas, where the presence of nature is less available than in rural areas, spending time in nature is becoming a unique experience.
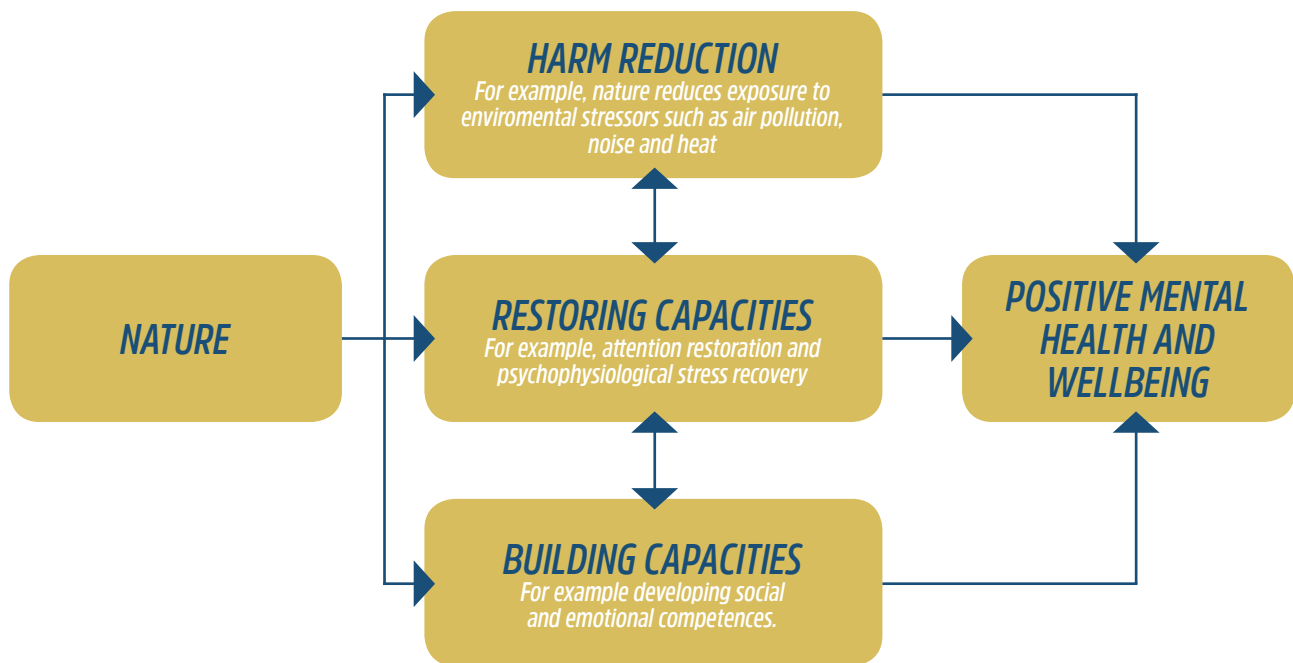
Figure 2.1: **Threefold pathway to mental health and wellbeing** *(adapted from [1])*

References

[1]   Markevych, I., Schoierer, J., Hartig, T. et al. (2017). Exploring pathways linking greenspace to health: Theoretical and methodological guidance. *Environmental Research*, 158, 301-317.

[2]   Capaldi, C. A., et al. (2015). Flourishing in nature: A review of the benefits of connecting with nature and its application as a wellbeing intervention. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 5(4), 1-16. doi:10.5502/ijw.v5i4.1

[3]   White, M.P., Alcock, I., Grellier, J., et al. (2019). Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and wellbeing. Scientific Reports 9, 7730.

[4]   Kaplan, S. (1995). The restorative benefits of nature: towards an integrative framework. *J. Environ. Psychol*. 15, 169–182. doi: 10.1016/0272-4944(95)90001-2

[5]   Norton, C. L., & Watt, T. T. (2014). Exploring the impact of a wilderness-based positive youth development program for urban youth. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 37, 335-350. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1053825913503113

Chapter 3:   Why Connecting with Nature Stimulates Youth Wellbeing
By Oda Salomons

Keywords

• SAFE SPACES •   • ENVIRONMENTAL WELLBEING •   • FLOW LEARNINGS •

• CONNECTING WITH NATURE •   • BRAIN, BODY AND ENVIRONMENT •

• OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES •   • NATURE •

Key Messages

- *Calm your body, free your mind, connect with your wild heart in nature*
- *In nature we feel less alone, we connect with something bigger*
- *Playful exercises in nature stimulates flow learning and positive mental health*

Relax and restore in nature

Being in nature helps us to relax. In nature our calming system (parasympathetic nerve system) is automatically activated, which performs all kinds of important repair work on our body and brain. That is one of the reasons why being in nature is so powerfully effective for our wellbeing. Nature connection supports growth in all six wellbeing domains of positive mental health: environmental, spiritual, social, emotional, physical and intellectual, with nature in the outer circle. In this article we explore why and how connecting with nature stimulates youth wellbeing and what youth workers can do to stimulate activities in nature.

Which nutrients in nature promote our immune system?
- exposure to phytoncides, an ethereal substance secreted by trees and plants that slows breathing and reduces anxiety;
- exposure to mycobacterium vaccae - a bacterium that naturally lives in the soil and stimulates the happiness hormone seretonine;
- increased adiponectin - a substance that reduces appetite;
- negative ions in the air have an invigorating effect;
- the super vitamin D our body absorbs from sunlight, which helps to reduce feelings of depression [1]

The connection between brain, body and environment

At the University of Essex, eco-psychologists developed the Green Mind Theory to explain why nature is so restorative [2]. For the past fifteen years, they have investigated the effect of green activities on our health. The Green Mind Theory makes a connection between our brain, our body and the environment. The basis for good health and a calm mind is sufficient sleep, a healthy diet and sports/exercise. The mind is linked to our brain and body. Our body is connected to natural and social environments. How our body reacts to those environments affects our health, according to the Green Mind Theory.

Why is this interesting? Using a simple metaphor, the researchers demonstrate the influence our brain has on our wellbeing. They simply divide the brain into the red and the blue brains.

The red brain

Our brain has a lower brainstem that is fast-acting, involuntary and impulsive. It is also the driver of our fight-or-flight behaviour. The lower brain reacts before we think and controls the sympathetic nervous system in our body. We need the red brain because, at the core, it is very healthy. It is important for our self-protection; it is our survival mode. We get a lot of things done, we are motivated to buy good food, fall in love, connect with friends, get status and recognition. It motivates us to pursue and maintain goals, such as years of school, perform at sports or struggle because we want to win.
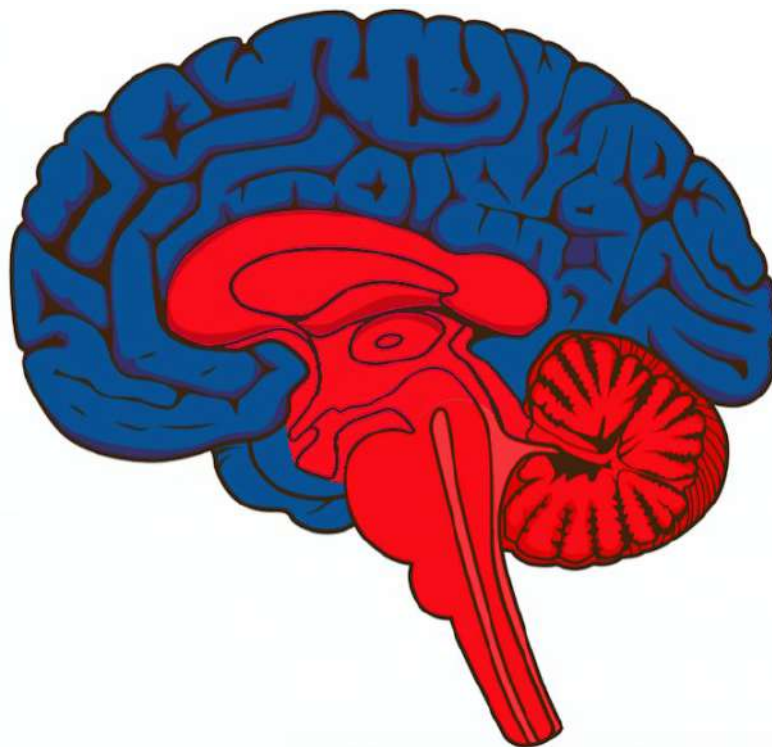
Figure 3.1:   **The red and blue brain.**
Blue brain: neocortex
Red brain: Limbic System and Reptilian Brain [3]

However, too much red brain is not good for our health. In modern highly consumerist societies, we often live in red alert. In our survival modus, we tend to see only threats and are disconnected from the creative part of the brain. We suffer from social comparison, which isn't good for our self-esteem. This overactive red mode also negatively affects our immune system: we get tired, get sick faster, sleep badly, become overweight and look for alcohol, gaming or drugs to make up for the feeling of being rushed. Or we become addicted to the feeling that excitement (Facebook likes, online gaming), status and recognition give and keep on going. We forget to turn on the blue brain.

The blue brain

The upper cerebral cortex is slower, voluntary. It is the centre for learning and is the driver of rest and digestion. The upper brain calms and controls the parasympathetic nervous system (our calming or sedation system), which performs all kinds of important repair work on our body. However, it only gets space if nothing else is needed: if the danger has passed, if the hunger has been satisfied. In the blue brain, the attention is open, nothing is crucial and there is room for new possibilities, creativity and connection with the people around us. However, it does not usually switch on by itself, - we have to do something to change modes.

Green Mind - optimal mix between red and blue

According to research, nature-based activities stimulate the blue brain. Activities that we do with our full attention, in which we are fully immersed, soothe our internal buzz. Such a state of mind is also called flow. In nature, a lot of unnecessary stimuli disappear (bleeps from your phone, emails, conversations with others), which makes it easier for us to get into a flow. In nature our sedation system is activated - we get a broader, softer, soft focus, which nourishes our exhausted sources of attention. This gives our creativity a boost and makes the red brain more manageable. I will explain later on how youth workers can stimulate flow learning in nature.

Relation with the framework for promoting positive mental health and well-being in the European Youth Sector

Six domains of well-being are mentioned in the framework: environmental, spiritual, social, emotional, physical and intellectual. At the heart of these domains are mentioned: values, mindsets and identity around three questions:

- How I feel?
- How I think?
- How I relate to others?

Nature connection supports growth in all six domains. Interventions in nature support well-being by:

- Creating a safe learning environment by switching on our blue brain;
- Experiencing a more relaxed and positive mindset, as our survival mode can easily switch off in nature - we feel safe, secure, soothed;
- Having a positive sense of identity, which includes knowing and feeling good about ourselves, feeling that we have a purpose and having confidence in the ability to learn and grow as well as experiencing that nature does not judge us, that we are 100% ok just the way we are, that we don't need to change;
- In nature, everything has its own rhythm, the rhythm of the seasons. Nature brings people in contact with their deepest desires and their own natural resources, which they can draw on to live in balance;
- Developing a healthy lifestyle: exercise on a daily basis, eat healthy food, sleep well, recover from stress, find the rhythm to regulate emotions;
- Connecting with the environment, and feel that we are part of something bigger (spiritual dimension);
- Discovering what is really important for us, what our values are, what makes us move and step into action. When we know what our values are, we can keep on taking footsteps on our life path with a purpose in mind - we no longer wander around, feeling lost and not knowing where to go. We feel what is important for us, what change we want to bring in the world, our reason for getting out of bed in the morning.

Evolutionary perspective

The problem is that most (young) people spend much of the day in artificially lit rooms, with air conditioning, so they hardly notice the rhythm of the day and night, changes in temperature or changing seasons.

However, according to the classic biophilia hypothesis of social biologist Edward Wilson everyone has an innate desire to connect with nature [4]. We have a kind of biologically set nature to respond positively to nature because we have evolved in nature. Our ancestors' well-being and survival depended on their connection to nature, i.e., finding food and water, navigating, and predicting time or future weather conditions. Nature has been good to us and we tend to respond positively to environments that are beneficial to us.

The wild part of our brain knows that we are fundamentally dependent and connected to the earth. Wilson writes that we feel a great need to feel connected to nature. We have lower blood pressure and a lower level of the stress hormone cortisol when we walk in a rural environment than when we walk in the city. We still benefit from savannah-like environments, according to the hypothesis, because humans originally evolved in them. We have an innate instinct to seek out environments that enhance our well-being and survival. The beauty and calming effects of non-threatening nature allow us to recover from stress and negative thoughts. Effects of the outdoors also appear to be psychological.

Connecting the body and our wild mind with nature

The free, wild part of our identity is the deep, emotive, playful and instinctual dimension of our self. We experience that wild side when we feel immersed in the landscape around us – in the rivers, mountains, deserts, plains and forests. Our wild side enjoys a visceral and deep-rooted kinship with all other creatures and with the diverse ecosystems we inhabit. Psychologist and wilderness guide Bill Plotkin wrote the beautiful book *Wild Mind* to explore the different sides of who we are in nature. [5]

You may recognize that wild side from when you were a child. How you went on an adventure with your family or friends in nature. Maybe you were a scout and learned survival techniques in nature. Or you went on holiday without a plan and saw where the path was leading you. What is it like now? When do you make room for this wild and free side? This is the cheerful, spirited, funny person you carry hidden within you. The one that is not concerned by the judgment of others and has no self-judgment and is, above all, present. Being, enjoying, in the here and now, with all senses open.

Bring nature in the daily routine

What do you do as a youth worker when your youngsters are tired, stressed and tend to think negatively about themselves? The first step is to bring youngsters in contact with nature. In the review 'Flourishing in Nature', the authors examine the concepts of nature contact and nature connection [6]. They found that individuals who are more connected to nature spend more time outdoors, and nature contact often increases momentary feelings of connectedness.

So do put on your coats and go out into nature! Just five minutes of exercise in a park, forest, or other green space immediately improves our mood and self-esteem (Barton & Pretty, 2010). In a meta-analysis, a study of ten English studies about the effect of exercise in a natural environment on mood and mental health, researchers analysed various activities: cycling, walking, gardening, fishing, boating, horseback riding and vegetable garden work.

Their main findings:

- The researchers saw the biggest change in mood and confidence after five minutes of movement in green nature.
- The greatest positive changes in health were found in young people and people with a mental illness.
- All natural environments boost wellbeing, but green areas with water add something extra.
- Whether you exercise intensely or gently, self-esteem and mood increase at all levels.

Sports and exercise scientist Jo Barton of the University of Essex advocates adding more green exercises to healthcare. 'We know from the literature that positive short-term effects have a protective effect on long-term results' [7].

Inspiring activities in nature

Joseph Cornell is one of the world's most famous nature educators. In his book *Sharing Nature*, you can find inspiration for playful activities to do with youngsters in nature. *Sharing Nature* is based on a flow learning method that contains four stages:

- Stage 1. Awaken enthusiasm. Without enthusiasm people learn very little. We need this intense flow of personal interest and alertness.
- Stage 2. Focus Attention. Attention activities help youngsters become attentive and receptive to nature.
- Stage 3. Offer Direct Experience. By bringing us face to face with a bird, a wooded hill, or any natural subject, Offer Direct Experience activities give us intuitive experiences of nature.
- Stage 4. Share Inspiration. Reflecting and sharing with others strengthens and clarifies the experience. Sharing brings to the surface unspoken but often-universal feelings that, once communicated, allow people to feel a closer bond with the topic and with one another. [8]

Connect with your wild heart, free mind and calm body

In this article we explored why being in and connecting with nature stimulates youth wellbeing. The Green Mind Theory helps us to understand the connection between our red and blue brains, our body and our environment. The way our body reacts to our environment affects our mental and physical health. Nature is an important facilitator for a positive mindset because our survival system (the red brain) can easily switch off and allowing us turn on the blue brain as we feel safe, seen, secure and soothed.

When we try to understand the importance of connecting with nature from an evolutionary perspective, we see that on a spiritual level we respond positively to nature because we have evolved in nature. Nature is our safe space, a place where we can learn and experiment in a playful, safe way without judging ourselves or others. Because in nature nothing judges you. The flow learning method of Joseph Cornell offers a useful framework and a lot of exercises for youth workers to work and play! with young people in nature.

So let us provide young people with intense nature experiences in order for them to turn on their blue brain and get in contact with their creativity and positive mood. Activities where we are immersed, without judging, in the here-and-now make us feel intensely alert and alive.

Walk through the forest and experience how wonderful it is to explore the environment with your wild heart, free mind and calm body.

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Chapter 4: Less digital, more outdoors in nature

By Mario D'Agostino

Keywords

• SAFE SPACES •   • ENVIRONMENTAL WELLBEING •   • PRESENCING •

• OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES •   • OBSERVING SELF •   • NEED TO DISCOVER •

• NEED TO BELONG •   • NEED TO CHALLENGE ONESELF AND REACH GOALS •

• PRESENCING VERSUS ABSENCING •   • EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING •

Key Messages

- **Environmental well-being, which includes an individual's relationship and interaction with nature and the wider environment, and physical health are both important and interrelated factors for promoting positive mental health. Nature provides the ideal setting where the two can be nurtured.**
- **Adventurous outdoor group activities involve young people at an emotional, sensorial, relational, physical and cognitive level.**
- **Nature and its rhythms and cycles provide a space where young people can reconnect with themselves, others and the environment, as they can experience the present moment through their senses.**

Promoting the positive mental health of young people outdoors

Towards the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th century, the first summer camps were set to promote physical and mental health for children and young people, mostly from urban areas. The "sanatoriums" also date back to the early 20th century. These were public clinics where one could do oxygen therapy and reinvigorate both physically and mentally.

In 1907, Robert Baden-Powell created the scout movement to promote, through outdoor group activities, the well-being of young people and environmental care through a sustainable exploration of nature. Today, the scout movement counts more than 40.000 members and is one of the world's most important non-formal education organizations in the world. The first Outward Bound School was opened in 1941 by Kurt Hahn with the support of the Blue

Funnel Line. Outward Bound's founding mission was to improve the survival chances of young seamen after their ships were torpedoed in the mid-Atlantic.

In the non-formal educational context, adventure and outdoor activities contribute in promoting the physical, emotional and mental health of young people and are particularly effective for personal and group development. In adventure therapy programs, for example, nature is used as the main setting, as it provides situations that cannot be avoided. Nature also represents an "unfamiliar setting that provides immediate feedback and creates a state of dissonance within participants. This internal cognitive-emotional dissonance can generate a transformative experience" [1], meaning that it becomes almost impossible for participants to hide their real emotions, motivating them to take action (ie find a shelter when it rains, drink when thirsty, take a rest when tired, etc). In adventure therapy programs, "perceived risk is used to heighten arousal and to create eustress (positive response to stress)" [2] and nature becomes an element that promotes inter and intrapersonal perspectives [3], interdependence and trust, vulnerability, openness and spontaneous connections [4].

The key factors that make outdoor activities effective tools for promoting positive mental health

The effectiveness of outdoor activities depends on several factors. Among these we would like to mention the shinrin-yoku and the 3 Basic Human Drives.

The shinrin-yoku

Activities that take place in nature, no matter how simple they are, are beneficial. Shinrin-yoku, which literally means "forest bathing", is a Japanese word that refers to a specific medical method very similar to aromatherapy, which was spread in the 80's together with oxygen therapy. A series of studies [5] have shown that spending time in nature (where there are a lot of trees) boosts the immune system. A walk in the woods can be reinvigorating and/or relaxing because while breathing we inhale volatile substances, called phytoncides (wood essential oils), which are antimicrobial volatile organic compounds derived from trees, such as α-pinene and limonene. The latter contributes in increasing the level of serotonin, which is the hormone for happiness that helps decrease the levels of anger, anxiety and depression. Stress hormones can in fact compromise the immune defence, as they contribute to suppressing the activities of frontline defenders, such as antiviral natural killer cells. Since forest bathing can lower the production of stress hormones and elevate mood states, it's not surprising that it also influences the immune system.

So, people who go for a walk in the forest and breathe deeply, have lower cortisol levels, a reduced heart rate and blood pressure, less stress and anxiety. This is why forest bathing also helps treat depression. Therefore, individual and group activities (such as outdoor experiential learning or adventure therapy) that take place in natural settings have an impact at physical as well as psychological and emotional levels.

3 Basic Human Drives

Dr Nicholas Kardaras, Chief Clinical Officer of Maui Recovery in Hawaii and Omega Recovery in Austin, Texas, claims that adventurous outdoor activities fulfil 3 basic drives/needs [6]:

1. The need to belong and feel connected with others and relate to them;
2. The need to discover new things - Neophilia
3. The need to challenge oneself and reach goals

Outdoor group activities, run either in non-formal or informal contexts in youth work, offer an answer to these needs, promoting positive mental health, self-esteem, and connection with oneself, others and the environment.

Dr Nicholas Kardaras unfortunately claims that, besides outdoors activities, video games and social networks also respond to these human drives; the latter, however, creates addiction and serious psychological distress. Outdoor and digital activities are both dopamine releasers, although in the case of virtual activities, dopamine is pumped instantly as with synthetic drugs. This creates an artificial state of well-being and addiction comparable to the one generated by the use of drugs [6]. When dopamine is released in large amounts, it creates feelings of pleasure and reward. Social media provides an immediate reward in the form of attention from others for relatively minimal effort. Therefore, the brain rewires itself through this positive reinforcement, making people desire *likes*, *retweets*, and *emoticon* reactions.

It can turn problematic when social networking sites become a coping mechanism to relieve stress, loneliness, or depression. For these people, social media use provides continuous rewards that they're not receiving in real life and they end up engaging in this activity more and more. This continuous use leads to multiple interpersonal problems - such as ignoring real life relationships, work or school responsibilities - and physical health ones, possibly ending in undesirable moods. It's not a coincidence that in case of digital addiction, depression or any other issue related to mental health problems, therapists often prescribe programs of adventure therapy, consisting of adventure experiences often conducted in natural settings, that kinaesthetically engage young people on cognitive, affective and behavioural levels.

Adventure therapy uses the environment to elicit change by using experience and action with collaborative exercises, trust and problemsolving activities, outdoors adventures and wilderness expeditions. After each activity, the group reflects and processes the experience in a group setting, where facilitators help participants internalize the experience and relate it to therapeutic goals.

Digital Drugs

Dr. D.Greenfield, Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, University of Connecticut School of Medicine and Dr. Peter Whybrow Director of Neuroscience at UCLA, calls electronic screens and video games "Electronic Cocaine", claiming that "People are carrying around a portable dopamine pump, and kids have basically been carrying it around too for the past 10 years".

A study published in the Journal Paediatrics by Dr. Dimitri Christakis at the university of Washington in 2010, found that children who spend more than two hours a day in front of a screen, were twice as likely to have attention problems.

In another study, Dr Nicholas Kardaras explains the reasons why the indigenous living in Amazon in small communities and in close contact with nature, show high levels of socio emotional well-being and don't develop depression. He claims that the reasons for this phenomenon are attributed to:

- Physical activity
- Being part of a community and having a sense of family bond
- Social cohesion and sense of solidarity among people of the community
- The direct contact with nature

These are all elements that can also be found in adventure and outdoor programs promoted by various youth organizations to foster well-being and restore balance in young people who suffer from psychological distress due to excessive use of digital tools. These experiential outdoor activities that create meaningful opportunities to face real-life experiences and challenges and group and individual reflection equally contribute towards:

- Increasing resiliency, by learning how to cope with stress and negative emotions
- Improving self-awareness and self-confidence
- Developing a more positive outlook and a growth mindset
- Acquiring positive social skills, like communication and conflict resolution
- Improving the management of impulsive behaviours
- Improving concentration and focus, thus impacting on cognitive abilities and academic results
- Acquiring the ability to set realistic goals
- Encouraging and promoting a sense of responsibility
- Encouraging openness and emotional discovery, thus overcoming stigma around mental health
- Building positive relationships and learning to cooperate with others

During COVID19, digital tools have turned out to be very useful for many people to stay in contact with their friends, continue working and diminish the sense of loneliness. However, they have probably also accentuated a non-healthy lifestyle, above all among children and young people. We believe that promoting positive mental health and well-being in outdoor contexts is a valuable alternative to all the time spent in front of a screen, as outdoor activities respond in a healthy way to young people's needs for:

- Being connected with oneself, others and nature
- Being physically active
- Being challenged and reaching objectives
- Exploring and discovering new things

Presencing versus absencing as a way to promote positive mental health

It has been largely demonstrated that excessive and non-conscious use of digital devices often causes alienation and "absencing".
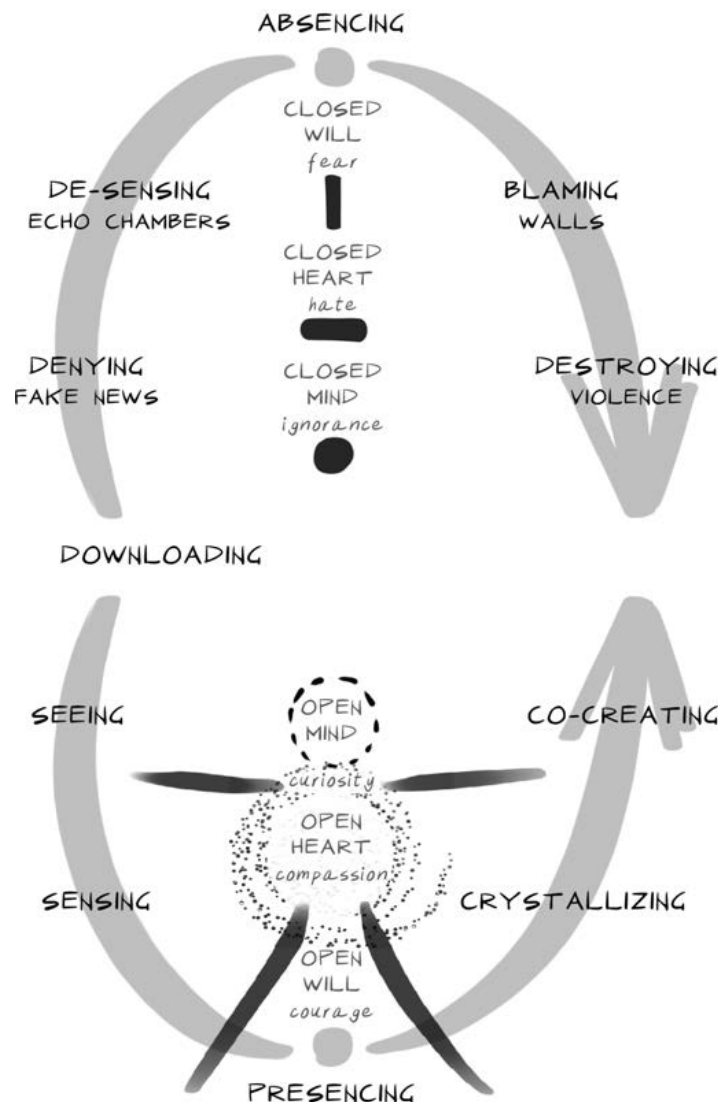
Figure 4.1: **Theory-U Model Presencing vs absencing [7]**

"Absencing" is a word from Otto Scharmer's Theory U used to describe a state of disconnection from oneself, others and the environment. This state, which leads to ignorance, hate and fear, is dramatically growing, particularly among Millennials, and generating a global increase of mental and emotional illness, especially in young people. Therefore youth work should focus on contrasting the "absencing" phenomenon by promoting "presencing" to foster positive mental health.

"Presencing", which in Scharmer's Theory U is the opposite of "absencing", is a state of physical, emotional and cognitive presence in the here and now, in which one is in contact with one's authentic Self and the context. Presencing, nurtured by curiosity, compassion and courage,

is "the blending of sensing and presence, means to connect from the Source of the highest future possibility and to bring it into the now. When moving into the state of presencing, perception begins to happen from a future possibility that depends on us to come into reality. In that state we step into our real being, who we really are, our authentic self [7]". Being in contact with one's authentic Self allows one to reach a state of mental and psychological healthiness, as body and mind become harmoniously aligned. Outdoor activities help young people in being in the present moment and in connecting with their true Self, thus strongly contributing to promote positive mental health.

On the importance of reconnecting for nurturing positive mental health

Today more than ever it's of vital importance to reconnect with oneself and bring one's human nature to be harmoniously connected to the natural cosmic cycles.

At the beginning of 20th century Rudolf Steiner, founder of the anthroposophical spiritual and philosophical movement and the Waldorf school, was already claiming that individual, social and spiritual well-being were deeply linked to the natural cycles of the earth and that the direct exploration of nature and its phenomenon were of vital importance for human beings to flourish, become well-grounded and balanced, be able to cope with the challenges of life [8]. Steiner supported manual, tactile and sensorial activities done in nature, promoting experience and learning by trial and error. For Steiner, the function of education was to develop a strong motivation (will) for learning, in all its facets, rather than accumulating knowledge. The anthroposophical approach looks at children from a holistic perspective, giving equal attention to the physical, emotional, intellectual, cultural and spiritual needs of each pupil, and is designed to work in harmony with the different phases of the child's development. Moments of boredom are valued as generative spaces, where children and young people's will and creativity allow them to take action to solve problems, learn and grow.

Outdoor activities also tackle all of what Gardner defines as multiple intelligences and stimulate problem-solving capacities, enhancing self-confidence in young people, with the result of being highly empowering [9]. On the contrary, using electronic devices to solve daily challenges - such as reaching a destination, memorizing phone numbers, remembering meetings, spelling words correctly - inhibits the multiple intelligence potential, affects our neural connections by stressing "absencing" states and distressing personal capacities.

Conclusions

To conclude, we're convinced that in this new digital era, in order to promote positive mental health, we need to foster outdoor group activities that tap into all the intelligences for problem solving and respond to the three basic human drives of belonging, being challenged and discovering new things through adventure.

All these elements contribute to addressing many of the social and emotional skills of the domains highlighted in the theoretical framework for promoting young people's positive mental health, developed by the NUIG University of Galway and the project partners. [10]

These experiential learning outdoor activities allow young people to develop self-awareness and have an impact on their cognitive (how I think), emotional (how I feel) and social skills (how I relate to others). They also have a positive impact on young people's mindset, their sense of identity and their values.

Being in natural settings is beneficial in itself, as young people gain a wholesome sensory awareness. When they spend time outdoors, they become more mindful of what they see, hear, smell and feel. Being in nature enhances young people's feeling of being more grateful and appreciative of what nature has to offer as well as fostering the urge to protect it.

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Chapter 5:   Disability and Peer Support in Youth Exchanges
By Sybren Bouwsma

Keywords

• SAFE SPACES •   • SOCIAL SUPPORT •   • ROLE MODELLING •

• COPING WITH DISABILITIES •   • YOUTH EXCHANGES •

Key Messages

- Social support from 'similar others' (who share a similar experience or condition) is an effective way of providing active coping assistance and role modelling, often more effective then that of 'significant' others (close friends and family).
- A youth exchange organized for young people with a similar disability or condition can have a very long-lasting effect on the (positive) mental health of the participants, especially if a social support network is created after the exchange.
- Facilitating a youth exchange for a target group with a similar disability or condition may ask specific competencies and preparation from the youth worker. Important is providing a safe and open environment. It can be beneficial if the facilitator shares the condition, but it is not an essential requirements if the participant can see the 'normal' youth worker as an interesting reference, which can be beneficial as well, both for the participant and the youth worker.

Introduction

This article refers to how an Erasmus+ Youth Exchange (YE) for people with a similar disability can help to increase their positive mental health. The experience of youth exchanges for young people who stutter is used as an example, with a particular focus on the value of peer support. In this context, we will take a closer look at the ideas of Thoits [2] about how social support of people with shared experiences ('similar others') can help in active coping assistance, social influence and emotional sustenance and how these experiences relate to the theoretical model of this project. At the end of the article you will find a personal reflection about what is required from youth workers to fully explore the benefit of peer support during an Erasmus+ Youth Exchange.

Biographical information and context

The author, Sybren Bouwsma, has experience in organising youth exchanges for people who stutter. Participants come from different countries and are 18-30 years old. They all have a different background, but they share a common experience in that they all have a stutter (see figure 1). These youth exchanges provide a unique experience for participants to meet, sometimes for the first time in their lives, someone else who stutters, creating a direct feeling of connectedness and belonging. These meetings with 'peers' (other young people who stutter) from different countries, which often lead to a long-lasting form of peer support, help young people to better cope with their speech impediment, as well as becoming more active in different fields of society. For many of the participants, these youth exchanges are a life-changing experience.

Peer support in Youth Exchanges for young people with a disability

Young people with disabilities have a hard time developing positive mental health, since their disability or condition causes them to feel different and not completely understood by their social environment. Examples of problems young people with a disability deal with are stigma, bullying, and social exclusion. These problems make it harder to build up self-esteem and a positive self-image, and to find a place in society (e.g. jobs and relationships). Peer contact can help to counter these problems by helping young people to better cope with a disability or condition, building up a support network and helping them to take a more active role in society. Peers with a disability who are succeeding in different areas of their lives can serve as examples, giving participants the opportunity to think "if this person who also has my condition can do this, then I can give it a try as well'.

Different forms of peer contact

Peer contact can take many different forms, from weekly self-help groups to life buddy support or peer support by telephone or video calls. Equally, peer support can also be between different age groups and with different experiences.

During an Erasmus+ Youth Exchange, participants are away from home for longer than a week and with each other 24 hours a day, meeting people from a variety of backgrounds (culture, language, education) that they would otherwise never meet. Often, participants are challenged to do things they have never done before. These elements can turn Youth Exchanges into intense experiences, as people's tiredness can lead to potential conflicts, but they can also have a positive effect on group bonding, and a deep sense of common shared experience.

An Erasmus+ YE organised for and with people that share a similar condition or disability provides not only the usual group bonding, but also a unique and positive form of peer support that extends across borders, which can have a big (positive) impact in the young participants' lives.

What is a European Youth Exchange

The Erasmus+ YE is an international event lasting at least 5 days (very often 7 to 9 days) where at least 16 young participants (under the age of 30) from at least 2 different countries meet each other and learn in a non-formal way.

A Youth Exchange typically has three elements or stages:
- Introduction, getting to know each other and , sharing fears/needs/expectations, to build up a safe environment
- Workshops related to a specific theme, based on non-formal education and learning by doing, to learn new things about a specific topic, but also as a challenge to do something that they have never done before
- Closing and reflection, reflecting what participants take away with them and what next steps can be taken
- Once the Youth Exchange has ended, there is often an opportunity to stay in contact and keep sharing experiences (sustainability).

More information about the Erasmus+ YE can be found at: https://ec.europa. eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/opportunities/individuals/young-people/youth-exchanges_en or at the National agencies in each partner country: https://ec.europa. eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/contact/national-agencies_en

Figure 5.1: **Group photo of the participants of the Erasmus+ YE of young people who stutter in 2019 (organized by the Anatta Foundation and Stutter associations from six different countries).**

Experiences from Youth Exchanges with people who stutter

The Erasmus+ Youth Exchange for people with a similar condition can be extremely valuable, particularly due to the social support from peers. This peer support has led to a positive change in the way participants deal with their condition, their self-image and their future perspective.

With regards to the positive change in coping with their speech condition, two participants shared: *'Always good to know I am not alone, and that it is possible to find peace with my stuttering'* and *'Now I dare tell people I'm stuttering which I couldn't do before'*.

Very often, it is the first time they meet other people with the same condition - a condition that is habitually associated to a lot of shame. Meeting others who share the same condition can really help young people to better cope with their stuttering in a new way, to know that they are not alone and it can help them be more at peace with the condition. A girl who had never spoken about stuttering at work (some co-workers didn't even know she had a stutter) gave a presentation about stuttering straight after the YE, leading to very positive reactions from colleagues and increased well-being in her workplace.

The change in self-image can be related to the new and sometimes challenging activities (outside their comfort zone) during the YE: *'I did a lot of things that I never imagined to do. So, now I think that I'm a strong person'*. Another participant shared *'My self image broadened from only a PWS to a person with many qualities'*.

In one of the activities held, theatre, young people who had never been on stage before played the main characters at the end of the week. Equally, participants who seemed very shy at the beginning of the exchange gave their own workshop on the last day. These experiences help participants to really see their own qualities and talents, usually "hidden" behind their speech condition.

Regarding the change in future perspective a participant mentioned: *'I've had a dream - to work within education or even being a teacher of some sorts, and support from the stuttering community is worth the most, it makes me feel that perhaps I have potential'* [1].

During a Youth Activity participants almost automatically speak about their studies and job plans, and we do encourage them to do just that in several activities. The dream job of becoming a teacher or studying psychology has come within reach for some people at a youth exchange. Other future perspectives emerge at a more social or societal level, as some young people have met their life partner of have become very active in their national stuttering organization.

As a result of the interpersonal sharing offered by the YE, participants have made life changes. It also boosts their personal development, increases their self-esteem and allows them to feel more socially included . Very often, the peer support continues on for a long time after the YE has ended. At the end of the Youth Exchange, the organizers create a

social media group where participants can keep sharing their experiences. Sometimes, even years after the actual YE event, participants are still active within their social media group, supporting each other in various ways.

In the US, research among participants at a 5-day camp for young people who stutter has shown a similar result in terms of the impact of multi-day meetings for young people who stutter [2].

Social support as a theoretical approach

We will now take a more theoretical approach to peer support between people with similar experiences or conditions, using the ideas of Thoits [3].

Thoits presents a model with two sources of social support: significant others (e.g. close friends and family) and similar others (e.g. people with whom you share a similar experience) - see figure 2 - and argues that *'because primary group members are often emotionally invested in the person's recovery and because they frequently are unfamiliar with the specific demands of the stressor, their information, advice, appraisals, and encouragement are likely to be relatively ineffective at softening its health and mental health consequences. More effective coping assistance should come instead from experientially similar others in the secondary network'* (p. 153), adding *'The advice, feedback, guidance, and encouragement supplied by experienced others should be more efficacious in buffering the impacts of adversity than the well-intentioned but less well informed coping assistance offered by members of the person's primary network'* (p. 154).

The help from these 'similar others' includes emotional sustenance, active coping assistance and social influence. Firstly, because of their direct personal experience, individuals who identify with vulnerable populations can provide emotional sustenance by tolerating expressions of distress, validating feelings and concerns, and providing empathetic understanding. Secondly, people with similar experiences can engage in active coping by sharing experience-based information, advice, encouragement, and appraisal/feedback, increasing each other's capacities. *'Due to past experience, similar others can provide coping assistance that is closely tailored to the exigencies of the problematic situation and known to be effective in solving problems'* (p. 154). Finally, people can exert social influence by serving as role models to others, inspiring hope for the future. The social influence of 'similar others' helps to shape the individual's coping efforts, reducing situational demands and emotional reactions and directly, and perhaps also indirectly, increasing his or her sense of control over life'.

These three forms of support from 'similar others' can be very relevant when looking at the value of organising youth exchanges for and with people with a similar disability or condition.

From Significant Others	From Similar Others
<u>Emotional Sustenance</u> Love, caring, concern Sympathy "Being there": companionate presence	<u>Emotional Sustenance</u> Empathic understanding Acceptance of ventilation Validation of feelings and concerns
<u>Active Coping Assistance</u> Instrumental assistance	<u>Active Coping Assistance</u> Threat (re)appraisal Information and advice Coping encouragement
	<u>Social Influence/Social Comparison</u> Role modeling Inspiring hope (possible self)

Figure 5.2: **A Proposed Classification of Effective Types of Support by Source (From: Thoits [3], p. 153)**

There is also a clear reference to peer support in the theoretical model of the Positive Mental Health Project. Peers are part of the second 'community' circle of the Theoretical Framework (p. 43). In this article, peers are specifically those who share a specific disability or condition (or 'similar other' in the words of Thoits), who spend time together at an international youth exchange. This form of peer support in youth exchanges has a positive mental health impact at the individual, community and societal levels. On an individual level, it can lead to an improvement in self-esteem and better coping, at a community level, it can help to create a positive sense of belonging and at a societal level it can encourage social inclusion and active participation.

This form of intensive peer support can be linked to the individual and societal levels in the Theoretical Framework as well. In that way, peer support with similar others can be linked to the dimensions of social and emotional well-being in the individual inner circle (particularly to 'How I relate to others' and 'How I feel'). And at socio-environmental level, peer support can be linked to a more active citizenship, employability and educational success.

Concerning the different levels of the theoretical framework, the specific form of peer support created during an Erasmus+ Youth Exchange for a specific group of young people with a disability can have a big impact on (positive) mental health of young people with a disability, their communities as well as society itself.

Youth workers and peer support

Finally, I would like to write a few words about the role of a youth worker in peer support as described in this article. In my experience, encouraging peer support at a YE with young

people with a similar disability or condition can be very intensive for a youth worker, but also very rewarding.

An interesting question is whether the youth workers should have experience with the condition or disability themselves when involved in this type of Youth Exchange. Although it can certainly help if some of the youth workers have knowledge or experience with the participants' condition, this is not an essential requirement: as a youth worker, not having previous knowledge or personal experience with the condition can be very refreshing, where the usual majority of people without the shared disability or condition become the minority. This can lead to a learning experience for all, participants and the youth workers in question. The participants can see the 'normal' youth worker as an interesting reference to people in their daily lives who do not have this condition, and the youth worker can look closely at what it really means to have this condition [4]. Both experiences can be very rewarding.

In addition to understanding of the disability or condition, here are some relevant aspects and skills that can help for youth workers in involved in this type of Youth Exchange (in no particular order):
• active listening skills
• ability to create a safe environment where people dare to share
• ability to self-reflect
• self-knowledge
• ability to 'challenge' (without asking too much of the participant)
• observational skills
• creativity
• humour

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[3]   Thoits, P. A. (2011). *Mechanisms linking social ties and support to physical and mental health. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 52(2), 145–161.*

[4]   Stamily, https://stamily.org/our-philosophy/ a diverse and independent community, consisting of people from all over the world. We are highly diverse, with many different passions, life stories, and goals, but have one thing in common: we stutter.
See: https://stamily.org/2019/08/14/stuttering-from-a-non-pwss-perspective/ for a story from the perspective of a non-stuttering youth worker to a stuttering youth exchange

Chapter 6:   Trauma and the body
By Thomas Albers

Keywords

• STRESS • • PTSD • • SAFE SPACES • • BODY AWARENESS •

• SURVIVAL SYSTEM • • SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT •

Trauma is often a difficult topic to address, especially in youth work where the youth workers aren't always confident enough to deal with it. However, the existence of trauma is a fact that cannot be ignored and recognizing the symptoms of trauma in an early stage is important to both the youngsters and the youth workers.

We all know that events like war, violence, sexual abuse or severe accidents are traumatic and can cause symptoms of 'posttraumatic stress disorders' (PTSD). But when we talk about trauma we have to understand that not only these kinds of single major event can cause the symptoms of PTSD. Trauma can be defined as the debilitating symptoms that many people suffer from in the aftermath of perceived life-threatening or overwhelming experiences [1]. How a situation is being experienced as life-threatening or overwhelming, is different to every individual and doesn't have to stem from a major catastrophe. For example, a situation in which a youngster is being bullied or even a school presentation can be perceived as overwhelming.

Traditionally in psychology trauma is seen as something present in the mind and the brain. The symptoms are being treated with psychotherapy and with medication to change the molecules in the brain. This can be of use, but trauma cannot and will never be healed unless the essential role of the body is taken into consideration.

New research and approaches to heal from trauma have welded the unity of body and mind. One of the foremost researches in the field of trauma, the biologist Dr. Peter Levine, realized by observing numerous animals that in the wild no animal remains traumatized after having faced a life-threatening situation. The excess of the tension that has built up within the animal to activate the fight, flight or freeze mode was always released - through shaking, tremors, bucking or running further than necessary to escape the threat - after survival of the situation and the animals recovered from the threat.

Fight, flight or freeze

As human beings we're always scanning our environments for threats and the main question there is "am I safe?". Very often this happens on an unconscious level. In our daily life we always encounter situations in which there might be threats to our well-being. When this happens we have three options how to respond: fight, flight or freeze (see figure 6.1).

These three responses come quickly and automatically from the brain and are perfectly normal and needed to help us deal with the healthy and unhealthy stresses of life. When we are being faced with a threat our sympathetic nervous system is being activated and the arousal levels in our body go up. This also means our body's metabolism, production of hormones, breath, heartbeat, blood pressure, concentration, emotions and cognitive abilities change to the good of survival.

The body prepares itself to either flight from or fight the threat and it will do whatever is needed. When the body realizes that it cannot fight or flight, it has only one last option to survive the threat and that is to freeze. The freeze response can manifest itself as dissociation, becoming numb or being flooded with emotion or thoughts that are too overwhelming to be integrated in the present moment. All these responses can occur to threats that can be of any character and can include exam stress and fear of a first date. It's important to realize that all these responses of the body are normal and it only gets problematic if we are not able to release the excess arousal and return to the baseline in which we can be socially engaged and can 'rest and digest'.

When this happens our nervous system gets stuck and can have a variety of unhealthy consequences such as chronic diseases, depression, anxiety and panic disorders. The consequences of trauma don't necessarily need to manifest themselves immediately but can do so after many years. And it doesn't need to lead to a complete breakdown but can simply be a decreased ability to feel satisfaction, emotions or physical pleasure.

Dr. Levine has developed an approach called Somatic Experiencing (SE) through which he helps people overcome the consequences of trauma. SE and similar approaches such as The Revolutionairy Trauma Release Process from David Bercelli reconnect people with the body, get energy unstuck and re-set the nervous system so that the natural cycles of the body be restored.

As youth workers we are often not qualified or adequately trained to help young people deal with traumatic events. We do, however, have an important function in recognizing trauma and referring the young person to a qualified health care practitioner that will help the young person receive the help and care they deserve. Besides this we can offer support to the young person – as what we usually do in youth work - with a safe space and a relationship that makes them feel safe and respected. [2]
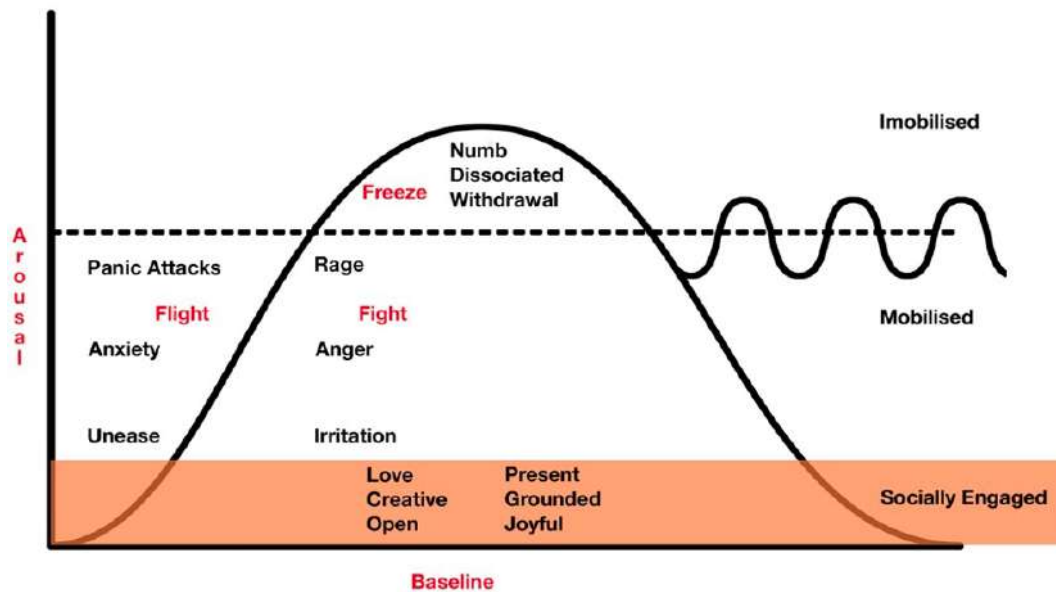
Figure 6.1: **The range of possible responses to arousal in the human body. [1]**

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[2]   Read more about Safe spaces in Chapter One of this publication: Dragan Atanasov, Creating Safe Spaces for Young People

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•   Berceli, B. (2008). *The revolutionary trauma release process: Transcend your toughest times.* Publisher: Namaste Publishing Inc

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BUILDING BLOCK 2
ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

AIM: ENGAGING

In promoting youth mental health it is important to engage young people in the process of social and emotional learning. Youth workers must understand what motivates the behaviour of young people. To foster intrinsic motivation for personal and social development, three innate needs must be fulfilled:

- *Competence – The need to experience mastery, which can be enhanced by providing positive feedback.*
- *Relatedness – The need to interact and connect with others and to feel supported by others.*
- *Autonomy – The need to determine one's own actions, for example, doing an activity because one finds it interesting, rather than because it is required by others. [1]*

[1] Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). *Self-determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-being.* American Psychologist, *55, 68-78.*

Chapter 7: Motivation and Self-Determination as essential ingredients for Positive Mental Health

By Thomas Albers

Keywords

• BASIC NEEDS •   • AUTONOMY •   • COMPETENCE •   • RELATEDNESS •
• MOTIVATION •   • PERSONAL GROWTH •   • WELL-BEING •
• ENGAGEMENT •   • SELF-DETERMINATION SKILLS •

Key Messages

- *Being self-determined means that one's behaviour is based on one's own will, that it comes from intentional, conscious choices and decisions.*
- *The psychological human needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are important ingredients for personal growth and well-being.*
- *The youth work setting has an important role in promoting self-determined behaviour in young people.*

Adolescence and young adulthood are critical phases in human development. Young people have to face physical, psychological, intellectual, social and emotional challenges, such as searching for self-identity, achieving independence and autonomy, setting personal goals and making plans, exploring new roles, acquiring and expressing personal values and ethics. Supporting young people to become self-determined in these challenges is an important developmental task of the youth work setting. This article takes a closer look at processes of motivation and self-determination and will explore some ways of supporting young people in their journey towards self-determination in these critical life phases.

One of the most influential theories on well-being, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), considers human beings as active organisms focused on growth and social integration [1]. The SDT defines three basic psychological human needs as key ingredients for well-being; the need for *autonomy*, *competence* and *relatedness*. The need for *autonomy* refers to the desire

to being able to make one's own decision about experiences and behaviours, and to take on activities that are in line with one's own integrated sense of self. It is about experiencing the freedom to decide one's own path. Feeling *competent* and able to use capacities leads to having a sense of mastery and confidence to take on challenges. The need for *relatedness* is about developing relationships, having a sense of belonging, being able to receive and give love and care and feeling accepted. Relatedness is one of the most fundamental human needs, and a pillar of our societies and youth settings.
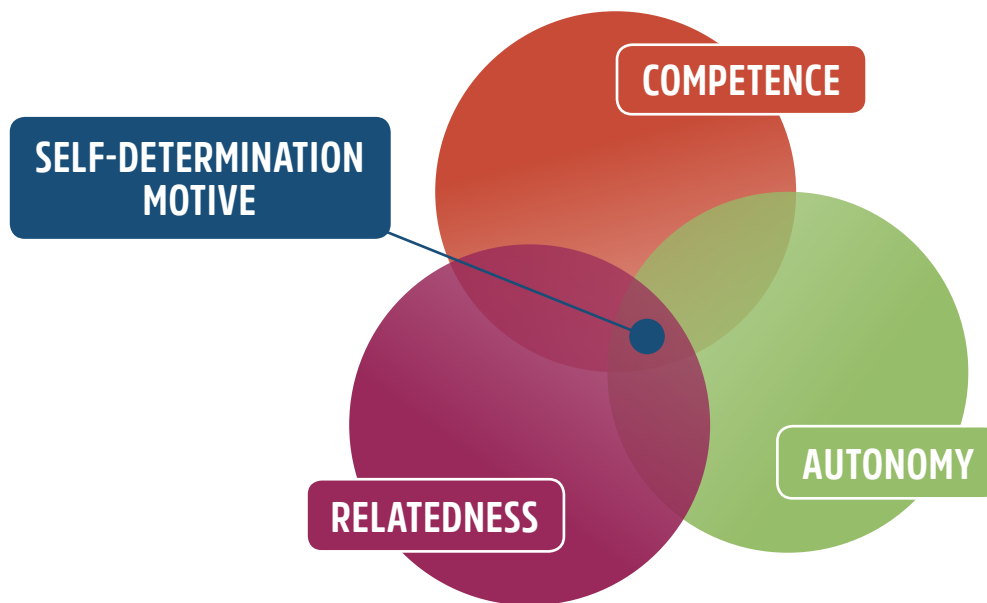
Figure 7.1: **The three basic needs of self-determination and intrinsic motivation [1].**

According to the SDT, fulfilling these basic needs is an essential condition to being able to experience personal growth, mental health and well-being. The youth work setting plays an essential role in this process. A youth work setting that provides an environment that supports young people to fulfil these needs equally provides the basic ingredients for personal growth, optimal functioning, well-being and developing socially engaged citizens. In general, the fulfilment of all three basic human needs is considered necessary and essential to vital, healthy human functioning, regardless of culture or stage of development. Usually, the unique expression of these three basic needs differs from person to person as each individual belongs to different (sub)cultures, with their own set of values and needs. Satisfying the need for autonomy, for example, will differ according to each individual and their culture. However, despite the differences in expression, the three basic needs have been found to be transculturally important.

Motivation and self-determination

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) describes that the quality of fulfilment of these three basic psychological needs is highly related to the processes of motivation (see figure

7.1). There are different kinds of motivation, and each motivation has a different degree of *self-determination*. Being self-determined means that one's behaviour is based on one's own will, resulting from intentional, conscious choices and decisions. Self-determined behaviour is thus intrinsically motivated; the motivation comes 'from within'. An activity is intrinsically motivating when the reward is in the activity itself. When young people take part in an interesting, new or challenging activity the reward is often the activity itself, hence intrinsically motivating. An activity can only be intrinsically motivating when we do it out of free will (*autonomy*), feel competent enough to carry the activity out or able to learn the new competences (*competence*) and when the activity doesn't limit our sense of connection to others (*relatedness*).

Extrinsic motivation on the other hand, is focused on receiving external rewards such as money, status, power, compliments or social recognition. Avoiding punishment, social pressure or feelings of fear and shame are also driving forces in the process of external motivation. Offering these external rewards to young people is limiting their sense of intrinsic motivation. Behaviour that is intrinsically motivated is more sustainable and leads to more positive mental health than extrinsically motivated behaviour, and thus favourable.

Figure 7.2: **The Self-Determination continuum**

To make it a bit more complicated

Extrinsic and intrinsic motivations are, actually, two ends on the continuum of motivation, with three more types of extrinsic motivation in between: *introjected*, *identified* and *integrated motivation*. To explain these 'in-between' types of motivation, it is important to mention that these are, to a greater or lesser extent, degrees of internalized extrinsic motivations.

Throughout their lives, young people's behaviour is often reinforced by reward and punishment to align them to certain social and cultural norms. At some point, the young person internalizes these external rewards and punishments, and the extent to which this happens can differ. With *introjected motivation*, this external reward or punishment no longer comes from the social environment, but from the person's own

internal 'voices' and emotions. When a certain behaviour is socially expected, the young person can feel proud when complying, or feel guilty when s/he doesn't. The behaviour is externally regulated because the main motivation is to receive rewards or avoid punishment.

The next level on the continuum is *identified motivation*. Here, the behavioural regulation is still internalized as per the introjection, but the young person sees the regulation more as part of their identity.

With *integrated motivation*, behaviour and actions of the young person have become part of their sense of identity and are in harmony with other personal values. The difference from intrinsic motivation however is that, in integrated motivation, harmony with the sense of identity and values is the central tenet, whereas in intrinsic motivation, the inherent joy and satisfaction of the activity itself is what motivates the young person. Only when behaviour is purely intrinsically motivated, will it be fully self-determined and be most stable in its contribution to positive mental health.

Some examples of motivation (in youth work):
Amy joining a youth camp on wellbeing because her parents will be disappointed if she doesn't, is an example of *extrinsic motivation*. Sandro coming to the same camp because he feels guilty if he doesn't, illustrates *introjected motivation*. Another young person, George, participating because he believes that it promotes his positive mental health, can be considered *identified motivation*. Edith taking part because she sees herself as a person that wants to be well and taking part in the camp helps her to develop new social and emotional competences, which is important to her, is an example of *integrated motivation*. Laura, who joins because the camp brings her pure joy and makes her feel happy, exemplifies *intrinsic motivation*.

Youth work as the road to self-determination

Developing self-determination in young people has many benefits. It enables them to become agents in their own life development and to make independent choices. More specifically, a well-developed level of self-determination has shown to play a vital role in several domains of positive mental health, including beneficial effects on general life satisfaction later in life [2], promote physical exercise, increase physical health [3] and prevent occupational and learner's burn-out [4]. These are just a few examples of the benefits of being intrinsically motivated and self-determined in behaviour.

In general, youth workers will have young people with many different types of motivation attending youth projects. It is always important to take into consideration and respect their actual and unique situation as it is. Young people's motivation is a consequence of their past and not showing intrinsically motivated behaviour does not mean they are not doing well;

self-determined behaviour has just many benefits. The good thing is that young people have the natural tendency and need for personal growth [1].

Self-determination of young people is fostered in many ways, including youth work, which is aimed at empowering, engaging and connecting young people. A young person that is self-determined is able to think and act autonomously, feels competent and connected to other people. There are several ways in which the youth work setting and the youth worker can contribute to the development of self-determined behaviour of young people. One of them is through fostering the development of *self-determination competences*[1], such as self-regulation, decision-making and action planning, which have shown to help youngsters become more autonomous, increase their sense of control over personal development and learn to evaluate and set personal goals [5].

This is also true for young people with (severe) disabilities, often and unjustly thought to lack the skills to exert control over their lives [6]. While it may be true that these young people have certain limitations in terms of opportunities, encouraging them to express preferences and promoting self-advocacy is an effective way to increase their sense of agency over their own lives.

Promoting self-determination is an important function of youth work[2] and can be done both in a taught and caught manner[3]. When there is a designed learning experience that teaches young people the so-called self-determination skills [8] (see table 7.1), this is considered a taught practice. When, on the other hand, the learning environment itself provides an opportunity to learn these skills, e.g. when the youth organization promotes an active involvement of young people in decision-making, this is considered a caught practice.

To develop effective youth programs[4] aimed at increasing self-determination and, consequently, positive mental health, the self-determination skills [8] in table 1 below should be taken into consideration at planning level. These skills are measurable and most effectively developed through regular practice.

In conclusion, for the youth setting, fulfilling the three basic human psychological needs (*autonomy, relatedness and competences*) through youth programs is an effective way of promoting intrinsic motivation and well-being. The self-determination skills, as part of the social and emotional competences, can be specifically targeted to support the development of self-determination in young people as an important quality.

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1   Most of these competences are also included in the list of social and emotional competences as defined in the framework on Positive Mental Health promotion, as developed for this Erasmus+ project [see 7]
2   See Youth Work Function 3 of the Council of Europe's Youth work competence model. https://www.coe. int/en/web/youth-portfolio/youth-work-competence
3   See [7], pages 32 -35 for more information about these two ways of competence learning.
4   See the Youth Worker's Manual developed for this Erasmus+ project for more guidelines on high quality projects on the promotion of positive mental health and self-determination. Freely accessible on www. positivementalhealth.eu

Skill	Description
Choice-making	Being able to choose between two or more options in order to exert control over his or her actions and environment.
Problem-solving	Being able to identify a problem and possible solutions, and develop an understanding of potential pros and cons of each possible solution.
Decision-making	Similar to choice-making, decision-making is about being able to make the right decision at any given moment. This skill requires young people to identify alternative decisions for action, the potential consequences for each alternative, assess the probability of each possible outcome, to be able to select the best alternative and implement this decision [9].
Goal setting and attainment	The ability to set appropriate personal goals and achieve the goals with action.
Self-regulation	Being able to control one's own behaviour by being aware of one's action, motivation and being self-adjusting. It consists in being able to self-monitor, self-evaluate, self-manage and self-instruct.
Self-awareness	Being aware of one's own strengths, limitations, needs, individuality and areas for growth.
Self-efficacy	Having the understanding that own actions have an impact and believing to be the causal agent in your own life.
Self-advocacy	Being able to understand own needs and values and being able to express these assertively and take appropriate actions accordingly.

Table 7.1: **Self-determination skills [8]**

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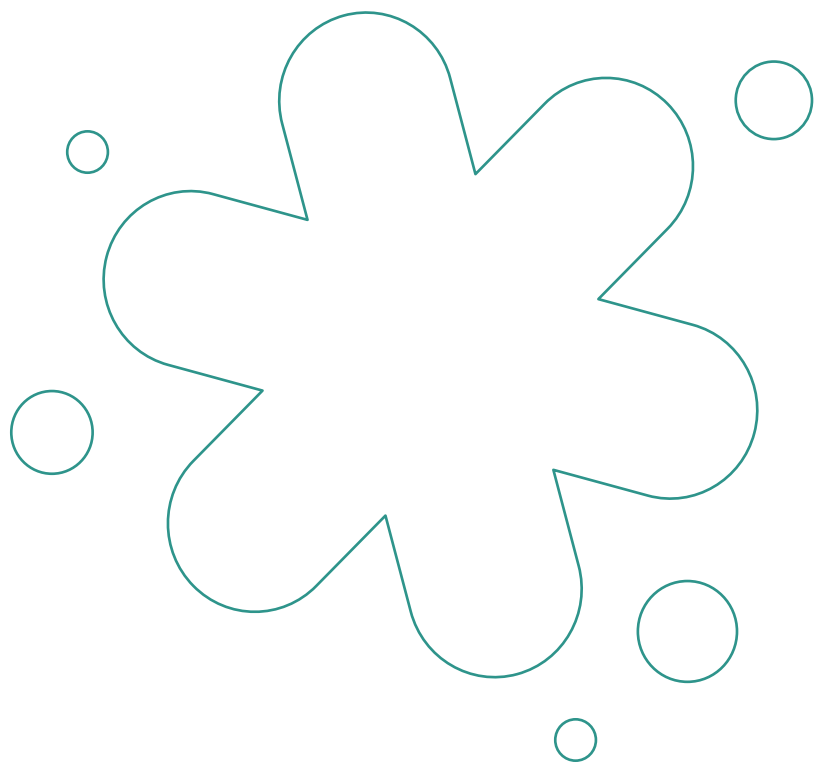
Chapter 8:   Compassion and emotional regulation systems
By Thomas Albers

Keywords

• BASIC NEEDS •   • COMPASSION •   • SELF-KINDNESS •

• SELF-CRITICISM •   • EMOTIONAL REGULATION SYSTEMS •

• SURVIVAL SYSTEM •   • COMMON HUMANITY •

Compassion is a basic human need and we all need it to live and to survive. For most people when they talk about compassion, they usually think of sympathizing with the suffering of others. But compassion contains more than that.

Compassion is the capacity to feel involved in pain and suffering, of both oneself and of others [1]. It goes hand in hand with the desire to lighten this pain or suffering. To have compassion is to accept that suffering and pain are part of our human existence, to open up our heart to suffering and to practice the patience to endure pain and suffering. At the same time there is an active component that challenges us to soothe the suffering in the least harmful and most wholesome way. The capacity to be compassionate is inherently present in all of us and can be developed through training.

For social or youth workers, when their compassion is too much focused on the needs of others, there is a high risk of developing ´compassion fatigue` where compassion levels are burned out. Therefore, self-care or self-compassion is just as essential as practicing compassion towards others.

In our modern western societies that have become oriented around achievement and competition, practicing (self-) compassion has become difficult and sometimes it can even be seen as a weakness. The development of compassion for the self and for others has become an important practice in youth work and for youth workers themselves.

Emotional regulation systems

Paul Gilbert [2] has done extensive research about compassion and emotional regulation systems. Building upon an evolutionary model, he argues that human beings have a tri-partite emotional regulation system (see figure 8.1). The model argues that we continuously shift

between three different systems or modes. All the three states are associated with distinct feelings, drives, motivations, purposes and neurochemistry.

Figure 8.1: **A tripartite emotional regulation system, adapted from Gilbert [2].**

The ´threat´ state is mainly focused on finding safety; the ´incentive´ state comes with a mindset attuned towards achieving or competition and the ´soothing´ system promotes safety and feelings of interpersonal connectedness. In the ´threat´ and ´incentive´ state we are in states of ´doing´, whereas in the ´soothing´ state we are in a state of ´being´. According to Gilbert, we need all three systems for our survival in our modern day society and a proper healthy balance between the three states will ensure our wellbeing. However, most people, due to the characteristics of our societies, are mostly shifting between the ´threat´ and the ´incentive´ states. Our ´soothing´ state, in which we are able to be (self-)compassionate, is underdeveloped. A prolonged misbalance, in which people are mainly in the ´threat´ and ´incentive´ states, creates chronic stress. Sooner or later this will result in mental and physical health problems; problems that can be prevented through involvement in appropriate youth work approaches on emotional intelligence.

Self-compassion

The neurobiological fight, flight and freeze responses [4] in the activation of emotions and behaviour can be activated by the appearance of physical or psychological threats, even if the psychological threat comes from within the person itself. The neurological and physical responses in the body can be equal in all these cases. Neff [3], describes how in the case of a psychological threat coming from within, the fight response can be translated to self-criticism, where one fights those parts that one doesn´t like, or accepts through self-criticism and judgement. The flight response can be translated into self-isolation, when we run and hide for the parts of ourselves that we consider as being threatening. The freeze response can be translated into self-absorption or over identification, where one tries to hold on to certain thoughts or attitudes because we believe it gives us certainty in an uncertain existence.

Neff [3] also identified three components of self-compassion that are antidotes to these self-harming practices. Self-kindness can help to neutralize self-criticism. Understanding our common humanity can help to overcome self-isolation and mindfulness will help to prevent self-absorption.

The practice of (self-)compassion has proven to be a very useful tool to improve levels of wellbeing and mental health. Also, a combined practice in youth work of mindfulness and self-compassion brings about a reciprocal enhancement of the effects in young people and youth workers. Some researchers therefore claim that in the practice of mindfulness, self-compassion should have a more dominant role than it currently has (for a review see [3]).

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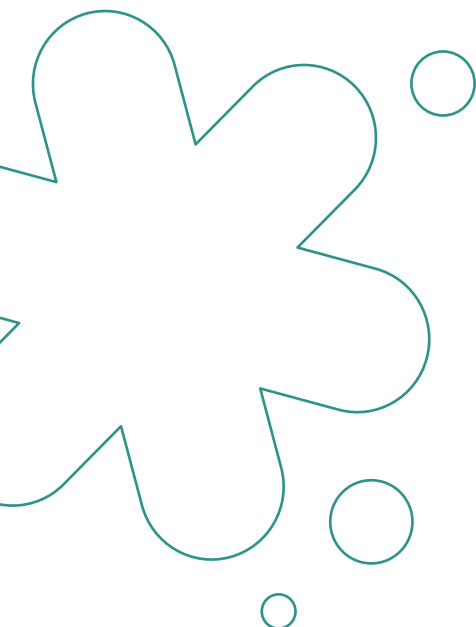
BUILDING BLOCK 3
EMPOWERING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES AND A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

AIM: EMPOWERING

Youth organizations have an important role in developing life skills in young people and stimulating a healthy lifestyle. The foundations for a healthy lifestyle include good health and a calm mind, sufficient sleep, a healthy diet and sports/exercise. A supportive environment that facilitates the acquisition of life skills empowers young people in taking charge of their own lives.

Chapter 9: Ikigai – Discover your life purpose
By Bára Rodi

Keywords

• VALUES •   • GOAL SETTING •   • DECISION MAKING •   • MINDSET •

• MINDFULNESS •   • FOREST BATHING •   • NATURE •

• OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES •

Key Messages

- **When young people feel lost, confused, in search of meaning, the concept of Ikigai can bring more clarity and awareness as well as help them choose an area/direction in life that is important for them, inspiring them and giving them hope.**
- **This article about Ikigai, the concept of "life purpose" based on 10 rules, offers some basic facts - background, historical context and also some inspiration – how you can apply it both professionally and personally.**
- **You will also be invited to reflect upon your "reason for being" which gives you a "reason to live", and find further reading and resources.**

Yukari Mitsuhashi, journalist and author of the book **Ikigai: giving every day meaning and joy** says you can uncover your Ikigai by asking simple questions:

- What brings happiness to my everyday life?
- What puts a smile on my face just thinking about it?
- What would I continue to do even if I had enough money to live happily ever after?

By answering these questions you are already on the way of "creating" your own Ikigai - **your "reason for being" which gives you a "reason to live"** - and this article offers some basic facts and insights about Ikigai.

At times when young people might feel lost, confused, in search of meaning, the concept of Ikigai can bring more clarity and help them choose an area/direction in life which is important to them, inspiring them and giving them hope.

Being aware of purpose/meaning in life, helps young people become more self-confident and active and responsible members of the community and society, ultimately supporting positive mental health. Also, having a sense of "purpose" acts as kind of compass to follow, definitely improving positive mental Health.

This article explains the concept behind Ikigai - its background and 10 "Rules" - and how to start reflecting about it. It also explains the methodology that allows youth trainers and youth workers to support young people through the process from the very start.

The purpose of Ikigai is not to declare that one needs to have and live one's Ikigai in order to be happy, but rather to allow for reflection and awareness about one's "Life purpose".

The Definition of Ikigai

There's no direct equivalent of the Japanese word Ikigai in English. The closest definitions I've found are the following (emphasis added in **bold**):
- The term Ikigai is composed of: iki and kai. At present, kai is generally written in *hiragana* (Japanese phonetic syllabary)… Iki refers to **'life'**; kai is a suffix meaning roughly **'the realization of what one expects and hopes for.** [1]'
- Japanese dictionaries define Ikigai in such terms as *ikiru hariai, yorokobi, meate* **(something to live for, the joy and goal of living)** and *ikite iru dake no neuchi, ikite inu kōfuku, reiki* **(a life worth living, the happiness and benefit of being alive)** [2].

This is pretty close to how **Wikipedia** [3] describes it as well:
- The term Ikigai compounds two Japanese words: *iki* meaning **'life; alive'** and kai meaning '(an) effect; (a) result; (a) fruit; (a) worth; (a) use; (a) benefit; (no, little) avail' (sequentially voiced as gai) to arrive at **'a reason for living (being alive); a meaning for (to) life; what (something that) makes life worth living; a raison d'être'**.

I've also seen Ikigai translated as:
- "reason for being"
- "the reason for which you wake up in the morning"
- "The direct translation is the 'happiness of being busy" (Note: I'll presume they mean living a "full life versus busy life" [4].

After rereading the **bolded** areas above, what if we were to view Ikigai as:
Aha Moment: Your "reason for being" gives you a "reason to live"

As far as descriptions go, here are a couple I resonate with:
- **"The process of allowing the self's possibilities to blossom"**
  (Note: this is even more powerful if you visualize the Ikigai diagram as a flower blooming).
- "This word **[Ikigai] is really like a treasure map**. And, this treasure map can help you find your way to finding wonderful things about yourself that you can share with the world, and the world will say 'thank you' for it." — Tim Tamashiro in his TED Talk [5].

Ikigai isn't necessarily about "work".

In a survey of 2,000 Japanese men and women conducted by Central Research Services in 2010, only 31% of participants considered work as their Ikigai. Someone's value in life can be work – but life is certainly not limited only to that.

There is evidence of the fact that many Japanese people keep pursuing their Ikigai until the end of their lives:

Many Japanese people never really retire, they keep doing what they love for as long as their health allows them to.

In Japan, Ikigai is a slower process and often has nothing to do with work or income.
Laura Oliver. [6]

Ikigai is not something grand or extraordinary. It's something pretty matter-of-fact.
Gordon Mathews, professor of anthropology [6]

You don't need huge ambition to be very happy, you just need a bunch of friends to drink green tea and talk with. Get rid of the mess and at the core is your Ikigai.
Héctor García [7]

Other than work, Ikigai can be family, a dream, or simply the spiritual feeling that life is worth living.

After interviewing one hundred centenarians and supercentenarians in Ogimi, Okinawa (Japan), for a research aimed at understanding life philosophy and longevity secrets, conducted by Central Research Services in 2010 [8], the authors developed **ten rules of Ikigai** based on their findings:

1. Stay active and don't retire
2. Leave urgency behind and adopt a slower pace of life
3. Eat until you are only 80% full
4. Surround yourself with good friends
5. Get in shape through daily, gentle exercise
6. Smile and acknowledge people around you
7. Reconnect with nature
8. Give thanks to anything that brightens your day and makes you feel alive
9. Live in the moment
10. Follow/live your Ikigai

These rules are in line with the holistic approach outlined in the framework* (Framework for promoting positive mental Health), i.e. the different aspects of well-being and how mental health is determined by multiple factors on many levels.

Ikigai

A JAPANESE CONCEPT MEANING "A REASON FOR BEING"

Satisfaction, but feeling of uselessness

Delight and fullness, but no wealth

What you LOVE

PASSION   MISSION

What you are GOOD AT   Ikigai   What the world NEEDS

PROFESSION   VOCATION

Comfortable, but feeling of emptiness

What you can be PAID FOR

Excitement and complacency, but sense of uncertainty

SOURCE: dreamstime   TORONTO STAR GRAPHIC

Figure 9.1: **the Ikigai Concept [6]**

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In my trainings I invite participants to:
Follow their Curiosity
Follow their Passions
Follow their needs and the needs of the World around them
Follow deeply their Love (for themselves, others, Nature….)

</div>

Philosopher and civil rights leader **Howard W Thurman** said, "Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. […] Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

Albert Einstein encourages us to pursue our interests. He once said:

*"Don't think about why you question, simply don't stop questioning. Don't worry about what you can't answer, and don't try to explain what you can't know. Curiosity is its own reason. Aren't you in awe when you contemplate the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvellous structure behind reality? And this is the miracle of the human mind — to use its constructions, concepts, and formulas as tools to explain what man **sees, feels and touches.** Try to comprehend a little more each day. Have holy curiosity."*

So in relation to our project

Finding your own Ikigai is a great way of helping **to improve positive mental health and wellbeing**. A good starting point is to consider what kind of activities you are passionate about and then taking steps towards getting involved.

Another method of embracing Ikigai is to consciously enjoy life's simple pleasures, like spending time with a friend or eating a favorite meal. This can help improve our mindset and provide the basis for creating a positive outcome for the day.

Finding what you're good at is a core aspect of Ikigai, which improves self-esteem. It can also be beneficial for anxiety sufferers as it instils feelings of self-worth, reminding them that they are capable of achieving something good and worthwhile. [9]

At its core, Ikigai is about finding a reason to live, being motivated to follow it and believe in that path - those directions are right for you at that moment.

And once you have that mentality, there is always a reason to keep moving forward.

This is very much associated to the area of Mindset (particular Hope, Optimism), and **Self-determination theory** (SDT Deci and Ryan) [10], the macro theory of human motivation and personality that concerns people's inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs.

In psychology, self-determination is an important concept that refers to each person's ability to make choices and manage their own life. This ability plays a crucial role in psychological health and well-being. Self-determination allows people to feel that they have control over their choices and lives.

Trying to find and live your Ikigai can help you to develop psychologically, emotionally, intellectually, physically, socially and spiritually.

It actively contributes to the development of the key areas of the Framework*.

How I think (goal setting and decision making): Looking for meaning and looking for one's own purpose helps us to better function and have a more satisfying life. Young people are also looking for meaning and purpose of life and Ikigai *"offers a spiritual feeling that life is worth living"*, *"live in the moment, take it slow"*.

How I feel: Being able to deal with one's emotions (self-awareness and self-regulation) and have the ability to act with empathy: *"Smile and acknowledge people around you"*.

Also it relates to having a positive view of oneself: by overcoming the challenge, the initiate gains self-confidence and new self-awareness about their strengths (passions) and reflection. *"The process of allowing the self's possibilities to blossom."*

How I relate to others: Developing a positive approach to life (worth living) and being a part of the wider community: the joy and benefit of being alive strengthens the feeling of community belonging *"surround yourself with good friends; smile and acknowledge people around you"*. Also being aware that we are part of something bigger, creating a sense of being one with nature (our ecosystem): *"Reconnect with nature"* And with *"what the world needs"*:

Values: Here, it is linked with the desire to perform to one's highest potential and still valuing and respecting diversity of others: *"smile and acknowledge people around you", follow/live your Ikigai.*

Mindset: Optimism, Openness, Gratitude are very present when you are "living" your Ikigai. *"Give thanks to anything that brightens our day and makes us feel alive"*. Follow your curiosity.

Identity: Self-knowledge, Self-esteem, Self-purpose are the guiding principles of Ikigai, as mentioned in detail above in relation with **Self-determination theory** (SDT Deci and Ryan). [10]

There is also a focus on keeping mind, body and soul in balance and have an active approach to self-care: *"eat until you are only 80% full"*; *"keep yourself fit through daily gentle exercise"* and *"stay active and do not retire"*.

Application in our organization

During the Midterm Training of the volunteers who come to our country in the context of the European Solidarity Corps project (Volunteering), we offer a 1,5 hour session to explore Ikigai. This practical session consist of introducing the Ikigai Concept Theory, allowing volunteers to link it to their own personal reality, and end with some personal "reflection and focus" time to identify 1-2 areas of the Ikigai Concept they wish to improve/work on during their last months of volunteering, both in their project and in their personal/future lives. We combine both individual work and sharing in pairs. We present a lot of examples and guiding questions, allowing them the freedom to choose how deep they want to go. If the moment is not right for them, they are sent further information and links to resources they can subsequently use.

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- Mitsuhashi, Y. (2018). *Ikigai: Giving every day meaning and joy*, Octopus Publishing Group

Chapter 10: How Youth Workers Support the Development of Youth's Resilience?

By Biljana Vasilevska Trajkoska

• RESILIENCE • • DEALING WITH CHALLENGES AND STRESS • • STRESS •

• SOCIAL COMPETENCES • • EMOTIONAL COMPETENCES •

Key Messages

- **Psychological resilience is a valuable dimension of positive mental health. It helps young people to deal with challenges and stress, to overcome them and to recover successfully without feeling overwhelmed or experiencing anxiety and/or depression, or turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms.**
- **Youth workers (can) engage youth in various non-formal education and leisure-time activities, connect and empower them, and provide them with the support needed for anticipating things from going off-base in their life, reducing the harm done when they do and recover.**

Introduction

Today, many youth workers worldwide run activities that aim to support youth positive mental health. This article targets exactly those youth workers who (want to) work in this field. It gives some information about what psychological resilience of young people is - a highly important dimension of positive mental health - and shares some ideas on what youth workers (can) do, so as to support its development.

Youth, as a period of transition from childhood to adulthood, is considered to be a significant developmental stage in a person's life, a time when the person is exposed to different challenges and opportunities, exclusive to that stage. During this period, people need various types of support in order to navigate through it successfully. As a social practice, complementary to social work, psychology, pedagogy, etc., youth work is an important part of the system that supports positive youth development and active youth participation in society. Among other things, this means that youth work has an important role to play in supporting young people's positive mental health, defined by World Health Organization as "*a state of wellbeing in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.*" [1]

When we explore youth work and what youth workers do over time in relation to (positive) mental health - what they aim for, how they do it, with whom etc... - we see that youth workers significantly contribute towards the development of systemic policy responses to contemporary youth mental health challenges, as well as making social changes and creating safe spaces needed for preventing those challenges from affecting the young population. Youth workers' contributions can also be witnessed in the way they are working directly with young people: by engaging youth in various non-formal education and leisure-time activities, connecting and empowering them, youth workers provide young people the support needed for anticipating things from going in an unwanted direction in their life; reducing the harm done when they do, and recover and come up stronger from that experience. Long story short, youth workers help young people develop their **psychological resilience**.

What is resilience and why is it important?

Resilience is considered a key element of mental health maintenance in young people during stressful situations and at times of personal crisis. Srivastava K. says that: *"it will be incomplete to talk about positive mental health without mentioning resilience…Positive psychology approaches always emphasized on individual's ability to enjoy life, and create a balance between life activities and efforts to achieve psychological resilience"* [2].

According to Luthar S. and Cicchetti D., resilience is *"an individual's positive adaptation to difficulties"* [3]. Similarly, Farber F. and Rosendah J. write: *"Resilience refers to an individual's positive adaptation to the experience of adversity. The maintenance of mental health is commonly considered a sign of successful coping with adverse conditions"* [4] Fraser F. & Blishen M. also state that resilience is *"an individual's positive adaptation in the face of adversity".* [5]

Being resilient doesn't mean that the young person won't have any challenges or problems in life, but rather that they will have various strengths that can help them deal with the challenges and problems they face, overcome them and recover successfully without feeling overwhelmed, without turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms nor experience conditions and situations that might affect their well-being and ability to function. The strengths that the resilient young person has include characteristics listed by the author and resilience expert Glenn Schiraldi: "sense of autonomy; ability to stay calm under pressure (equanimity, the ability to regulate stress levels); rational thought process, self-esteem, optimism, happiness and emotional intelligence, meaning and purpose, humour, altruism, love and compassion, curiosity, character, balance, sociability, adaptability, Intrinsic religious faith, long view of suffering, good health habits" [6]. Such characteristics help young people to cope with everyday temptations and challenges and to enter into every stressful "battle" in life feeling "prepared to win" or – "prepared to learn"!

Resilience can also help youth with an existing mental health condition to improve their ability to cope with that situation and make the most of it.

So, **how can youth workers support the development of young people's resilience and, consequently, support their positive mental health?** Here are some ideas:

- Support skill acquisition: In order to support the development of young people's resilience, youth workers worldwide, (can) support youth to develop variety of skills that can be very useful for overcoming challenges in life and for fast recovery, such as, for example: communication skills, problem-solving, leadership, adaptability, creativity, teamwork, conflict transformation, etc. In addition to supporting skill acquisition, youth workers can support youth in developing realistic views and awareness of the skills that they have and can use, the skills they don't yet have and need to develop, as well as accepting the potential limits to develop certain other skills without feeling less worthy because of it.
- Encourage young people to set goals in order to strengthen the development of organizational and planning skills and do something that gives them a sense of accomplishment and purpose every day.
- Encourage youth to be confident, realistic and rational. Support them to learn how to train their thoughts and attention, so as to decrease negative thoughts in and bring greater focus on the most meaningful aspect of an experience.
- Support youth in becoming proactive, in developing skills to face problems instead of ignoring them and to figure out what needs to be done, to plan and to take action.
- Support the development of social intelligence in young people, their capacity to know themselves and to know and connect with others, to develop, enjoy and maintain relationships etc.
- Support the development of emotional intelligence in young people: understanding and taking care of their own emotions and the emotions of others, teaching them techniques they can use to regulate their emotions and the amount of pressure and stress they feel in different situations. Support youth in learning how to care for people who need help, to accept people's differences, to be friendly and neither mistreat nor bully others, and to take responsibility for their actions.
- Encourage and support young people in making lifestyle changes and looking after their physical health: to understand and learn the importance of getting enough sleep, being active, eating healthily… and relaxing, using relaxation techniques such as spending time outdoors, walking in the park or by the river, listening to music, taking their dog for a walk… appreciating and connecting with nature.
- Support young people in becoming involved in their community, or participating in activities, and in making decisions about things that are meaningful to them. Youth workers create opportunities for various "active citizenship" and participatory activities that make young people feel connected with others, involved in something "bigger" in life, competent, appreciated, respected. Engaging youth in the community makes young people feel needed, worthy and responsible, and gives them a sense of contributing towards the development of a better world for themselves and other people.

If we link this to the "Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Youth Sector" [7], we can say that youth workers can support youth in all the 6 domains of social and emotional development: *cognitive, emotional, social, values, perspectives and identity/self-image* [7].

I know that there are many other things that youth workers (can) do, and I encourage you to talk about them with your colleagues and particularly with the young people you work with. One thing that youth workers should remember as essential in youth work is to always listen to young people and adapt your approach to their individual characteristics and preferences - design and tone your work accordingly.

To conclude ....

Becoming more resilient takes time and practice! Modern Times can be summed up as a period of challenges and competition. In building resilience, minimising risks to mental health and ensuring effective support is available, youth workers have the potential to prevent youth from experiencing poor mental health and/or to cope with it more effectively.

Youth work organizations play a big role in supporting young people. By creating opportunities for young people to build their competences and skills and to gain control over their behaviour and lifestyle, youth organizations can support young people's positive mental health, as well as the development and maintenance of positive mechanisms for coping with mental health challenges. That can be beneficial for the young people themselves but also for their families and wider communities.
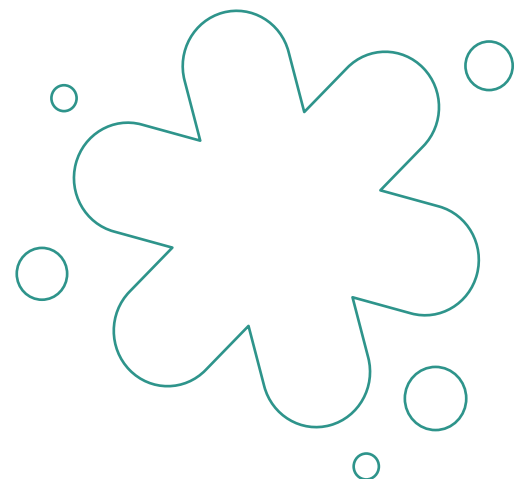
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Chapter 11: Cultivating a State of Mindfulness increases Positive Mental Health

By Laura López Gámez

• MINDFULNESS •   • AWARENESS •   • ATTENTION •   • PRESENCING •

• CONSCIOUS BREATHING •   • OBSERVING SELF •   • POSITIVE THINKING •

• COMPASSION •   • BODY AWARENESS •

Key Messages

- Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations and surrounding environment, through a gentle and nurturing attention.
- The practice of Mindfulness can start changing our brains into a kinder, more attentive and harmonious state.
- Mindfulness practice brings us to an inner witness that observes all that is occurring without being caught by it, a timeless Self that is pure awareness.

Jon Kabat Zinn is an American professor emeritus of medicine and the creator of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Centre for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. After years of practice of mindfulness and meditation with Buddhist teachers, Jon Kabat Zinn became one of the main figures within the academic world to spread the knowledge of Mindfulness in the western world. His research and investigations on the benefits of Mindfulness has produced evidence-based studies that corroborate the positive effects of the practice in few weeks, increasing the overall state of well-being of the practitioner [1].

Jon Kabat Zinn works mainly refer to the "I AM" domain developed in our theoretical framework, as a self-aware state of mind that is always present in the core of our experiences.

> *"Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes."*
> Carl Jung

What is Mindfulness?

"Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment, through a gentle and nurturing attention". Mindfulness also involves a kind acceptance, meaning that we pay attention to our thoughts and feelings without judging them - without believing that there is a "right" or "wrong" way of thinking or feeling in a certain moment. When we practice this art of being present, our thoughts tune into what we are sensing in the present moment rather than going back to the past or imagining the future.

Studies from the University of Harvard [2] show that 47% of our time we are lost in automatic and useless thinking, wasting a lot of our energy in thoughts that are out of our control and that drive us into uneasy feelings. They conclude that a wandering mind is not a happy mind and reflect the importance of practicing a way of managing our minds and cultivating a state of well-being.

Core aspects of Mindfulness.

1. A focused kind attention.
Our attention drives our minds and enables our capacity to be aware of who we are, what we are doing, how we are feeling and what we are thinking. Self-awareness is an essential step for creating well-being in our lives and promoting a high level of positive mental health. Developing the capacity to direct our attention in the present moment enables us to respond instead of reacting, gaining more freedom in our decisions, recovering our self-empowerment as we become more coherently, centred, based on our internal references rather than searching answers outside, in others.

In bringing our **attention** inside, we undertake a path of self-discovery, unfolding our talents, realizing our fears, our limitations, and our longings or desires. We give a moment each day to be fully with ourselves, gently sitting and breathing, perceiving the smells and sensing the warmth of the sun, embodying our walk in the street as we go to work. We meet ourselves and all the potential that is within.

2. Attention in our body and senses.

The door to access this present moment is our body, through our **five senses**: earing, smelling, tasting, touching, and seeing. Through our senses, we perceive the external and internal world, and from that received information, emotions and thoughts arise in us interpreting our reality.

The body is always in the present moment, here and now. The mind, on the other hand, spends 47% of the time travelling from past to future events, wandering in thoughts that are away from what is actually happening in this moment.

3. A pause for conscious breathing.

Making pauses throughout or day and breaking that uncontrolled automatic mind patter that runs in us, is a tool that allows us to come back to the present moment. The fastest way to direct the mind to the present moment is to stop, and give our full attention, just for a couple of minutes, to our **breathing**. Conscious breathing allows us to make this direct connection, grounding the wandering mind in our body that is always in the present moment. Mindfulness guides us to focus a kind attention to our breathing, bringing us back to the aliveness of being present in this moment.

A state of Mindfulness is a natural state of being when our mind is calm and relaxed. Nowadays, with the stressful lives we lead, our minds are running in an automatic mode. Often, we are not conscious of the taste of what we are eating, or the sound of the birds while we are walking in the street. Day after day, we can find ourselves increasingly living in this automatic mental mode, missing the present moment and disconnected from the contact and awareness of our body and our senses.

The Witness Self, the observer.

The practice of Mindfulness helps us to get in touch with a profound state of the mind that is observing all that appears without judgment. It's a Self that is witnessing [3] all that happens: thoughts that appear, emotions that arise and sensations perceived in our body and in our environment. An inner witness that observes all that is occurring, both inwardly and outwardly, without being caught by it, a timeless Self that is simple awareness.

Quoting Ken Wilber, "The Witness is that which is capable of observing the flow of what is - without interfering with it, commenting on it, or in any way manipulating it. The Witness simply observes the stream of events both inside and outside the mind-body in a creatively detached fashion, since, in fact, the Witness is not exclusively identified with either." In other words, when the individual realizes that his mind and his body can be perceived objectively, he spontaneously realizes that they cannot constitute a real subjective self. As Huang Po [4] put it, "Let me remind you, the perceived cannot perceive."

This realization leads to experiences of transcendence and interconnectedness that unite us with our spiritual dimension, as we are able to let go and see things from a different perspective, a place that is beyond the influence of time and space, beyond our own personal history, beyond our emotions and thoughts. By becoming aware of this inner witness and staying in contact with it, we access a profound state of the Mind from which we can embrace and respond to challenging situations in our lives, situations where uncertainty and uneasy emotional states appear.

> *"To understand the immeasurable,*
> *the mind must be extraordinarily quiet, still."*
> Jiddu Krishnamurti

This spiritual domain is also related to purpose in life and affects the social, cultural and natural environment too. Supporting young people to develop this domain is crucial for creating the conditions for a more inclusive and involved being.

This contact with our inner witness, that we call in our theoretical framework the "I AM" domain, will directly nurture and promote PMH as we become more aware of our feelings, thoughts and ways of relating to others. Being in contact with this "I AM" that is at the core of who we are, will nurture all the other domains from the inside.

Mindfulness and neuroscience

Neuroscience research done in the last decades shows the capacity of the brain to change its neurological connections, a capacity called neuroplasticity [5]. Our brain can create new

neurological paths that bring new learnings and change the configuration of the brain. This reflects the importance of daily practice, as it is through constant repetition that these changes occur in our brain connections. The daily practice of Mindfulness can change our brains, with new synaptic connections that are kinder, more attentive and harmonious. We can change, with time and with the awareness of our practice, the way we think, feel and act, as these three domains are closely interconnected.

> *"As the witnessing presence of Awareness, we stand in the background of experience; as the light of pure Knowing, we stand at its heart."*
> Rupert Spira

Mindfulness practice brings our mind into the present moment and supports the cultivation of emotions of gratitude, kindness, compassion and peace that activate different parts of our brains, and increase hormone levels of serotonin, dopamine that reinforce our immune system.

The awareness of thoughts, body sensations and emotions, harmonise our internal world bringing back a sense of unity that increase our Positive Mental Health. This dynamic and coherent relationship between our sensations, emotions and thoughts is essential to cultivate a sense of peace and harmony, and to nurture our health and well-being.
"What you practice grows stronger". Practice gratitude, compassion, kindness and peace.

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Chapter 12: Positive emotions
By Thomas Albers

Keywords

- RESOURCES -   - POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS -

- SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT -

In the field of psychology, the topic of emotions and their function to human existence has been studied widely. The function of `negative´ emotions has received considerable attention. More recently, thanks to the emerging field of positive psychology, a momentum is building around positive emotions and their function in relation to human thriving.

Negative emotions, such as anger, sadness, anxiety and guilt, evoke specific and adaptive responses within the individual to a ´threatening´ situation. The response can be a ´fight´ or ´flight´ reaction that triggers the person to ensure their emotional or physical safety and well-being. Typically, negative emotions narrow our attention and cognitive abilities and evoke heightened levels of physical arousal. Experiencing these emotions helped our ancestors survive and to respond quickly and adequately to life threatening situation. An accumulation of unhealthy stress can result in the same physiological response as experiencing these threats. An extended exposure to these threats can lead to unhealthy consequences in youngsters, their social environment and society at large. Adequate education to deal with negative emotions and unhealthy stress can prevent negative consequences of negative emotions in individuals.

Much less research has been carried out on the function of positive emotions compared to the amount of research for negative emotions. In contrast to negative emotions, positive emotions don´t evoke specific adaptive responses to the experienced emotion and there is no link with survival. Barbara Fredrickson, one of the pioneers of positive psychology, has written extensively about the ´broaden-and-build model´ of positive emotions [1,2]. Positive emotions (such as pride, joy, satisfaction, gratitude, love, serenity, compassion etc.) do much more than just make us feel good. In her model, Fredrickson explains that positive emotions don´t narrow our attention, cognition and repertoire of behaviour – as negative emotions do - but rather broaden them. Every positive emotion has its unique contribution to this ´broadening effect´. For example, experiencing joy will stimulate play and creativity. Curiosity will stimulate research, exploration and experiencing new things. Gratitude will foster social connection. In general, positive emotions promote social engagement.

Where negative emotions are of value for short term responses to (life) threatening situations, positive emotions build up long term resources. Through the broadening of attention, cognition and behaviour, young people build up resources that sustain the presence of

positive emotions (the ´build effect´). For example, when youngsters experience joy in playing football, they become more physically fit, understanding game dynamics, creativity and social connection just by playing the game. In the future, youngsters can tap into these resources that have been built up, to deal with difficult or challenging situations.

Research has shown that there is a relationship between positive emotions and health, physical functioning, severity of symptoms of pain, reduced susceptibility of diseases and a prolonged life expectancy. All these effects of positive emotions have been found across cultures around the world and they were also present when basic needs such as food, safety and shelter weren´t met. This means that the positive effects of positive emotions are universal in human beings. Promoting the presence of positive emotions will enact an upward spiral of positive emotions (as shown in figure 12.1), where both the broaden- and build-effect induce the experiencing of emotions which are more positive. The result of the broaden- and build-effect is an increased physical and mental wellbeing which in turn again stimulates experiencing more positive emotions.
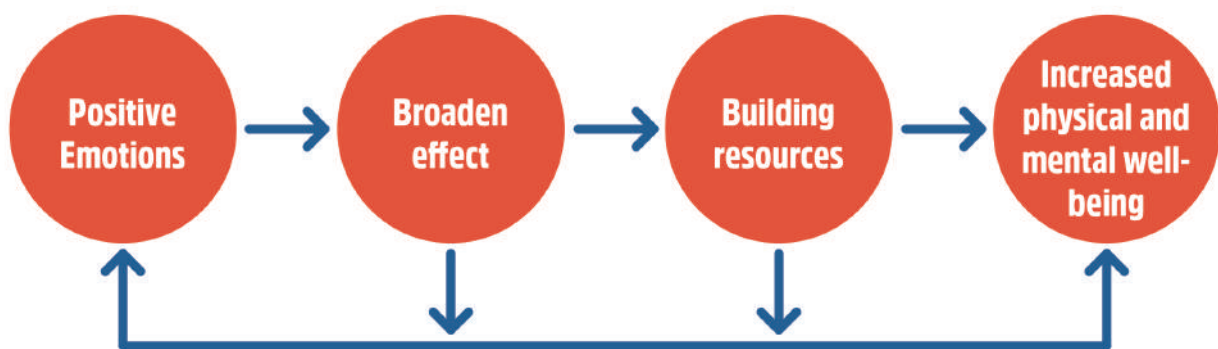

Figure 12.1: **Increasing the presence of positive emotions initiates an upward spiral. The broaden- and build-effect on their own can stimulate positive emotions, and hence initiate an upward spiral of positive emotions. [2]**

Positivity ratio

The experiencing of negative emotions is an undeniable part of human existence. Without negative emotions we would lose contact with reality and our ´true self´. Proper negative emotions are also part of a full and flourishing life. It´s important to distinguish proper from improper negative emotions. Proper emotions such as guilt or anger are very specific and can be resolved. They encourage certain recovering behaviour that can be healthy and productive. Improper negative emotions such as shame, disgust or contempt are very broad and unfounded. They are difficult to resolve and dominate an overall mood that enforces a downward spiral of emotions.

Fredrickson [3] has done research to find out what ratio of positive to negative emotions is most beneficial to a healthy and flourishing life. She found the ratio of 3:1 in people who were flourishing and thriving in life. Those who didn't report happiness or well-functioning in their lives were found to have a ratio of 2:1.

The good news is that positive emotions can be trained and through a diversity of exercises they can become more prevalent in people´s lives.

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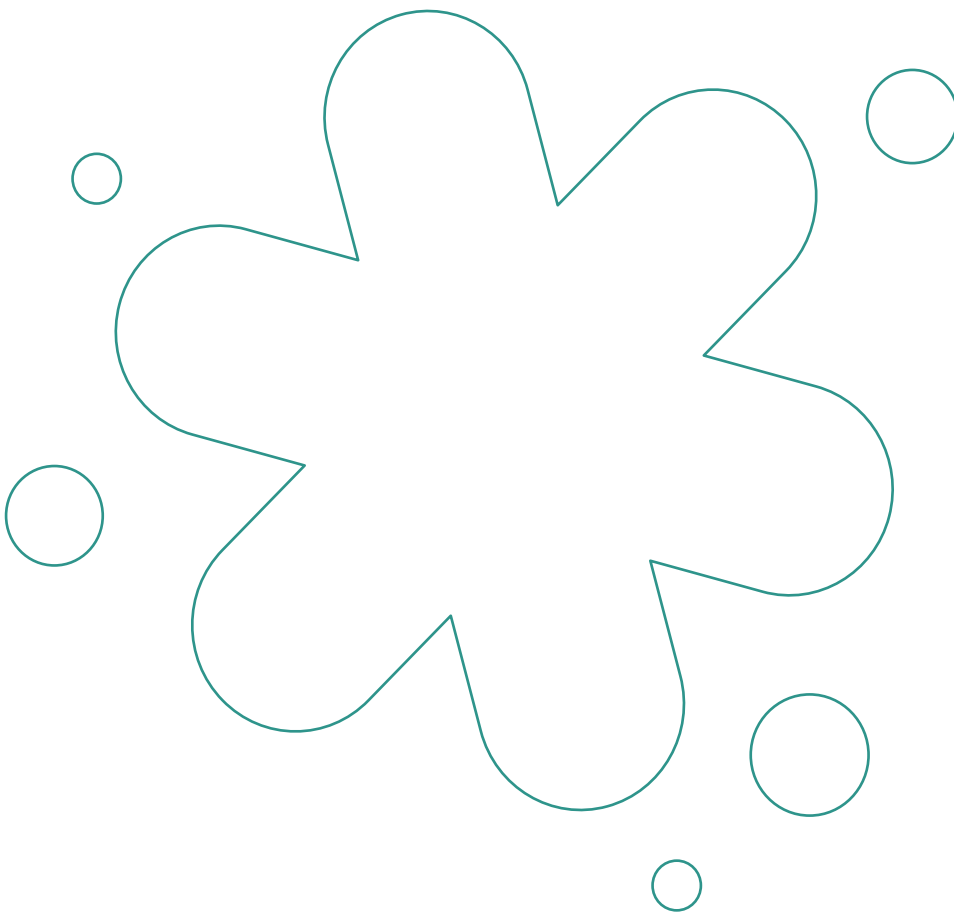
Chapter 13: Active Meditation Practice and the Wisdom of the Body for Positive Mental health

By Laura López Gámez

Keywords

- MEDITATION •
- BODY INTELLIGENCE •
- POWER OF MUSIC •
- BODY AWARENESS •
- AWARENESS •
- INTERCONNECTEDNESS •
- POLARITIES •

Key Messages

- **An active meditation is the practice of presence and silence while doing something that involves moving our bodies.**
- **By reconnecting with our bodies, we reconnect also with the wisdom and rhythms of nature.**
- **Music is a powerful tool for transcendence, for reconnecting with the sensation of being part of something bigger than we are.**

> *"We dance for laughter, we dance for tears, we dance for madness, we dance for fears, we dance for hopes, we dance for screams, we are the dancers, we create the dreams."*
> Albert Einstein

Meditation is the practice of bringing the mind into stillness and silence, training our attentional ability to focus on what's present, accepting reality as it is, without escaping from it through unconstructive and repetitive thoughts, and without giving value or judging what is. When speaking of meditation, we are referring to a practice that will take us into a "state of mind" that we call in our theoretical framework the "I AM" [1]. This awareness state is a natural state of presence that can be cultivated through a practice. It is a connection with an inner space of awareness and self-observation, with full attention to what happens instant by instant inside and outside of us.

Meditation is a formal practice of sitting down in silence in a meditation posture and with the attention focused on our breathing and body sensations. Mindfulness or a contemplation

practice is the attitude of taking this full attentional state of the mind to whatever we are doing in the moment; contemplating a sunset, listening to birdsong while walking in the park, or brushing our teeth in the morning.

An active meditation is the practice of presence and silence, while doing something that involves moving our bodies: dancing, painting or singing, amongst others.

What is Vital Readjustment?

Vital Readjustment is an active dance meditation that will help us tune in with our bodies and make the necessary readjustments in our vital energy to restore the connection with our nature and find a healthy place in existence, bringing back harmony and integration within our being, and in relation to others and our environment.

It is a free movement meditation done with a selection of sacred music pieces that guide us into an inner journey through our body and its emotional memories, awakening parts in us forgotten or repressed, bringing them back to the flow of our life.

In movement meditation, we perceive we are in a life of constant movement, just like a river where the water flows in direction to the sea. This flow of water is our vital energy. During our life experiences, many emotions that were not properly expressed, or were blocked and buried in our bodies, are like stones in the river that limit our flow in life. These buried emotions need to be expressed and liberated from our bodies, from our unconscious minds, and be brought back to the light of consciousness as available resources for life. In youngsters, this practice of being in contact with the movement of life fosters resilience, allowing them to be in touch with the nature of life, constantly adapting to new challenging situations.

Active meditations enable us to use this forgotten resource and recover an internal order that will allow a coherent personal and collective development, balancing different aspects within, unblocking capacities that were lost in past experiences, and restoring in a healthy way our relationship with ourselves, others and our extended environment.

Through these active meditations we realize life is energy in constant movement, we liberate from fixed ways of perceiving reality, letting go of old attachments. We find ways of creatively expressing emotions such as rage, fear, sadness, vulnerability, loneliness, anxiety, joy, and ecstasy. Through movement, we reconnect with the cycles of birth, death and renovation and to the spirit of life in this planet that hold us all together in One. We find in ourselves the wisdom in our bodies and our capacity to heal.

> *"There can be no transformation of darkness into light and of apathy into movement without emotion".*
> Carl Jung

Why it is important to work with our bodies?

We would like to explain some main concepts about the importance of becoming aware in our bodies.

Our brain is a unity that is apparently "separated" into different states of consciousness, or brain functions measured in different waves or frequencies. Recent research in neuroscience, shows that around 5% of this brain functioning is conscious and that 95% is unconscious [2]. Information about sensations, beliefs and experiences turns into automatic patterns that drive our emotions and affect our behaviour without us even realizing it. This unconscious information is stored in the body and is called by some authors like Joe Dispenza the *unconscious mind* [3].

An example that reflects this understanding is when we start learning to drive a car. At first, it's difficult to coordinate feet with hands and having to look everywhere. It's something that requires all our attention in the present moment and the coordination of all our senses. After years of driving, we do it in an automatic way where we don't have to think about it, and can even do other things while driving. The neurological connections for that specific learning have been established in our brains and now it's done automatically. The body knows what to do and how to do it and the conscious mind can get lost in other things. This is the way our brain works and learns.

Our unconsciousness drives us without us even noticing it. Something that happened in the past can still be here, even when we remove it from our consciousness: just because we are no

longer aware of something does not mean that something is no longer there. For example, if we had an experience in early childhood that was humiliating for us, and in that moment we weren't able to process it because of our young age and other circumstances, that experience, along with the emotions felt, and the accepted beliefs, are kept in our unconscious mind and will continue to act in our lives.

All rejected, uncomfortable and traumatic experiences that we were not able to feel, express and integrate as part of us, are kept locked in our unconscious, and our body is where we store them all. What our mind rejects is stored in our bodies until we become aware, until we are able to express and release it, and bring it back to consciousness as experience and wisdom.

We access our unconsciousness by getting in contact with our bodies and emotions, and by putting the brain in certain states that are close to meditation states, this means, our brain functioning in Alfa, Theta and Gamma waves. When we meditate and dance, we reach these states and access our unconscious minds, expressing and liberating tensions, embracing what was rejected, acknowledging false beliefs we accepted as truths, etc. By recovering all these parts of ourselves, we become more integrated beings, more human, and a lot of our potential and empowerment is recovered: we are more aware of who we are and have more resources to face life and existence.

By reconnecting with our bodies, we reconnect also with the wisdom and rhythms of nature [4]. Today, this (re)connection is urgent, a matter of life or death given our way of living. Everyday it becomes clearer and more evident that we are not respecting the planet and ecosystems we live in, and we are still oblivious to the consequences this will have. We are disconnected from our nature and we are harming the planet and ourselves in very unwise and unconscious ways. What we are doing at an outer level with the planet is just a reflection of how we are living at an inner level, within ourselves, and within our body that is our individual planet.

The need of Integration of Polarities for positive mental health and well-being

Life is about finding balance and **integrating polarities** as we live in a world of duality where we always find an opposite. If we reject or suppress one side in favour of the other, the accepted polarity will show its destructive face, leading us into some kind of insufficiency because one part of ourselves is missing. Therefore, we will find ourselves incapable of knowing a state of well-being until the integration is achieved.

The first wound of separation

We carry a wound since the moment we were born. We lose the sense of oneness with our mother and become a separate being in very vulnerable conditions. The fear of death touches our lives and instinctive mechanisms are activated to guarantee our survival. We have to cry to show we are hungry, to reflect our pain or to demand protection, etc. We no longer live in the womb, were everything was provided for - food, protection, temperature, etc. This world of duality and separation will serve our development during our whole life.

Life becomes a dance of conflicting polarities happening simultaneously - "I am kind, and not selfish", "this (that is happening) shouldn't be happening", etc, and we need integration to regain the lost sense of oneness. We live in this permanent dance of contradictions or inner conflict until we find the balancing integration of opposites and regain our inner reconnection with the unity we are, and find inner peace.

The Main polarities we'll work to foster positive mental health are:
• Security vs Maturity
• Pleasure vs Fear
• Masculine vs Feminine

In any conflict we face in life, we can look at which polarity within us needs integration. We probably identified ourselves more with one pole, not taking into account it's opposite, living in an unbalance that calls for the integration of the essential aspect left in the shadow of our consciousness. Bringing this aspect into the light of our awareness will restore the equilibrium and our integrity.

When we integrate polarities and accept the different aspects of ourselves without rejecting any, some core states naturally appear: gratitude, love, joy, and peace settle within us due to this complementary integration and acceptance of life. These states are beyond polarities, they are transcended states that develop within us as a result of accepting the wholeness of life and who we are.

Music, Emotions and Transcendence

> *"Music is the one incorporeal entrance into the higher world of knowledge which comprehends mankind, but which mankind cannot comprehend."*
> Ludwig van Beethoven

Masuru Emoto's [5] experiments with water
Emoto claimed that water was a "blueprint for our reality" and that emotional "energies" and "vibrations" could change the physical structure of water. Emoto's water crystal experiments

consisted on exposing water in glasses to different intentions using words, pictures, and music, and then freezing this water and examining the shapes of the resulting crystals with microscopic photography. Emoto claimed that water exposed to positive speech and thoughts would result in visually "pleasing" crystals being formed when that water was frozen, and that negative intentions would yield "ugly" frozen crystal formations.
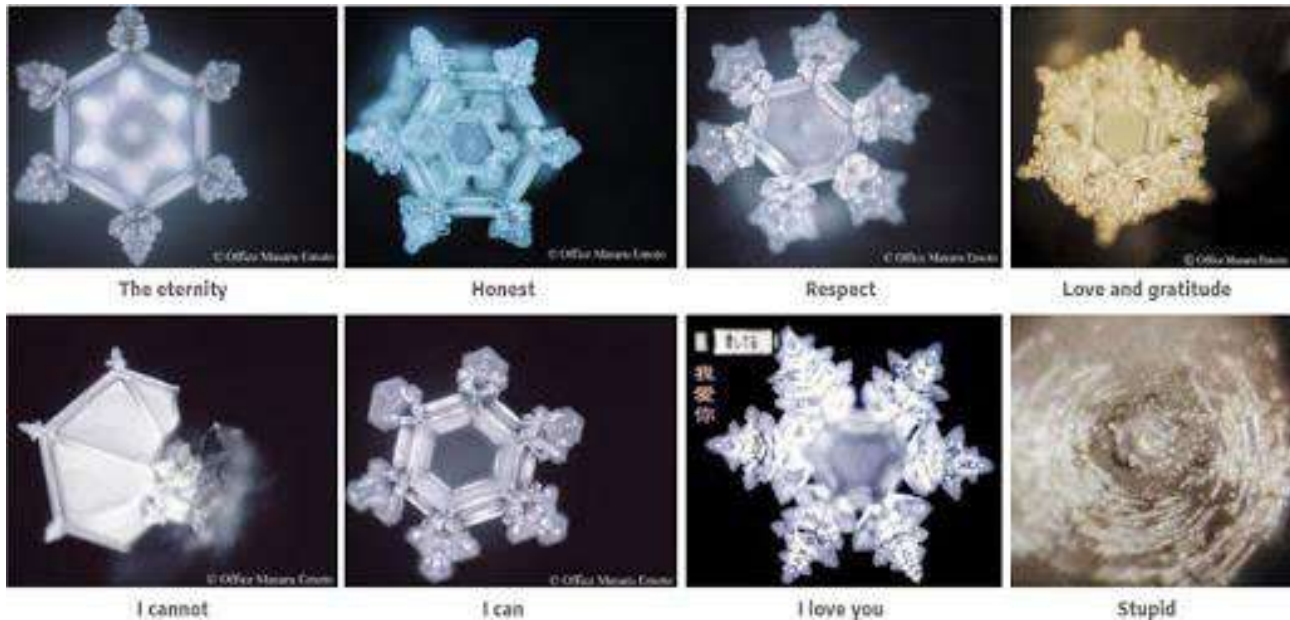

Image 13.1: **Masaru Emoto [5]**

These experiments show the impact sounds, words and music may have on our molecular structures and the importance of nurturing balanced states to bring well-being and beauty into our inner world using our voice, the intention of our words and the harmony of music.

In this sense, certain sacred music pieces are very powerful means of exploring, getting in touch with and transforming ourselves. Music supports body movement and activates memories and emotions that are hidden within us, easing its expression and possible integration in the moment they emerge while we are moving beyond our rational minds.

Music is a powerful tool for transcendence [6], for reconnecting with this sensation of being part of something bigger, losing the sense of separation for a moment and finding connection with what is around us. Music directly affects the functioning of our brains changing our wave frequencies, and taking us into certain states of consciousness.

Beyond the duality of the mind, we sense into elevated and natural states of presence, gratitude, kindness, love, joy and peace that reflect the spiritual layer of who we are. In these states, separation is dissolved and transcendence and meaning emerges in our individuality, realizing we are part of all that is around us, in communion with humanity, our planet and all the beings living in it.

Music creates an atmosphere that allows to sense into our sensibility, opening up states of gratitude, kindness, compassion and peace, finding unity within ourselves and with others, essential aspects that nurture and promote positive mental health in our lives.

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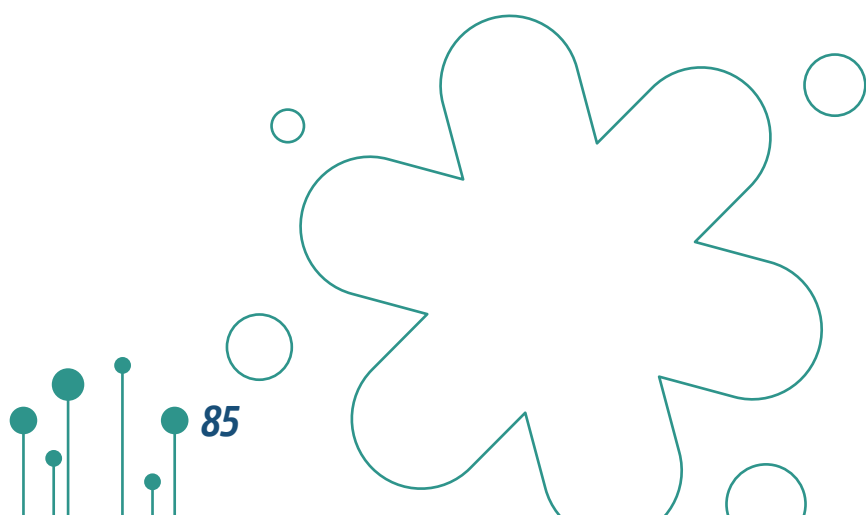
# Chapter 14: Positive relationships and non-violent communication

By Thomas Albers

Keywords

• SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT • • POSITIVE RELATIONS • • COMPASSION •

• NON-VIOLENT COMMUNICATION • • INTERCONNECTEDNESS •

• OBSERVING SELF •

Our emotional wellbeing is only possible in harmony with other people. At work, in society, in families, at schools, in communities, it's all about relationships. As humans we aren't individual separate entities, instead we are fundamentally connected to our fellow human beings, other living beings on the planet and to the natural world. In this article you can read about the importance of having positive relationships and how you can develop them.

The modern day Buddhist teacher Thich Naht Hahn [1] coined the term 'interbeing' for our essential interconnectedness with our fellow living beings and the universe. He also published a book with 14 precepts about the maintenance of proper interbeing of humans in the web of life. In many other philosophies and religious traditions, maintaining proper and positive relationships with our fellow beings is needed for personal growth and flourishing as a human being and as a society.
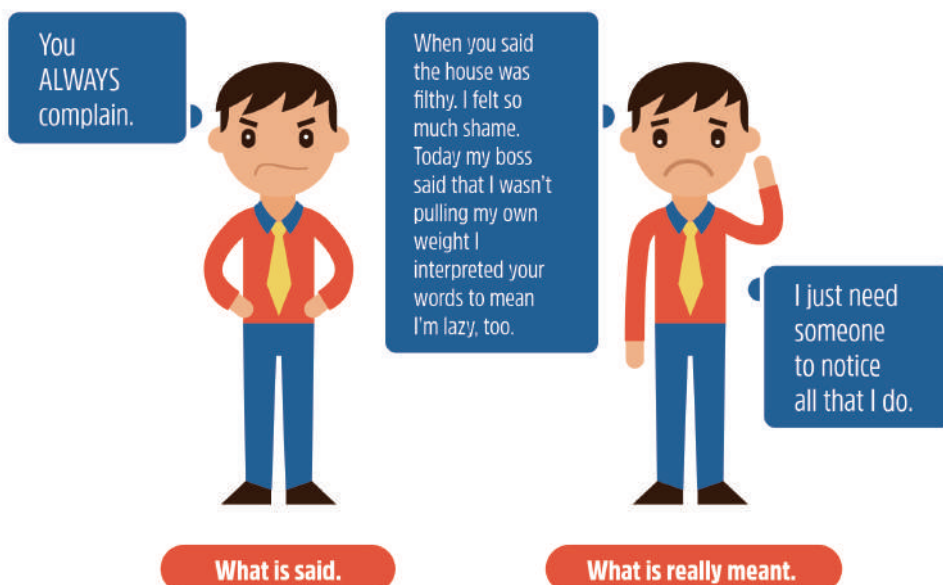
In psychology not so much is known about positive relationships. More is known about conflicts, the malfunctioning of relationships and how to deal with that. There are a few theories about which characteristics positive relations have [2,3]. In these theories, positive relations are defined as flourishing relationships in which the partners can develop themselves; there are strong feelings of connection, plenty more positive experiences than negative and there is space for (emotional and physical) safety and dependency. Emotional intimacy, affection, commitment, empathy, sexuality and pleasure are important characteristics of these positive relations. How we share and respond to both positive and negative experiences and emotions in our relationships is very important. Sharing and building on positive experiences, for example, has very positive effects on the quality of the relationship. Negative experiences and emotions are also a realistic component of relationships. When these are present in relationships, it is important that we respond to them in an active and constructive way [4].

Non-violent communication

Figure 14.1: **The four part Non-Violent Communication Process [5].**

There are several methods and techniques through which you can promote positive emotions in youth work. One of the most useful and concrete theory and method is Non Violent Communication (NVC) or sometimes called Compassionate Communication. Central to NVC [5] is the development of the capacity to communicate with others in a compassionate way. It stimulates and deepens active and constructive responding and listening through constantly listening to the underlying needs in the communication of others, even when they express themselves negatively or aggressively. According to Rosenberg [5], when one is capable to hear the needs of someone else, discuss them and take them into account without them being at the expense of his or her own needs, this person is actually enriching the live of someone else.

The method of NVC basically consists of communication in four steps (see figure below): observation of facts without judgement, recognising and expressing feelings and taking responsibility for your own feelings by connecting it to a need and making concrete requests for that which enriches your life. Each step has its own characteristics and brings about a development on an emotional and psychological level. Within NVC, responding with compassion to the expressions of others and practising forgiveness are essential elements in the building of positive relations.

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Chapter 15: Sleep and Positive Mental Health of Young People
By Bára Rodi

Keywords

• HEALTHY LIFESTYLE •   • SELF CARE •   • GOOD SLEEP HABITS •

• SLEEP •   • DAILY RHYTHM •   • SLEEP-WAKE CYCLE •

Key Messages

- **Young people nowadays are the most vulnerable group subjected to sleep deprivation in society. The 2 main factors are: natural shift in their circadian rhythm and excessive exposure to electronic devices.**
- **Lack of sleep affects many areas in young people's life: from their academic performance to mental health problems.**
- **As youth workers, we can educate ourselves on good sleep habits and sleep hygiene and support youngsters in recognizing the importance of sleep for their mental and overall health.**

Intro

Sleep and mental health are closely connected. Sleep deprivation affects our psychological state and mental health. Nowadays, both adults and teens in industrialized nations are becoming sleep deprived, but in young people the problem is even more urgent [1].

This article looks at the specific sleep needs and patterns in young people (teenagers and adolescents), and how we as youth workers can support better sleep, and thus better mental health of young people.

Although lifestyle factors (incl. sleep, healthy eating, exercise etc.) are not covered in detail in our framework for promoting positive mental health, these are also important factors in determining positive mental health for young people. The determinants of the mental health model in the Framework for promoting positive mental health [2] reproduced below illustrate how mental health is determined by individual factors, including lifestyle factors, along with social and environmental factors. This paper discusses the importance of sleep for youth mental health and strategies to improve sleeping habits and sleep quality among young people.

Figure 15.1: **Individual, community and societal determinats of mental health for young peole (adopted from Nagaoka et al, 2015)**

Specifics of sleep rhythms in young people

Youngsters' tendency to go to sleep late - very much disliked by the majority of parents - is now scientifically proven to have a biological cause. By the early 1990s, Mary Carskadon, PhD, at Stanford, established what has become a widely recognized phenomenon: that teens experience a so-called sleep-phase delay. Their circadian rhythm - their internal biological clock - shifts to a later time, making it more difficult for them to fall asleep before 11 p.m. [3]

This shift in the daily rhythm makes it difficult for young people to reach the recommended 8-10 hours of sleep every night (which is on average 2 hours more than sleep needs for adults). The 2015 U.S. national poll shows that more than 87 percent of high school students get far less than the recommended 8-10 hours, the average being only 6,5 to 7 hours of sleep. [4]

While some students get to bed by 10:30, the majority of students go to sleep around midnight because of extracurriculars and homework. All studies and polls done about students and their sleep habits show how this lack of sleep greatly contributes to the loss of a student's mental, physical, and emotional day to day rituals.

Main facts about teen sleep - from the National Sleep Foundation [5]

Biological sleep patterns shift toward later times for both sleeping and waking during adolescence - meaning it is natural to not be able to fall asleep before 11:00 pm.

- Teens need about 8 to 10 hours of sleep each night to function best. Most teens do not get enough sleep - one study found that only 15% students reported sleeping 8 1/2 hours on school nights.
- Teens tend to have irregular sleep patterns across the week - they typically stay up late and sleep in late on the weekends, which can affect their biological clocks and disrupt the quality of their sleep.
- Many teens suffer from treatable sleep disorders, such as narcolepsy, insomnia, restless legs syndrome or sleep apnea.

The visual representation of the shift from childhood typical circadian rhythm to adolescent typical circadian rhythm is below:
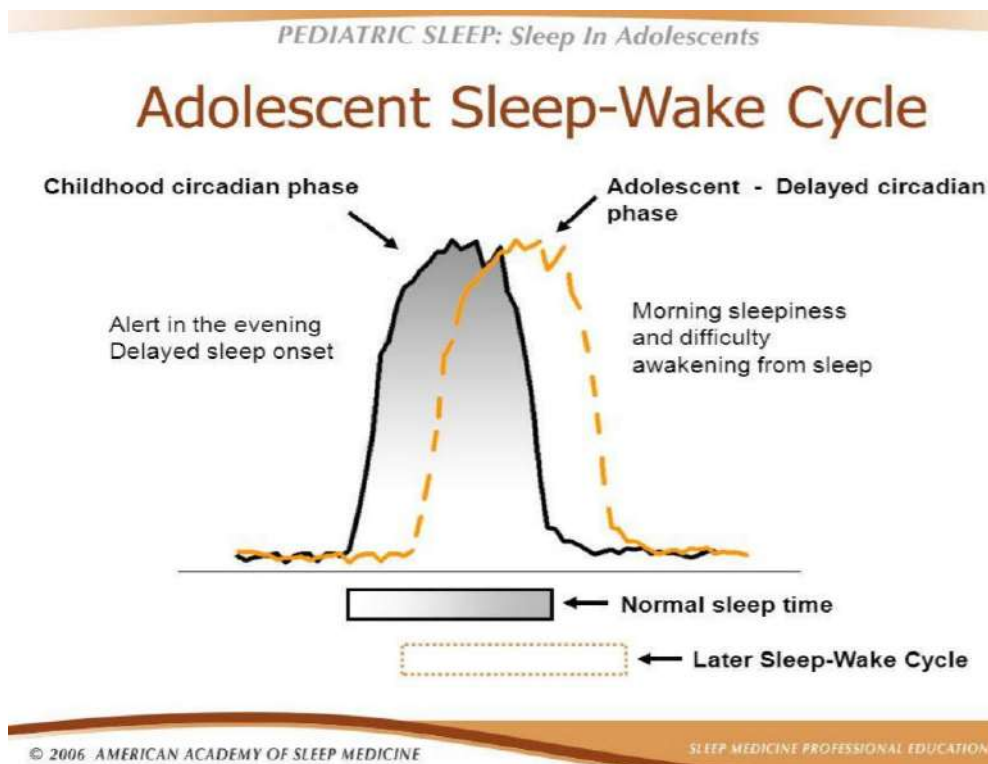

Figure 15.2: **The Adolescent Sleep-Wake Cycle © 2006 American Academy of Sleep Medicin.**

Not getting enough sleep causes **mood disorders** (irritability, moodiness, lower frustration tolerance), **behavioral problems** (teens who are not getting enough sleep are more prone to risk-taking behaviors such as drinking alcohol and driving recklessly), **poor academic performance** (including multiple school absences, attention problems, memory problems, bad decision-making and **poor athletic performance**.

How can lack of sleep/ poor quality of sleep impact the mental health of young people?

NSF's 2006 *Sleep in America* poll found that many adolescents exhibit symptoms of a depressive mood on a frequent if not daily basis, and these teens are more likely to have sleep problems. In fact, 73% of those adolescents who report feeling unhappy, sad, or depressed also report not getting enough sleep at night and being excessively sleepy during the day. [6]

Research has shown that sleep problems among adolescents are a major risk factor for suicidal thoughts and death by suicide, which ranks as the third-leading cause of fatalities among 15- to 24-year-olds. And this link between sleep and suicidal thoughts remains strong, independent of whether the teen is depressed or has drug and alcohol issues, according to some studies. [7]

Sleep helps to regulate emotions, and its deprivation contributes to many mood disorders, such as anxiety, depression and bipolar disorder. For youngsters who are prone to these disorders, better sleep can help to prevent their onset/worsening. Sleep deprivation lowers inhibitions among both adults and teens. Teens are naturally prone to impulsive behavior already - their frontal lobe of the brain, which helps restrain impulsivity, isn't fully developed yet. This could lead to aggressive behaviors.

What are the main causes of poor sleep quality for young people?

There are multiple factors, of course, but the 2 prevailing ones are:
1. *Extensive use of electronic devices before bedtime*
2. *School starting too early for the delayed sleep phase of teenagers/ adolescents*

All over the world, adolescents spend increasingly more time on electronic devices. 92% of U.S. teens have smartphones, and 24% report being online "constantly," according to a 2015 report by the Pew Research Center. [8]

Young people often have multiple electronic devices they use simultaneously, many of them at night. 72 percent bring cellphones into their bedrooms and use them when they are trying to go to sleep, and 28 percent leave their phones on while sleeping. [9] Many young people also use electronic music devices, laptops or play video games in the hour before they go to sleep. The blue light from the monitors further worsens the already delayed sleep-phase (blue lights means "it is daylight" - this message is sent via the retina to hypothalamus, the portion of the brain that controls the body's circadian clock).

This permanent connection to technological devices requires a non-stop alertness and responsiveness that is not respecting human's natural rhythms. Here, we want to an invitation to youth workers and adults in general to create spaces where it is possible to pause and be disconnected from technology in order to be more connected with oneself, others and the environment (read more in our other articles about the role of nature for positive mental health). [10]

School starting time and its effect on young people's sleep

Around the time of puberty, adolescents experience a delay in their biological clock which determines when teens feel most awake and when they feel sleepy. This is partly driven by a shift in the release of the hormone melatonin. This means teenagers are biologically programmed to stay awake later and sleep in later. For most teens, if they are required to get to class by 7:30 or 8am, they simply cannot get the amount of sleep that their developing brains and bodies need to function optimally.

Studies [11] have shown that teens with insufficient sleep show impairments in learning and memory, and many will even show behavioral signs that mimic attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Sleep deprivation also contributes to many of the mental health problems, such as depression, substance use and suicide.

The scientific evidence supporting later school start times for adolescents is clear - teens in school districts with later start times get more sleep. Their bedtimes stay the same, but their wake-up times get extended, resulting in more sleep. Teens are more likely to show up for school, and they do better academically.

Examples of strategies to support young people to sleep better

The Children's Sleep Charity works throughout England and Wales [12], providing services to ensure children and young people get a good night's sleep that will promote their emotional, physical and mental well-being. In 2016, they worked together with schools across Yorkshire and the Humber to consult with young people and develop effective methods of supporting them to improve their sleep patterns.

What were the methods and important aspects?

- **Peer support:** Peer support sessions enabled pupils to understand about sleep in more depth, recognizing the importance of sleep for their physical, mental and emotional well-being. Information was also given around strategies that could help them to get a better night's sleep. One 14-year-old who experienced peer support said "It was really helpful to meet with others who have sleep issues. I always thought it was just me that was struggling".
- Specific **one to one advice from a sleep practitioner**
- **Workshops and discussions:** Educating pupils about the importance of sleep - most were unaware about how sleep affects appearance, weight, memory and ability to meet their full potential.
- **Resource material:** Resources have been developed in order to deliver sleep information to staff in schools, as well as parents and young people.
- **Parental engagement:** A common scenario that emerged was that youngsters were often told by their parents to go to bed at 10pm. They clearly weren't able to fall asleep at this time, which was raising anxiety levels. Explaining to both parents and young people about the circadian rhythm and sleep cycles helped them to identify why they couldn't fall asleep and gradually move their body clocks to a more appropriate sleep time.

Useful advice for improving sleep in young people
Adapted from CHOC Children's medical facility handout [12]

Maintain a regular sleep schedule. Ideally we should all (including young people) be going to sleep and getting up around the same time every day, including non-school nights/days. Try to keep the difference in sleep and wake times within one hour. Increasing that difference to more than an hour could be compared to travelling to a different time zone.

Be consistent on weekends. Although teens can stay up a little longer, they should not sleep in to catch up on sleep they missed during the week. It will make it harder to get back on track for their regular schedule. (There is even a phenomena called "Sunday insomnia"). [13]

Create a sleep-friendly physical environment. The bedroom should be comfortable, cool, quiet, and dark. A cool environment of 16-18°C is thought to be an ideal temperature for a bedroom. Temperatures over 24°C can disturb sleep.

The bed should only be used for sleeping. Try not to do homework, read a book, or listen to music in bed.

Keep a consistent bedtime routine. Try to "wind down" by doing relaxing activities such as reading or listening to calm music. Do not use this time to watch television, cram in more studying, use the computer/phone, or exercise.

Incorporate exercise into your daily routine. It may help you fall asleep more easily and sleep more deeply. Ideally have your exercise in the morning/early afternoon. It takes up to 4-5 hours after fitness training for your body to cool down.

Take a break and go outside for some time every day, especially in the morning. Getting sun exposure helps your body keep its internal clock on track.

Eat meals regularly, and avoid going to bed on an empty stomach. However, do not eat a full meal an hour before bed, and try to opt for a light snack instead.

Relax and slow down before bedtime. Many young people also show signs of anxiety and high stress levels. Two methods that have been proven to be most successful for fighting insomnia, are:
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Autogenic training

but any method that will help to slow down breathing and slow down the stream of thoughts would do a good service.

Relation to theoretical framework

In the "Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Youth Sector" [2], we find the following 6 domains of well-being: emotional, physical, intellectual, social, spiritual and environmental. In the text above we cited studies scientifically proving the importance of sleep mainly in the first 4 domains:
1. Emotional: sleep deprived youngsters have shown more signs of depression and other psychological issues than their well sleeping counterparts; higher suicidal rate and more compulsive behavior.
2. Physical, among others:
   - Sleep deprivation causes the release of insulin, which leads to increased fat storage and a higher risk of type 2 diabetes.
   - Insufficient sleep can affect hormone production, including growth hormones and testosterone in men.
   - Lack of sleep affects body weight, through hormones leptin and ghrelin, controlling feelings of hunger and satiety, or fullness.
   - Not sleeping enough weakens immunity through lower cytokine production.
3. Intellectual: poor sleep is associated with lack of motivation, worse school and work results.
4. Social: relationships may suffer due to increased moodiness, irritability, lack of motivation and others. Sleep deprived persons are less likely to engage in social activities.

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[3]   www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK222804/

[4]   www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/mm6703a1.htm

[5]   https://www.sleepfoundation.org/

[6]   https://stanmed.stanford.edu/2015fall/go-to-bed.html

[7]   www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6218408/

[8]   www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/

[9]   See also chapter 3 of this publication: Salomons, O. - Why connecting with nature stimulates youth wellbeing

[10]   www.commonsensemedia.org/research/The-New-Normal-Parents-Teens-and-Devices-Around-the-World

[11]   www.thechildrenssleepcharity.org.uk

[12]   www.choc.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Sleep-Hygiene-Teen-Handout.pdf

[13]   www.verywellhealth.com/tips-to-cure-sunday-night-insomnia-4083167

Additional Resources:

- www.rand.org/blog/2020/03/teens-are-sleep-deprived-later-school-start-times.html
- www.choc.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Sleep-Hygiene-Teen-Handout.pdf
- https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/307334#effects
- Vicki Dawson: Supporting young people with sleep issues to meet their full potential:
- http://sheu.org.uk/sheux/EH/eh344finalvd.pdf
- Credits pictures: https://unsplash.com/s/photos/sleep

BUILDING BLOCK 4
BUILDING REFLECTIVE SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

AIM: TRANSFORMING

Reflective practice is the process of making meaning from experience, a practice that transforms insights into practical strategies for personal growth. Supporting young people in developing a reflective attitude is of vital importance for deepening their awareness about themselves, others and the context they are in. Awareness is a powerful tool to deal with the changes and challenges of everyday life.

Chapter 16: Reflection and reflective practices for promoting positive mental health

By Angelica Paci

Keywords

• LEARNING CYCLE •   • EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING •   • REFLECTION •

• AWARENESS •   • IDENTITY •

Key Messages

- Positive mental health starts with knowing oneself and being aware of one's abilities. Life in this way can be lived in flow and to its fullest, as young people can contribute to their communities with what life is calling them to do. What can support young people in knowing thyself and making meaning from experience is to practice reflection. Being facilitated through reflection and being invited to reflective practices enhances young people's ability to be more aware of their strengths, pitfalls and limits.

- Through reflection young people also learn to identify, name and process their emotions, making it easier to find ways to regulate them. This helps them in coping with the "normal stress of life" and building resilience. Social and emotional learning for wellbeing doesn't happen by chance, it's a structured process that youth workers facilitate in order for it to be effective.

- Becoming more aware of who one is plays an essential role in young people's life, as it allows them to make more informed decisions for contributing accordingly to the community they are living in. For young people to become more aware of how they feel, think and relate to others through reflection, allows them to be more inner ready to face the challenges of life and grow in kindness and compassion either towards themselves, the others or the environment.

Reflection as a key element for processing the experience

Every day, young people face life's experiences, some pleasant and some not so. These experiences can be opportunities for personal development and learning when young people are equipped with the competences to process them in a fruitful and positive way. However, even though experiences are the basis of one's learning, they are not necessarily always constructive or educative. According to Dewey, there are both educative and "mis-educative"

experiences. A mis-educative experience is one that "arrests or distorts growth" and leads to "routine action," thus "narrowing the field of further experience," and limiting the "meaning-horizon" [1]. Routine actions suggest that one acts without an awareness of the effect of one's actions on the environment, including others and self. Routine actions turn into habits that dominate us, rather than us having control over them. We thus become unaware of the impact the environment might have on us, and the cycle of growth that results from this two-way interaction is halted.

What can support young people to transform an experience into grounded awareness? How can an experience be processed in a way that allows learning more about themselves, others and the context they interrelate in? If we look at Kolb's learning cycle [2] (figure 16.1), what turns experience into experiential learning is the reflection process, as it gives time to look at what one sees, feels and thinks after the event has happened. Reflection is an introspective act in which the learner, individually or in a group setting, integrates the new experience with previous ones, making sense of what happened.
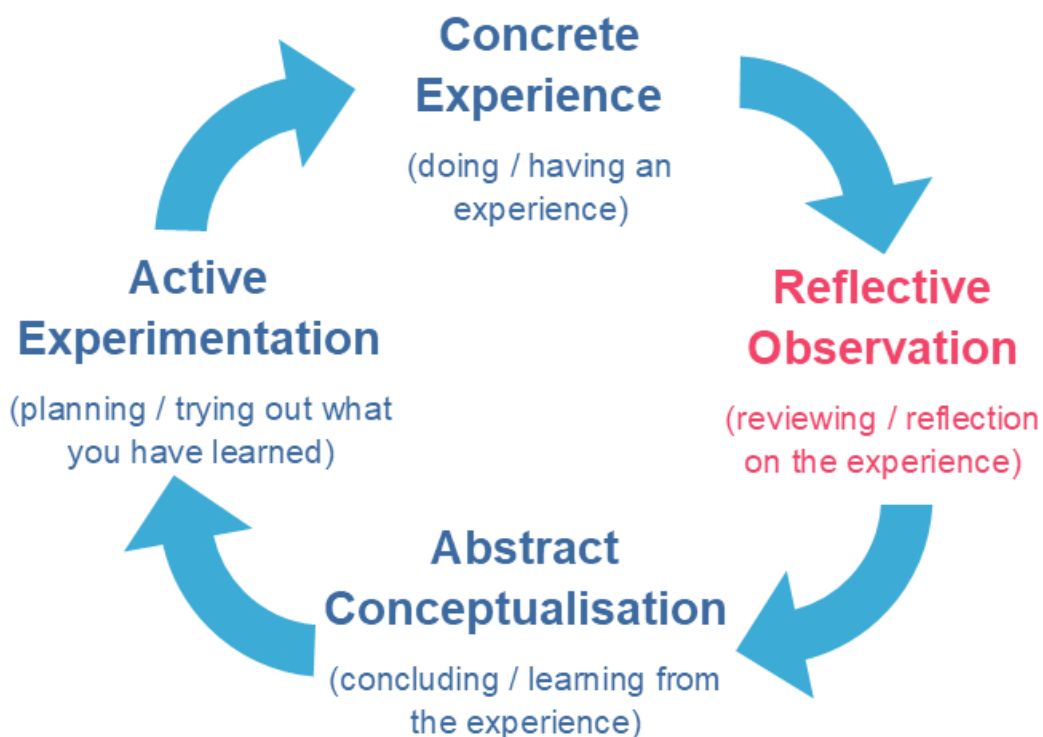

Figure 16.1: **Kolb's learning cycle [3]**

Supporting young people in developing a reflective attitude, nurturing what Howard Gardner defined as intra and interpersonal intelligences [4], is, therefore, of vital importance for deepening their awareness about themselves, others and the context they are in. Awareness is a powerful tool to deal with the changes and challenges of everyday life. J. Dewey stated that the main function of reflection is to make meaning and to formulate "relationships and continuities" [5] with the elements of an experience - the links between the experience and prior experiences, between the experience and one's knowledge, and between that knowledge and the knowledge of other individuals.

Most of the time, many of our thoughts and feelings go unobserved, leading to repetitive, negative patterns in our lives.

Developing the ability to slow down, observe and reflect is crucial for gaining understanding, transforming actions and finding forward momentum in life and relationships.

The more practiced and capable one is at reflecting on thoughts, feelings, sensations and interactions, the better one is at transforming actions and improving relationships. Reflective practice is empowering and, over time, allows one to become skillful in making informed judgements and more accurate decisions. [6] We are a learning species and our survival depends on our ability to adapt, not only in the reactive sense of fitting into the physical and social worlds, but also in the proactive sense of creating and shaping those worlds.

Reflection as a holistic process

Reflection is very often equated to the evaluation of a certain situation, experience, assignment or process and is used in educational contexts as a means to promote learning. This is, of course, very useful, as it gives the opportunity to look at facts and analyse them in order to check what is working and what is needed, with the aim of improving performance or knowledge. In this case, the focus is mostly on integrating previous knowledge and experiences into new ones, with the purpose of acquiring new skills. This way of looking at reflection gives only a partial idea of the enormous potential embedded in this process, including its applicability. Reflection is, in fact, much more than just a logical cause-and-effect process, as it is subjective and is concerned with feelings and beliefs.

Reflection is a resource that can be used in any life context and situation, such as family, group of friends/peers, work, etc. It allows young people to get in touch with themselves and reveal complex thoughts and attitudes. Reflection can include evaluation as part of the process, but goes much deeper, taking different perspectives into account and looking at underlying reasons. Reflection is intended to explore subtle inner and relational processes, with the purpose of revealing causes and personal triggers. When reflection is promoted as a regular practice, either during a planned non-formal activity or in informal contexts, it supports young people facing more complex or uncertain events and behaviours to "dig deeper" and uncover explanations, and possibly solutions, that are not obvious. Dewey claims that the process of reflection moves the learner from a disturbing state of perplexity or "disequilibrium" to a harmonious state of settledness or "equilibrium" [5]. Perplexity is generated when the meaning of the experience has not been fully recognised nor assessed yet. It is a yearning for balance that, in turn, drives the learner to do something to resolve it, thus starting the process of inquiry or reflection.
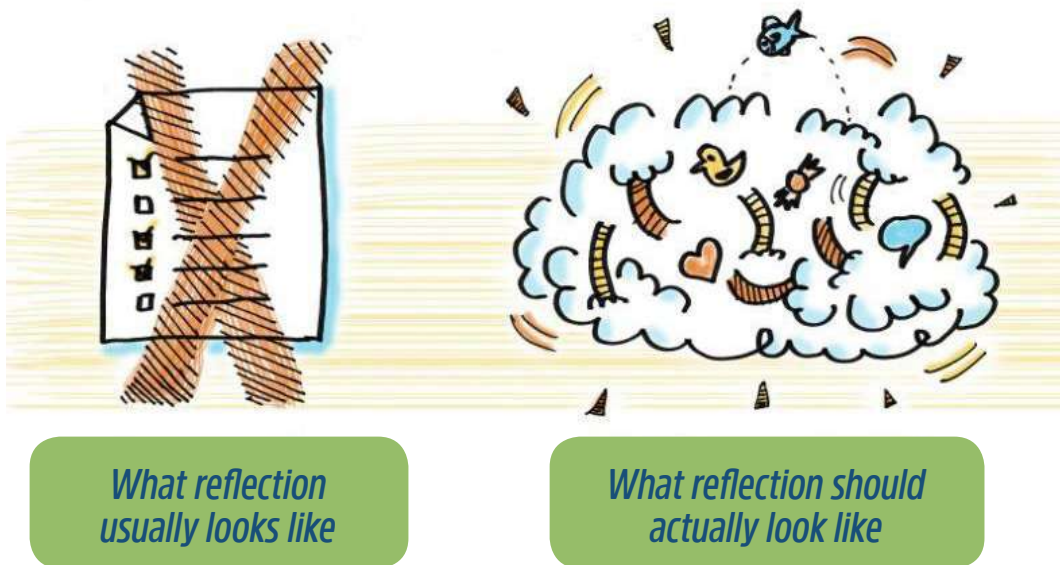
*What reflection
usually looks like*

*What reflection should
actually look like*

Figure 16.2: **What does reflection looks like? [7]**

Reflection is therefore no longer conceived as a mere evaluation or logic process of cause-and-effect, but rather as a holistic process of discovery and deep insight. It is a process in which individuals connect body and mind to become more aware of who they are, what they feel, what they think and how they relate to others and the context they are in. "Therefore, reflection is usually indicated by some kind of emotional intensity in which learners demonstrate the connection between themselves and that-which-is-at-stake (the actual topic of reflection). This intensity can sometimes be expressed only in their non-verbal body language. As thinking involves more logic and rationality, this emotional intensity is usually missing." [8]

Facilitating reflection is an empowering proces

Facilitating reflection is one of the key competences in youth work and one of the most empowering processes that young people can experience. It's about questioning what is at stake by asking young people when and where things happened, who was there, what did people do, what the outcome of the situation was and what they wanted to happen. It continues with exploring their feelings before, during and after the experience, so that they become aware of what made them feel good (perhaps making them want to feel the same way in other experiences) and what made them feel bad (perhaps making them not wanting to feel the same way in other experiences). Looking into bodily sensations and emotions helps young people to identify underlying needs and wishes, and meeting those needs and wishes helps them create fulfilment. In fact, feelings are spontaneous and emotional responses to what is being experienced and provide essential information about what is actually going on. A warm feeling on the face might mean one is embarrassed, butterflies in the tummy can mean one is nervous or excited and clenched teeth might signify one is angry. Being aware of physical signals allows young people to better identify how they are feeling, and by engaging with how they are feeling, to gain an insight into what they like, what makes them feel anxious, uncomfortable or angry, what makes them feel satisfied or joyful.
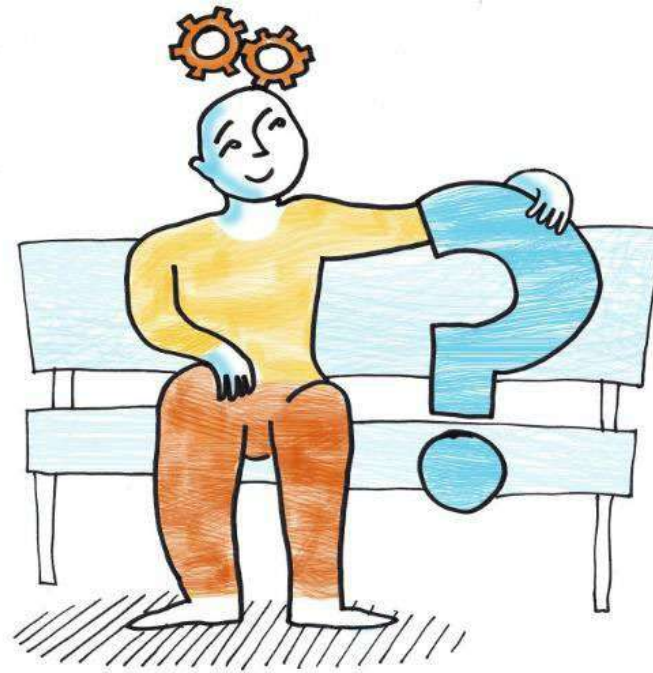
Figure 16.3: **Is there a right question? [7]**

As natural progression of those insights, young people can investigate what made things go well and what didn't in terms of behaviour and attitudes, in order to draw the "lesson" the experience provides, or to better to integrate the learning for themselves. "In action" reflection questions would be "what didn't I do that I could have done?" and "what could I do that I haven't done yet?". Schön was the first to talk about reflection-in-action, claiming that in this process "the practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation" [9].

All this new learning about themselves, others and their context allows young people to think of possible little steps they can take in order for change to happen. Scientific research [10] suggests that children who are better at reflection are also more successful in all competences in the cognitive domain. Questioning is indeed an important tool to direct the reflective attention of young people, working like a torch in the night, shedding light over what is not processed at a conscious level. Is there a correct sequence or a right question to ask? Questions are shaped in relation to what is happening in the here and now, taking into account the learning context as well as the purpose of the learning experience itself.

To build a "reflective space" [11], questioning should be driven by a genuine interest about the learner(s), with an attitude of non-judgmental curiosity with regards to how people see, think and feel about what is at stake. Answers can convey important information for a new question, creating a process of reflection that can lead people to start a dialog with their internal and external 'companions' by allowing some distance from their initial thoughts and feelings. In doing so, people will naturally start building the space to reflect within (both individually and collectively), where a co-created dialogue can happen and where silence and "not knowing" are

valued. According to Kessels, this not-knowing helps learners to progressively unfold a good quality dialogue with themselves, constructing 'poetic arguments' that are quite different from 'logical reasons'. [12]

Reflection is, in fact, a process where part of the information is elaborated unconsciously. Tom Luken claims that "the conscious works serial whereas the unconscious brain works with parallel processes. The conscious brain should necessarily limit itself to a few aspects, whereby there is always a certain arbitrariness. [...] Conscious thinking is inclined to use logic, also for questions, paradoxes and dilemmas that can't be answered with logical thinking. One of the consequences is that in order to get to a solution, inconsistent information gets 'pushed away', whereby the eventual decision is based on a distorted representation (of reality)" [13].

Reflection is more effective when it's conceived as part of a learner-centred approach, as what is being elaborated by the individual is retained in a more authentic and personalized way. The learning comes out of the learners' frames-of-reference, which determine how they perceive themselves, others and/or the world(s) they live in. This allows young people to take ownership of content, to determine what is useful or relevant to them and build the cognitive connections to allow the learning to be retained.

Reflective practices

Reflective practice is the process of making meaning from experience and transforms insights into practical strategies for personal growth. It implies listening, observing and paying attention to oneself, others and context, noticing patterns and facing one's assumptions, with the purpose of changing the way one looks at things. Reflective practice is a way of recognising and expressing what one is learning in the present moment.
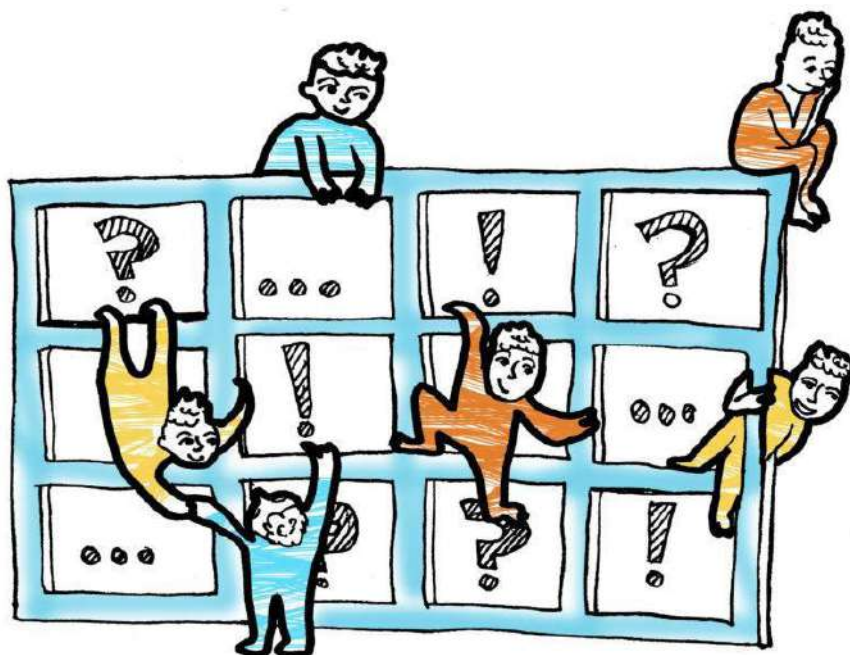

Figure 16.4: **Is there a right question? [7]**

It needs to be captured and represented in different forms (verbal, written, pictorial, sculptural, etc), as learning from experience comes from the process of representing the reflection itself. Reflective practices are an essential part of developing a healthy habit of reflecting on what happens either at personal or community levels. At a deeper stage, they strongly contribute to the development of young people's capacity to identify and regulate emotions, respond to challenges, cope with stress, establish healthy relationships, make timely decisions and build new skills. Young people, as well as adults supporting them, can benefit from making use of reflective practices, as in doing so they increase their self awareness, nurture their emotional intelligence and their capacity for emotional regulation. Reflective practices contribute to the development of young peoples' leadership, allowing them to:

- build the capacity of making decisions that show a systemic awareness;
- become more able to motivate themselves, to influence others and to be an inspiration for their peers;
- develop the capacity to generate innovation through open questioning and attending to the answers with open mindedness;
- become able to be compassionate to self and others;
- inspire trust through demonstrating trustworthiness.

Reflection as a way to increase awareness

"Reflection is a multi-layered process of identifying, clarifying, exploring that which is-at-stake. It's a process in which one goes deeper, making connections and meaning, gaining insights between different meaningful 'events' (in the broadest possible sense, both internal and external to the reflecting person). As such it leads one to greater awareness" [14] and supports young people, as well as adults, to become more conscious about their relationship with themselves and/or the outer world. The World Health Organisation defines wellbeing as "the state in which individuals realise their own abilities" in order to express their full potential and make a concrete contribution in their community. This means that, first of all, they need to become aware of what their strengths are and understand their own values, beliefs, personal preferences, needs, tendencies, habits and everything else that makes them the unique individual that they are. By becoming self-aware and understanding strengths and limitations, new opportunities open up that just aren't available otherwise. When young people have a better understanding of themselves, they are able to experience themselves as unique and separate individuals. They become more authentic and tend to have more honest and genuine relationships, as others will be attracted to who they really are. They are empowered and more able to make changes and build on their areas of strength.

The power of self-awareness

Self-awareness has the potential to enhance every experience young people have, as it's a tool and a practice that can be used anywhere, anytime, to ground oneself in the moment, realistically see oneself and the situation, and help them make good choices.
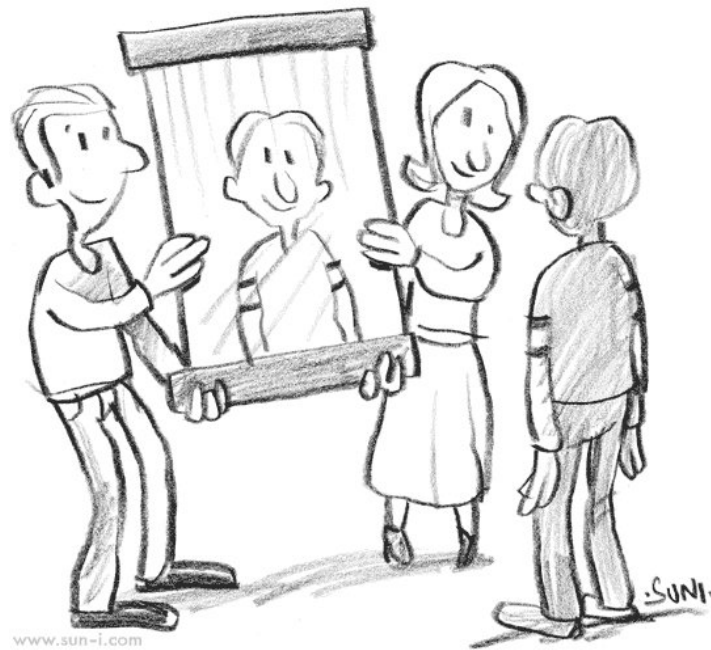
Figure 16.5: **Awareness empowers me! [15]**

Research shows that self-awareness is directly related to emotional intelligence, and making it easier to identify what one's stressors are and use this information to build effective coping mechanisms. Goleman claims that good emotional and social competences give the child the possibility to be effective and to use their cognitive capabilities, while children who do not regulate their emotions remain focused on themselves and not are capable of learning or thinking. [16] Self-awareness as seen by practitioners and researchers is both a primary means of alleviating psychological distress and the path of self-development for psychologically healthy individuals. Fenigstein et al. wrote that "increased awareness of the self is both a tool and a goal" [17]. Being self-aware also means acknowledging that one is not one's thoughts but the entity observing the thoughts, which gives a great sense of freedom.

To conclude, reflection allows for greater self awareness about one's unique strengths and limitations, for better being equipped to face challenges, solve problems, make decisions, and predict the outcomes of those decisions. Furthermore, this process helps to analyse the differences and similarities between individuals, with the further benefit of developing interpersonal relationships and of being able to direct one's communication towards the needs of the others.

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Chapter 17: Rites of Passage and Positive Mental Health of Young People
By Bára Rodi

Keywords

• RITES OF PASSAGE •   • SENSE OF SELF •

• TRANSITION •   • IDENTITY •

Key Messages

• Historically, most cultures all over the world developed rituals to help youngsters consciously step into adulthood and take on new responsibilities.
• The lack of Rites of Passage nowadays might be one of the factors contributing to adolescent identity crisis, drug abuse, impulsive behaviours and mental health problems.
• Our role as youth workers is to be aware of the topic, and support youngsters to either join a Rites of Passage programme of or create one for themselves, as well as to provide information on the topic and options available

This article aims to explore the importance of youth rites of passage for the positive mental health of young people (mainly in the "identity" and "sense of self" domains). It is meant to familiarise all those working with young people (youth workers and other practitioners in the youth field) with this topic.

What are Rites of Passage?

"A rite of passage is a ceremony or ritual of the passage which occurs when an individual leaves one group / stage of life to enter another. It involves a significant change of status in society. Over the span of history, various cultures and societies have established specific rituals to commemorate the key moments of development." [1]

Ceremonies marking and celebrating different life transitions are known as "rites of passage". French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep coined the term in his classic publication *The Rites of Passage (Les Rites de Passage)* in 1909. Some of the most important Rites of Passage are birth, stepping into adulthood, marriage, divorce, parenthood, elderhood and death.

In this article we will specifically focus on the conscious transition from adolescence to adulthood (youth rites of passage). Lertzman in his work *Rediscovering Rites of Passage* says: "When these times of transition are marked, ritualized, witnessed, and supported, it creates a kind of experiential map of self-development. Without proper rites of passage, people can become disoriented and lose their way on life's journey" [2].

Youth Rites of Passage (RoP)

Different cultures all over the world developed ceremonies/rituals to mark the transition from youth to adulthood, undertaken consciously, and witnessed by the community. An initiation marking this passage into adulthood and confirming responsible participation in the world can be seen as an integral part of human development. These rituals are primarily spread throughout adolescence and the start of adulthood as a person also matures physically, and mark a certain progress in one's life.

Many modern societies have lost such traditions. Psychologists suggest this loss of rituals leads to attempts at self-initiation, testing the extreme limits of feelings and behaviours, from substance use (to reach altered states of consciousness) to different forms of dangerous / harmful activities (flirting with death).

Culturally-specific rituals are now re-emerging and evolving so that adolescents may be appropriately met, challenged, inspired, and mentored into adulthood. The intentional marking of these transitions is not only significant for the young person (initiate), but equally so for the family and the entire community or school.

In this article, we will explore how Rites of Passage (RoP) can support the positive mental health of young people in relation to the theoretical framework proposed by Kuosmanen et al., by associating RoP to the "Identity domain", particularly in terms of increased sense of purpose and place in the world for the young person. [3]

Stages of Rites of Passage

Most RoP ceremonies and rituals can be divided into the following 3 stages: [4]
- **Separation** is the initial step of an individual's journey away from a point of familiarity and social structure toward something new. As one gets closer to the unknown, one gradually learns and acquires new skills and abilities.
- **Liminality** is essentially the breaking point, when a person crosses the edge or margins of society. In other words, when a person passes into the threshold or limbo between two stable conditions or stages of life.
- **Reintegration** involves implementing what has been learnt or sought in a person's sense of being. The person returns from the edge and back into society with a new role or identity. He or she reformulates an understanding of life, development and acceptance of oneself with greater ability.

Simply put, we can conclude that each ceremony has "a beginning, a middle and an end".

The space "in between", also called "liminality" or "threshold", is particularly important. It is the moment of initiation: *"Liminality is a marginal status of not having the old identity or a new identity available"* [5].
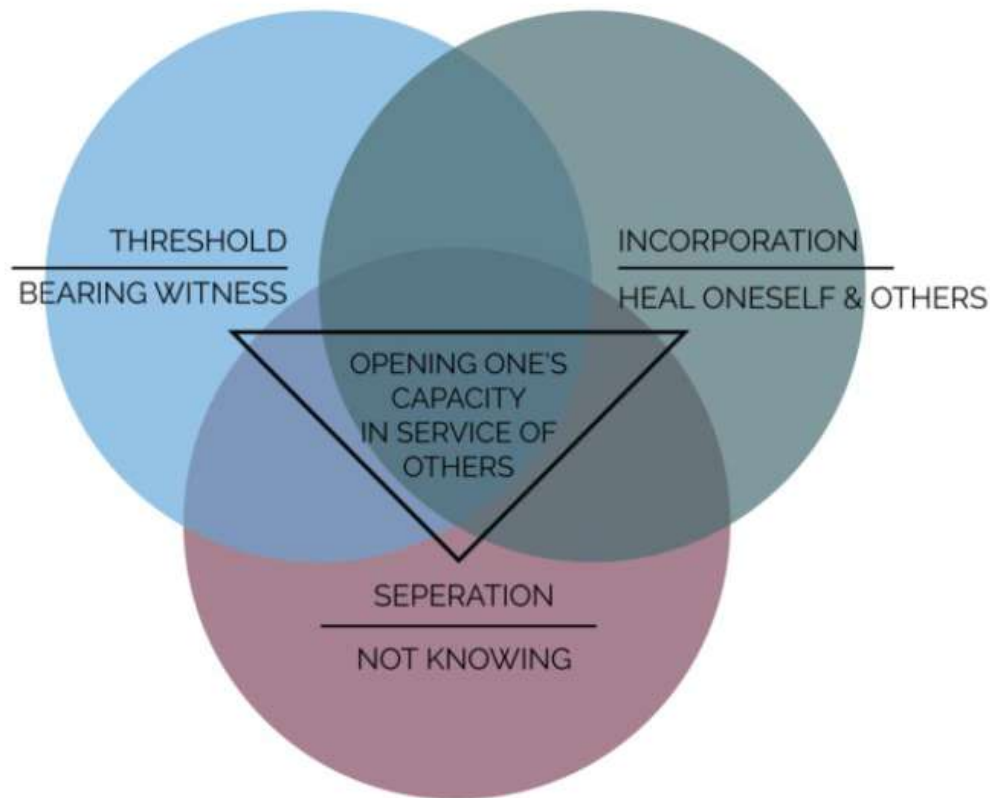

Figure 17.1: **The three stages of the Rite of Passage [4]**

Examples of Youth Rites of Passage:
- Physical: first menstruation, i.e. menarche for girls; ritualistic tattooing, branding, or mutilation for boys; voice change "voice drop" for boys
- Religious: Baptism (Christening), Bar and Bat Mitzvah in Judaism, Confirmation in Western Christianity, Hajj in Islam, Vision quest in some Native American cultures
- Military: Boot Camp and Officer Candidate School, Line-crossing ceremony
- Academic: Graduation at University, Matura at High school
- Others: Sweet Sixteen, Walkabout, Belt ceremonies in martial arts (e.g. obtaining black belt)
- Coming of age ceremonies [6]

Benefits of Youth Rites of Passage for Mental health:
- Rites of passage support young people in the process of becoming whole, productive and contributing members of the family and community.
- Young persons come out of the experience with a new and empowering story that helps them take responsibility for the decisions that set the course of their future.

- Young persons are supported while creating the story of who they are and the kind of life they want to build based on the exploration of their own personal values. We also help them find the story that connects them to their community (identity building).
- Through this self-exploration, initiates emerge with a stronger sense of personal responsibility for all aspects of their lives, taking full responsibility for their own actions as an adult.

If Rites of Passage help a young person to navigate safely from childhood into adulthood, find purpose/meaning in life, become more self-confident and become an active and responsible member of his/her community and society, they ultimately support positive mental health.

Positive mental health, according to WHO, is a state of wellbeing in which the *individual realises his or her own abilities, can manage the normal stresses of life, can work effectively, and is able to play a role in his or her community.*

Rites of Passage are used for the initiate to develop psychologically, emotionally, intellectually, physically, socially and spiritually.

Arnold van Gennep's major work *The Rites of Passage* states: **"Rites of passage exist in order to consolidate social ties, establish roles, and give members of a group a sense of purpose and placement"** [7].

In our theoretical framework, this would be related to all 3 aspects - How I feel, How I think and How I relate to others. [3] It also strongly resonates with *"Social and Community"* - a young person establishes a new place in the community as an "initiated adult", ready to take on responsibilities such as taking care of others, finding his/her vocational path and starting a family.

What is the risk of NOT having Rites of Passage?

Given RoP play such an important role in the healthy development of youngsters into mature and responsible adults, it is surprising to find that most industrial cultures have abolished them. "Several scholars describe modern industrial society as an adolescent culture, characterized by rapid growth, gross individualism and instability (ecological, financial, political and social)" [8].

There is also evidence-based research (including writings by David Blumenkrantz [9]) on the efficacy of a variety of rite of passage programs. In the comments section of the aforementioned article [8] there is an abstract of Paul Abodeely's article *Coming of Age: An Evaluation of a Nature-Based Rite of Passage program on Adolescent Development.*

Examples of Rites of Passage projects/ practices for youth

School of Lost Borders in California, USA

Vision Quest / Vision Fast Program overview:
The RoP program is divided into three sections; severance, threshold time and incorporation. The first days are a time of 'severance' or separation from daily life, leaving behind what no longer serves, where a young person is setting an intention for the solo time. The threshold time is the solo time - four days and nights out in a vast and beautiful Colorado wilderness area. Finally, after the solo time, there are days for the incorporation experience, where young people share their story and begin to celebrate the fullness of who they are and what gifts they bring to this world.

Example of projects in the Erasmus+/ Youth in Action field - Santiago Crew 2012

Youth exchange within "Youth in Action" programme of the European Commission.

26 young people from Spain and Czechia.

145 kilometers: Navia to Ribadeo (Camino del Norte), Lugo to Melide (Camino Primitivo), Melide to Santiago de Compostela (Camino Frances)

Organisers: Čia Čekija (Czechia) and AC Amics de la Biblioteca de la Fonteta (Spain).

Traditional pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, with the purpose of serving as a rite of passage, as a stepping from childhood into adulthood, for young people from challenging social backgrounds (part of the Czech group were young people aged 18/19 leaving foster care to start their independent life).

Accompanied by 3 mentors from each country, young people practiced being free and responsible, caring for themselves, the community and the nature/environment around them. The pilgrimage served as the "initiation" – middle part of the ritual. Before the pilgrimage the organisers set experiential learning and non-formal activities to establish relationships and build trust within the group. The "incorporation" part that followed the pilgrimage was the done through "witnessing by the community" – sharing the experience through storytelling, photo exhibition and guided reflection with the group leaders.

How to create your own rite of passage

(adapted from a resource developed by the Centre for Youth and Community Development through Rites of Passage [10])
- *Preparing for the experience* (what transition do I want to celebrate? What could be an appropriate way/manner of doing so? Who can support me in this experience?)
- *Spending time alone in reflection* (mostly seclusion in nature)

- *Receiving knowledge from elders*, as a way of being initiated into what it means to be a woman, a man, an adult (in their family, community and/or religion).
- Spending time being of service to their community.
- *Welcoming the initiate into the family/community*, as somebody ready to take on becoming a responsible adult. This is often done in the form of a community-wide celebration.

The aspect of community is very important. Sometimes a young person can perceive an experience as transformative and life-changing – e.g. spending a year abroad alone for studying or volunteering – but if this change/transition is not recognised by the family and community, it doesn't serve as a rite of passage.
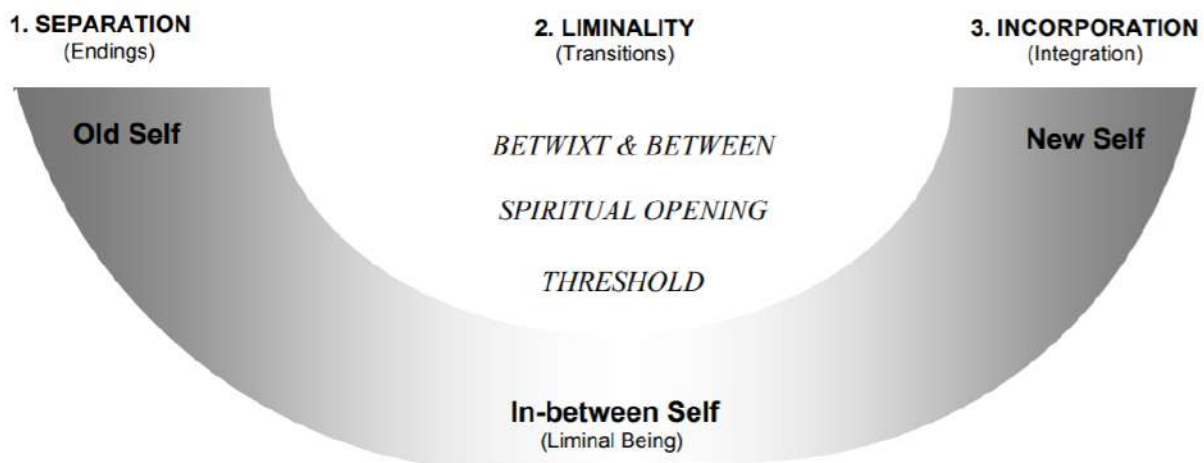

Figure 17.2: **Understanding change through the Rites of Passages framework [11]**

Example - parent preparing modern rite of passage for the child:

13 challenges for a 13 year old boy (Modern Rite of Passage)

Claire Potter prepared a set of challenges for her son Fred, to prove he had the maturity to be granted the freedom and independence he wanted.

The 13 challenges covered 13 different areas of life, and each challenge would arbitrarily contain the number 13 in some way if possible.

E.g. Challenge one: "Get on a train on your own. Get off at the 13th stop. Go to a cafe or restaurant. Order the 13th item on the menu. Then buy yourself a whole outfit with £13.13". The full description of the story was published by *The Guardian* in 2012. [12]

Conclusion

As youth workers/youth leaders we need to be aware of the major changes and transitions that happen in a young person's life. Traditionally, this transition was done consciously and with the support of the whole community in the form of a ritual, helping to form a new identity and supporting the mental health and well-being of adolescents and young adults. Since most of the traditional rites of passage in our societies have been abolished, we can take examples and inspiration from the many programmes available all over the world that are reviving RoP and supporting young people to successfully transition from adolescence to adulthood.

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•   Plotkin, B. (2008). *Nature and the human soul: Cultivating wholeness and community in a fragmented world.* Novato, CA: New World Library.

[9]   Rites of Passage as a framework for community interventions with youth: www.gjcpp.org/en/article.php?issue=3&article=10

[10] Youth and community development through rites of passage: http://rope.org/learn-more/external-resources/creating-a-personal-rite-of-passage/

[11] Wendling, G. (2008). https://artandstory.typepad.com/files/understadning-rites-of-passages.pdf

[12] www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/jul/28/modern-teenage-rite-of-passage

Description of different youth Rites of Passages programs from all over the world:
- https://pathwaysfoundation.org.au/rites-of-passage-programs/pathways-to-manhood
- https://youthpassageways.org/partners/school-of-lost-borders/
- http://www.bullfrogfilms.com/guides/lostguide.pdf
- https://brotherhood-sistersol.org/programs/rites-of-passage-program/
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Further reading

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The Rites of Passage Framework as a Matrix of Transgression Processes in the Life Course:
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Investing in the Health and Well-Being of Young Adults:
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About the Authors

Thomas Albers works as the international project manager for the Anatta Foundation in the Netherlands where he is the coordinator of this EU funded project on the promotion of Positive Mental Health for European youth. He is passionate about environmental and positive psychology and seeks to combine both research fields in his work and studies. On behalf of Anatta Foundation, he delivers trainings for young people to increase wellbeing and people-nature connections. Thomas is also a PhD candidate at the Sapienza University of Rome in social and environmental psychology.
Organization: Anatta Foundation.

Mario D'Agostino is an expert in non-formal education and experiential learning. Since 1989 he has worked as a trainer, consultant and facilitator for several institutions, both for profit and non-profit organisations. From 1998 to 2003 he was vice president of the "Advisory Council", the political body of the "Youth and Sport Directorate of the Council of Europe". During that period he further developed his know-how in facilitating participation processes, community work, intercultural communication and learning, training for trainers in experiential learning, personal and group development. President of Kamaleonte since 2004 and one of the founder members of the international academy of experiential education "Via Experientia", Mario facilitates long-term training programmes for trainers and leaders on "How to facilitate groups and lead teams". His main strength as a facilitator and coach is the ability to process individual growth and group dynamics through experiences and reflective practices.
Organization: Kamaleonte ASD

Dragan Atanasov is an experienced trainer and consultant, specialized in youth work, cultural diversity, community development and social inclusion. Skilled at conducting researches and assessments, designing and delivering trainings, writing publications, developing policies, monitoring and evaluating programs. Dragan has over 10 years of involvement in civil society, youth work and international developmental programs and is the founder of a youth organization and Secretary General of the Union for Youth Work of Macedonia.
Organization: creACTive

Sybren Bouwsma has a background as social researcher, ethicist and is graduated as Outdoor Life Coach. He works as facilitator and trainer and gives workshops in international projects in nature focussing on building self-esteem and confidence. He has a stutter and is involved as organizer and facilitator of international youth meetings for people who stutter.
Organization: Anatta Foundation

Laura López Gámez has a degree in Psychology and she's a trainer in Humanistic and Transpersonal approaches. She's also a facilitator in "Body movement & Corporal Expression" and in "Vital Readjustment". With training in Mindfulness and Gestalt therapy, Laura works mainly as a researcher and trainer in the areas of Conflict Resolution, Emotional Intelligence, Mental Health, and Leadership, developing holistic practices that bring body, mind and emotions into alignment and coherence.
Organization: Euroaccion

Angelica Paci has, for over 10 years, been training and facilitating groups and individuals in their personal and professional growth and well-being through experiential learning programmes, where reflective practices have been a core element in learning and development. In recent years she has been working in Kamaleonte for non formal school programs on the topics of leadership, multiple intelligences and emotional intelligence. She is also a founding member of the international nonformal network of "Via Experientia" and of ALP - activating leadership potential. She believes in the power and value of collective intelligence. She sees the group as a source for learning and thinks that diversity is a value that enriches people and the context in which they live, learn and work. Otto Scharmer's "Theory U" and Arawana Hayashi's social presencing theatre are her source of inspiration and their practices are currently integrated in her work.
Organization: Kamaleonte ASD

Bára Rodi is a trainer, facilitator, medical doctor and project manager based in Prague with 15 years of experience in the field of non-formal education. She is a member of the Pool of Trainers of Czech National Agency of Erasmus+/ Youth in Action since 2007. In 2010/11 Bára took part in Training of Trainers (ToT) organised by Salto and is active in the international training field ever since. Her favourite topics are: storytelling, training of trainers, communication, graphic facilitation, nature-based methods and everything related to health and wellness. You can find more about her on: http://trainers.salto-youth.net/BaraRodi
Organization: Vice Versa CZ

Oda Salomons is an experienced trainer, coach and psychologist. Her compassion for people and love for nature, learning and developing come together perfectly in her work as a nature coach and trainer. She provides opportunities for stressed people to flourish in nature, where they blossom into energetic and passionate employees. She also follows and gives international training courses in the field of mental health and stress. She is associated with Anatta Foundation.
Organization: Anatta Foundation

Bara Stemper Bauerova is a trainer, consultant and member of Austrian Pool of Trainers, parent educator and partner of Vice Versa related to topics of Wellbeing/ Wellness. You can find more about her on: https://www.salto-youth.net/tools/toy/bara-stemper-bauerova.323/
Organization: Vice Versa CZ

Biljana Vasilevska Trajkoska holds an MA in social work, and work as a systemic and family therapist and educator. Biljana has extensive experience in developing non-formal education, youth work and youth participation relevant policies, standards, educational programs and resources as well as in delivering educational programs for social youth work, youth development, social and youth protection, non-formal education, youth participation, and youth policies.
Organization: creACTive

About the Organisations

Anatta Foundation
Country: The Netherlands
Website: anattafoundation.org

The Anatta Foundation is a non-governmental organisation that focusses on a better connection between people and nature to create more psychological well-being, to get more respect for nature and to work on a 'sustainable mindset'. We are inspired by ideas from Positive Psychology and various nature based approaches. In Erasmus+, the foundation enjoys working with young people with a disability and other vulnerable youth groups. The foundation is the lead partner in this Erasmus+ project.

creActive
Country: Macedonia
Website: kreaktiv.mk

The mission of the Youth Association creACTive is to support the creativity and active citizenship of young people by organizing activities in the areas of culture, non-formal education and leisure time for young people, as well as through working on recognition of youth work and promotion of volunteering in Macedonia.

creACTive coordinates the first open youth center in Kavadarci since 2009, providing youth work services to young people on a daily basis. The center organizes the free time of young people through various non-formal educational, artistic and structured leisure activities.

creACTive is one of the founders of the Union for Youth Work and is actively involved in processes for recognition, standardization and professionalization of youth work in Macedonia.

creACTive dedicated 2 years to implementing a long-term project for establishing the first vocational standard for youth work and piloting the first youth work training in Macedonia. Key creACTive staff were directly involved in preparing the first ever Standards for quality of youth work in Macedonia and the national Portfolio for youth workers.

Euroaccion Murcia
Country: Spain
Website: euroaccion.com

Euroaccion is a non-governmental, independent organisation for the support of youth and adult learning, professional and personal development of people with fewer opportunities.

Our vision is based on personal change for broader social change. Our mission is to inspire and stimulate human potential through experiential learning, non-formal education, volunteering and social inclusion-related projects.

Euroaccion annually coordinates around 8–9 European projects since 2000, as a partner or applicant, mostly on youth, education and capacity building about gender related issues, social inclusion of vulnerable groups, emotional intelligence of people with fewer opportunities through humanistic approaches, non-formal education and Gestalt Psychotherapy methods. They have partners over the whole Spanish territory, in more than 20 EU countries, as well as in Asia and South America.

At a local level, we work mainly in schools, with the students, parents and teachers. One of our main services is ICARO–a project about Emotional Intelligence for children and young people between 3 and 18 years old. The activities developed are inspired by humanistic currents and the principles of Emotional Intelligence.

Everyone is a global being and Euroaccion focusses on the development of all aspects -socially and individually. Through approaches based on non-formal and experiential learning, the aim is to create a trusting and safe place in and with the group, fostering the interaction of its members and promoting healthy and effective communication systems. The Euroaccion team also has a long-term working experience with migrants of different backgrounds and age groups.

The Health Promotion Research Centre (HPRC)
Country: Ireland
Website: nuigalway.ie/hprc/

The Health Promotion Research Centre (HPRC) at the National University of Ireland Galway produces high quality research that supports the development of best practice and policy in the promotion of health. The HPRC collaborates with national and international agencies on the development and evaluation of health promotion initiatives and has an active multidisciplinary research programme in place. Designated as a World Health Organization Collaborating Centre since 2009, the Centre has substantial experience in the management of large-scale national and international research projects. See further details at: www. nuigalway.ie/hprc

The research team involved in this project is lead by Professor Margaret Barry and Dr Tuuli Kuosmanen is the lead researcher. The team has extensive knowledge in the field of mental health promotion, with over 20 years of experience in developing the theoretical and empirical base for promoting mental health, conducting systematic reviews and evidence syntheses for national and international agencies (including national governments, European agencies and WHO), producing technical reports, academic papers and evidence briefings for both specialist and non-specialist audiences. Building on their experience in developing and evaluating interventions for promoting the social and emotional wellbeing of young people, the team will lead the development of the theoretical framework for this project.

Kamaleonte
Country: Italy
Website: kamaleonte.org

Kamaleonte promotes the development and psycho-physical health of groups and individuals through outdoor experiential learning programs held at a local, national and international level. Some of the topics addressed by the programs are personal and professional development, problem solving, team building, effective communication and leadership, intercultural learning, diversity, conflict management, inclusion, and group dynamics.

Kamaleonte is a member of the informal network "International Academy of Experiential Education" (www.viaexperientia.net), that has been researching on experiential learning as an innovative and holistic methodology for developing the transversal competences of adult trainers and educators.

Kamaleonte is the founding member of the Adventure Therapy network in Europe (www.adventuretherapy.eu). Adventure therapy is a method that can suit the specific needs of individuals facing psychological troubles. The aim of the approach is to use outdoor activities for supporting them with more effective coping mechanisms and enhance their self-esteem and awareness.

Vice Versa
Country: Czech Republic
Website: viceversa.cz

Vice Versa is an association formed by trainers, youth workers and educators with a passion for non-formal education, based in Prague, Czech Republic.

Vice Versa's main goal is to promote active citizenship and non-formal education by providing possibilities for young people and youth leaders to be socially active, take part in different events and support them in their personal development and further education.

Vice Versa aims to support intercultural dialogue, active citizenship, environmental and global education and awareness, as well as the creation of links between formal and non-formal education, by providing innovative educational opportunities both for young people and those working with them.

About the Project

The Erasmus+ funded project Positive Mental Health aimed to increase the health and wellbeing of young people, through the development of a theoretical framework, practical tools and methodologies and learning material to help youth workers be better able to support young people in their journey.

Are you interested in more information about this project?
This publication with background readings has been developed as part of the Erasmus+ Project: "Positive Mental Health; Promotion of wellbeing and flourishing in the European youth sector", which is funded under the Erasmus+ programme, project number: 2019-2-NL02-KA205-002567.

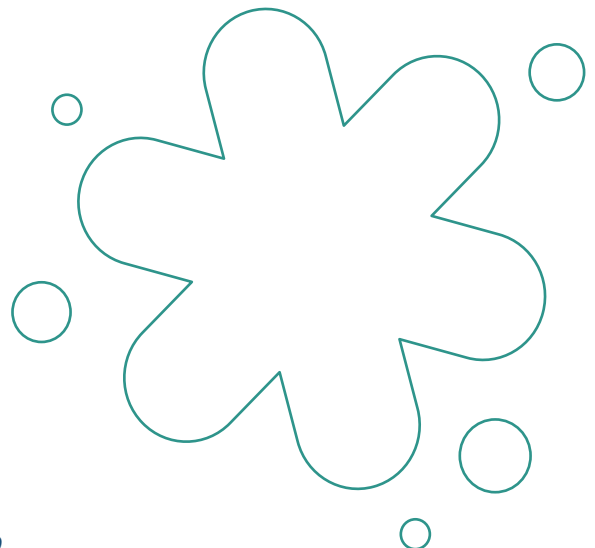All project outputs are accessible free of charge from the project website:
www.positivementalhealth.eu

A FRAMEWORK FOR PROMOTING POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH
Kuosmanen, T., Dowling, K. and Barry, M.M., (2020). *A Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Youth Sector.* A report produced as part of the Erasmus+ Project: Promoting positive mental health in the European Youth sector. World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Health Promotion Research, National University of Ireland Galway. www.nuigalway.ie/hprc

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Positive Mental Health