

# ***Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Organizations***

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*Positive Mental Health*

# Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Organizations

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

## Intellectual Output 2: Youth Organization's manual

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## **Introduction:**

# **Who should promote Positive Mental Health?**

*“Health is created and lived by people within the settings of their everyday life; where they learn, work, play, and love.”<sup>1</sup>*

Our current societies are, unfortunately, still minimally characterized and organized according to a positive mental health (PMH) approach that focuses on what does not work. Policy makers and health insurances have only recently started to realize (in some EU countries) that promoting a healthy lifestyle is essential in reducing the costs of health care. Youth organizations have, in general, recognised the importance of PMH for much longer.

How can we change a society that has had a problem-oriented approach for so long? What can we learn from organizations who successfully introduced positive mental health? The most important factor is that the focus on positive mental health only works when the change starts from within the system. Social innovation imposed vertically is doomed to fail in 70% of the cases<sup>2</sup>. We need to talk with all the stakeholders in the system and devise a common mission and goal together. Designing high impact youth programs implies having a systemic view, starting with a needs assessment, creating safe learning environments and stimulating ownership for positive mental health.

In the Netherlands for example, the city of Nieuwegein created a network to promote positive health. They worked together with all the stakeholders from the health and wellbeing sectors, such as health care organizations, social work, schools, businesses, independent entrepreneurs, religious organizations, local authorities, gyms, health insurance providers and citizens, to discuss how to promote health and wellbeing.

They began by examining the current situation with all involved parties. Firstly: what have we done so far for promoting positive health? Secondly: What do we want to achieve together? And finally: What action can we take? The school, for example, focused on healthy food in the canteen. The entrepreneurs came up with campaigns to promote healthy food. Social workers initiated workshops on promoting positive mental health. Social organizations promoted participation in social interaction. And companies improved working conditions to reduce burnout.

All these initiatives together, no matter how small, eventually have an impact on wellbeing and flourishing. Through this process, clear principles for promoting positive mental health were identified:

- ‘Look at health not at disease
- Look at how people can stay healthy
- Look at what people can do instead of what they cannot do.
- Look at how you can promote a healthy lifestyle.’<sup>3</sup>

## A Youth organizations' manual

The example above showcases how the promotion of PMH of young people can be successful if the whole system and its stakeholders are involved. In fact, positive mental health (and ill-health) is never the sole responsibility of an individual. A young person, as any person, is the product of the environment he/she grows up and lives in. This manual provides some key suggestions for youth organizations on how they can contribute to the wellbeing of young people. The topics discussed are derived from the framework on PMH promotion<sup>4</sup> and from a study among 128 youth workers where they were asked which topics they considered relevant for youth organizations to know more about. The manual consists of 8 chapters with topics that can inspire youth organizations to become more 'self-determinant' in the promotion of young people's wellbeing and take an active stand in society. The manual is written for staff regardless of their experience in this topic. Each chapter is written from experience and scientific insights.

We sincerely hope that this work may inspire youth organizations to become aware of their strengths in PMH promotion of their young people and to realise how they can take an active role in society. The world needs you!

### The authors

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  - [3] Ibid, p. 85
  - [4] 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](http://www.nuigalway.ie/hprc) (Page 31).

# Chapter 1: Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Organizations

By Mario D'Agostino

Today more than ever, the challenge for youth organizations is to foster strategies that promote positive mental health. Over the last two decades, we've been witnessing an increase in psychological, social and emotional discomfort among young people<sup>5</sup> in Europe. Young people seem to be emotionally vulnerable, meaning that they are in a state of mind in which they are unsure, insecure, and lack confidence in themselves and their abilities. Their mind seems to perceive their own strengths and abilities as not *enough* and they become more scared and anxious about being incapable. Among the factors that have contributed to such discomfort we find:

- The lack of positive “life masters”, a role model function replaced by social media “influencers”;
- The change in family dynamics. Parents spend more time with their children, but are increasingly more absorbed by their technological devices<sup>6</sup>. They are distracted and aren't fully present.
- Social contexts that are less safe and less decipherable;
- An increasing level of structured leisure time, replacing a more unstructured and informal one. This was the context where young people had more freedom for discovering their authentic talents;
- The increase in social media use<sup>7</sup>
- Pressure from the school environment which causes an increased level of anxiety<sup>8</sup>

The consequence is that some young people, particularly in certain contexts and countries, are deprived of positive adult figures they can talk to and be inspired by. At times, they are also missing a family community with parents, siblings, grandparents and relatives, where they can feel cared for, protected and safe. Although young people are virtually connected via social media, they lack real places and communities where they can move freely and feel socially safe. There are fewer contexts where they can participate in, fewer inclusive communities where they can feel they belong. Young people are deprived of informal spaces where they can meet during their free time and possibly manifest their creative capacity by deciding and organizing activities with their peers. These are settings where young people have the opportunity to challenge themselves and increase their physical, emotional and social competences. Until 20 years ago, children and young people were habitually meeting in these informal contexts: places where young people could socialize in and be creatively active. These were places where peers could meet and organize their leisure time together, deciding what to do, which games to play, thus activating creativity, co-decisive processes and problem solving capacities. These places, that also provided opportunities for young people to build their identity and find their role in their group of reference, are nowadays missing - either in terms of physical spaces or in terms of available time. Increasingly, and particularly since the Covid pandemic crisis, young people's days are scheduled like the

ones of adults, and they meet in a structured time and space that doesn't allow them to decide autonomously how they would like to spend their free time. This scenario highlights how the needs of young people today are quite different from the ones of the young people of 50 years ago, in order to sustain positive mental health and flourish. This has brought youth organizations to orient their mission towards the emerging need of young people to take ownership of spaces where they can discover things about themselves and build their identity. Youth organizations offer spaces where young people can actively and creatively participate in and decide how to organise and manage their time together in the "here and now", to take the risk of *doing, failing and growing* without being judged by adults.

In this frame of reference, the challenge for youth organizations and their leaders is to promote positive mental health in young people by working on 4 main aspects:

- Creating opportunities for young people to meet and participate in facilitated experiences in which they are free to decide the extent they want to be involved in and how.
- Trusting young people and their capacity to organise their free time, dealing with conflicts that may arise and supporting them to learn from experience.
- Leaders of youth organizations are indeed role models and need to show patience and consistency in listening to and embracing young people's needs. Suspending judgment and being authentic, honest and coherent, with a healthy, inclusive and positive lifestyle.

Youth organizations that wish to promote positive mental health have an ethical challenge as well as a professional one: the message that their organizations deliver through their activities is crucial, and needs to be coherent with their mission.

Organizations should tend towards sustainable actions that are carried out with respect and far-sightedness. They should act in a healthy and coherent way, avoiding manipulative and disconnected messages as much as possible. For example, promoting positive mental health while having volunteers or youth workers who are frustrated or unsatisfied, or too focussed on their own needs and times, would result in an organization that is not reliable and coherent with its intention.

Youth organizations should be for young people, and provide a context without prejudices, where they can feel free to express themselves creatively and develop a sense of belonging. It is a space where they can find inspirational role models, establish authentic relationships and carry out ideals to affirm themselves, and for the good of the micro and macro community.

In other words, promoting positive mental health should go hand-in-hand with the wellbeing of the organization. The model that follows might offer a direction to youth organizations and their leaders on how to promote wellbeing along with the effectiveness of their working context.

Every youth organization and/or leader should tend to an organizational wellbeing by taking into account certain aspects, all of equal importance and value, such as:

- Defining and clarifying the organizational procedures in which youth workers can activate and carry out actions in autonomy,

- Exchanging information, clear timings and shared guidelines that acknowledge diverse competences,
- Defining roles and responsibilities (so that everybody knows who does what).

These are some of the elements that contribute to creating a safe and trustworthy organizational context, and promote the wellbeing of its staff members. Unclear procedures and rules can, in the long run, create confusion, frustration and conflicts among people and lead to project failures. Pivotal to a healthy dynamic that takes individual wellbeing into account is the care and attention devoted to human relations, based on dialogue and mutual listening and the continuous sharing between staff members and stakeholders of the different projects.

On-going communication, sharing of information and space for emotional exchange and honest feedback among staff members are essential aspects for maintaining an authentic working environment. Sharing each other's diverse expectations and personal needs is important to avoid illusions that can affect relationships.

Each project has its own objectives and is a challenge that involves different people and diverse organizational dynamics. So sharing objectives and celebrating results is equally important. Organizational wellbeing implies that the project leader does not impose the project objectives, but rather ensures that these are shared and accepted by all staff members. Sharing the objectives, and accepting the challenge in order to achieve them, is the prerequisite for a process of co-creation and shared responsibility. Achieving shared objectives fosters motivation and positive emotional states at individual, group, organizational and community levels. Failure creates frustration and, if repeated, generates conflict and disempowering beliefs. However, failing to reach the objectives does not mean failing to carry out the entire project. In the event of not meeting expected results, but reaching other targets such as, for example, group cohesion, it is always desirable to acknowledge the unexpected results.

Finally, it is very useful to create opportunities for staff to experience moments of wellbeing together, such as for example a walk in nature, a picnic where each person brings something to eat, or going on a silent retreat or a workshop on how to take care of oneself. Other than contributing to creating a relaxed and trustful environment, these shared practices bring along reflections and insights and can foster a sense of belonging, resulting in an increased intrinsic motivation that enables staff members to realize the organization's mission and to feel part of a safe, protected and reliable environment.

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[5] <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/32622/1/MHCYP%202017%20Summary.pdf>

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[7] <https://www.ajmc.com/view/mental-health-issues-on-the-rise-among-adolescents-young-adults> (visited 14-4-2021)

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## Chapter 2:

# Organizational Policy, Identity and Resilience

By Thomas Albers

Youth organizations are, generally speaking, non-profit oriented and centred on an ideology or the needs of young people. The mission, vision, core values and ethos (see inset) of youth organizations are oriented around improving young people's lives and societies as a whole. Their purpose should go hand in hand with purpose of its staff members, the young people they work with and the society they play a role in. One needs the other to be able to flourish.

In this chapter you can find suggestions as to how youth organizations can make sure that the fundamentals of their organization (policy and identity) are well designed for effective positive mental health promotion practice.

You will also read about what organizational resilience is and how this can be relevant for surviving in a fast-changing world where young people's subcultures change rapidly.

- **Mission:** A mission statement defines an organization's purpose and primary objectives. Its prime function is internal - to define the key measure or measures of an organization's success. Mission statements are the starting points of an organization's strategic planning and goal setting process. They focus attention and ensure that stakeholders understand what the organization is attempting to accomplish.
- **Vision:** Vision statements reflect the ideal image of an organization in the future. They create a focal point for strategic planning and are time bound, with most vision statements projected for a period of 5 to 10 years. The vision statement communicates both the purpose and values of an organization.
- **Values:** Values are the beliefs of an organization, the expression of what it stands for and how it will conduct itself. Values are the core of an organization's being. They underpin policies, objectives, procedures and strategies because they provide an anchor and a reference point for all things that happen.
- **Ethos:** An ethos is the set of fundamental values held by a person, a group or organization. Ethos is what characterises the tone or culture of organizations.

[9]

## Key Principles

There are many handbooks and other resources that can help organizations become more professional or better organised in general. Principles such as involving young people in policy development or developing a supportive environment for both young people and staff are of utmost importance for the effectiveness of positive mental health promotion and youth work in general. The key principles described below are particularly important for organizations that focus on the promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing of young people.

- **Get to know your organization's calling.**

As a youth organization, it will help if your mission, vision and values are clear to everybody involved, but one of the most important questions to answer is 'what is this organization's true calling?'. This question will get you to focus on how you can add value to the world and the lives of many individuals, rather than on how the organization can survive in a money driven world. A next question you could ask is 'What does this calling require us to do?' instead of 'what would we like to do with this organization?'.

- **Aim for 'organizational authenticity'**

Practicing what you preach is obviously one of the main principles. Particularly if you work with young people, as authenticity is incredibly important for building relationships based on mutual trust and respect, which is fundamental for effective promotion of positive mental health<sup>9</sup>. Being authentic as an organization, means that the calling, mission, vision and values of the organization are not simply well described, but also well put into practice. For example, a youth organization that aims to improve the wellbeing of young people should also take care of the wellbeing of their own youth workers. As being constantly authentic can be quite a challenge in a stressful world, aiming to be can suffice. Being authentic, in fact, also includes being honest about mistakes or when you, as an organization, are uncertain about certain things. Young people can appreciate this way of being 'human' as an organization.

- **Know where your limits are**

Knowing your organization's calling means that you also know what you are not called to do or become. It can be tempting to want to address every need of a young person that comes by, but diverting from what your calling is will only lead to self-alienation. Knowing your limits means, for example, that if you offer social and emotional support to young people in vulnerable positions, you know when to refer them to a therapist or other kind of health care practitioner when you realise that is what they need. Even when it could be tempting to want to take responsibility for a young person's wellbeing, if it is beyond your scope or skills, it is better to guide the young person towards more adequate help.

## Organizational Resilience

Young people can flourish or become resilient when facing external or internal stressors, so too can organizations. Knowing your resources and building and maintaining a network with stakeholders, for example, makes the organization more resilient against

‘bad weather’. Organizational resilience is “the ability of an organization to anticipate, prepare for, respond and adapt to incremental change and sudden disruptions in order to survive and prosper”<sup>10</sup>. The Covid-19 pandemic affected many youth organizations around the world that called on their adaptive qualities to restrictions, uncertainties and changing needs of young people and staff members. Continuously reflecting on your organizations calling and making this clear, allows the youth organization to evolve with a ‘compass’ that gives direction, particularly during hard times. In fact, organizations “aren’t born resilient, they are built over time through reflection and deliberate effort.”<sup>11</sup> (Abraham, et al., 2013) And it’s never too late to start developing your organization’s resilience.

### Suggestions for further reading

- Frederic Laloux (2014). *Reinventing organizations*. Brussels: Nelson Parker.

### Reflection questions

- What makes your organization unique?
- What is your organization true calling?
- What does this calling require you to do?
- Does the staff in your organization resonate with this calling?

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[9] National Youth Council of Ireland & National Youth Health Programme (2013). *Promoting Health in the Youth Sector – A Practice Manual*. ISBN: 978-1-900210-27-0

[10] 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](http://www.nuigalway.ie/hprc) (Page 31).

[11] From <https://www.bsigroup.com/en-GB/our-services/Organizational-Resilience/> (visited 29-03-2021)

[12] Abraham, B., Hatton, T., Vargo, J. & Seville, E., *Resilience Within*, Resilient Organizations Business Resource 2013/A, ISSN 2381-9790 (Print), ISSN 2381-9804 (Online)



## **Chapter 3:** **Collaboration and Network Building**

*By Sara Pereira*

A network is built in a non-hierarchical, dynamic way and its pillars are the relationships formed within it. When creating a network, it is important to take into account the emotional connection between people that form that network and to promote PMH as an intrinsic part of that relationship. In doing so, the network can become a tool for building capacity and growth for the organizations, in terms of knowledge, influence, professional motivation and impact on their target groups.

Building a network with stakeholders from various levels - local, national and European - requires organizations to have defined strategies in place, enabling them to expand their mission farther, raise interest and/or create more impact by joining stakeholders that have the same lines of work and values. These stakeholders can be NGOs, municipalities, regional authorities, schools, companies, etc.

These networks may create organizational growth, even though that's not the main goal when interacting with others. Although direct benefits are appreciated, they are not the principal reason that moves the organization to start or join a network.

The social value created for social organizations is of utmost significance when creating a local long lasting network that is committed to the local partnerships, mainly focusing on the relationships between the organizations. Even though these networks allow the association to grow in terms of activities and possibilities, they predominantly allow the spread of the organizations' mission, creating impact in the field. Considering this, when looking for a potential organization to work with, youth organizations' selection is "(...) based not on how its credentials look on paper, but on its reputation for impact and its track record of commitment to working with others based on stated value."<sup>13</sup>. These stated values can be cooperation in decision-making and challenges, teamwork, multilateral and group dialogue, transparency and defending the same core values (such as human rights, democracy, active participation, etc.), among others.

This also means that the impact is bigger than the sum of the parts, once the network is able to coordinate human resources – competences and time, for example -, economical resources and others. In other words, each organization, part of the network, offers their own resources and expertise, which allows the implementation of bigger and better activities, creating added value without necessarily increasing the costs of developing such actions.

Likewise, the network built revolves around trust and reciprocity, thus contributing to a control-free environment, since each organization's staff does not need to micromanage every task of the network. This allows for a flatter (no organization above others) or non-established leadership given that all work is interrelated and needs to be done by the whole network to create impact. In this respect, partnership agreements and terms should be settled,

and include the definition of roles, tasks, responsibilities, communication strategies, time dedicated to an activity and other resources. Rather than losing their identity and autonomy, this approach, as written by Wei-Skillern and Silver<sup>14</sup> saves “(...) each organization from trying to do everything on its own, it promotes a dynamic in which resources are allocated where they can make the most impact. If another organization is better able address an issue, then it makes sense to invest in that effort rather than to reinvent the wheel in one’s own organization.”

An example that illustrates this is the possibility of endorsing Positive Mental Health (PMH) within a network of regional organizations in the region of Murcia: the «*main goal is to build a “collaborative advantage” in which multiple organizations together achieve something that individual organizations could not achieve alone*»<sup>15</sup>, namely the promotion of PMH by organizations that, alone, would not be capable of achieving by themselves the level of impact they are having now, as a network.

In the case of Euroaccion<sup>16</sup>, the network was initiated in a voluntary form and keeps its high level of participation due to the effort of the involved organizations in keeping the collaboration moving. Every year, Euroaccion receives around 15 European volunteers that develop activities not only within the organization, but also for the network built for this purpose, then extended to other kinds of actions. Several organizations within our network work with mental health, ranging from prevention to specific interventions, to bring an improvement in the quality of life of their clients. Others work with families (hosting, informing, counselling, and training) with the objective of reaching families, as a basic step for social integration of all within the household.

Networking among youth organizations relies on collaborative teams to develop a viable approach to healthier youth growth and have a stronger impact in the people involved. Therefore, a long-lasting network implies a legitimate and relevant collaboration among all involved, safeguarding each organization’s independence and “*reinforcing and empowering of members to deliver programs and achieve goals*”<sup>17</sup>. Networking also implies mutual support, meaningful activities and learning opportunities, as well as the ability to create a stronger impact, both internally and externally, in line with the organizations’ mission.

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[13] Wei-Skillern, J., Silver, N. (2013, p. 124). Four Network Principles for Collaboration Success. *The Foundation Review*, 5(1), 121-129.

[14] Wei-Skillern, J., Silver, N. (2013). Four Network Principles for Collaboration Success. *The Foundation Review*, 5(1), 121-129.

[15] Baker, Ellen, Kan, Melanie, Teo, Stephen T.T. (2011, p. 853). Developing a collaborative network organization: leadership challenges at multiple levels. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 24 (6), 853-875. doi: 10.1108/09534811111175797

[16] The project’s partner from Spain.

[17] Samad, Ziad Abdel (2003, p.22). NGO Interaction, Coordination, and Networking. DOI:10.13140/2.1.2143.0089

## **Chapter 4:**

# **Incorporating Aspects of Positive Mental Health in Human Resources Management**

### *By Carmine Rodi Falanga*

Organizations, no matter what size, are made of people. To reach its objectives, an organization needs to be aligned with its members. This includes ensuring that motivation doesn't run out, managing expectations and how these change over time, designing paths of personal and professional growth for all those involved and, of course, aspects related to positive mental health.

And it is in the organizations' best interest: studies show that "positive mental health has a positive correlation to memory optimism and work competency", while "workers with dominant political values rated higher in self-regard than workers whose values were dominantly economic"<sup>18</sup>.

In order to incorporate Positive Mental Health aspects in human resources management of organizations, we will briefly discuss:

- How to attract talent - providing mentorship and guidance and allowing space to grow
- Where to find the right people?
- Financial aspects: compensation or other bonuses - discuss expectations in advance and negotiate together
- How to incorporate positive mental (and physical) health in the organization's culture: allowing space for self-care, emphasising reflection, positive communication, feedback and learning
- The importance of creativity, Fun & Play
- Avoid "crunch" culture and, if necessary, allow space to recover

### **How to attract the right people with the adequate competencies for positive mental health - providing mentorship and guidance and allowing space to grow**

Typically, organizations face challenges related to the rotation and turnover of their staff. Youth work can be a very demanding profession, and youth workers burnout is indeed common. On top of that, in many European countries, youth work is seriously underfinanced, so youth workers face economical obstacles due to low income. There are different reasons for founding members of organizations to retire, leave, or simply change jobs. New members have to be recruited, who don't necessarily match the same set of motivation, aspirations and skills their predecessors had. This can be a delicate process that can have serious consequences on the organization's activities, and survival even. In the field of positive mental health, keeping stable and motivated staff with the appropriate competencies is crucial for achieving the organization's mission and vision.

## How to take care of and reward committed and talented staff members?

“Money” comes to mind as an answer, and the harsh reality is that, very often, financial resources are not abundant, particularly in the NGO field. This can of course affect the atmosphere and overall positive mental health of youth workers and the whole organizational environment, and might also affect the interpersonal relations and the organization’s internal dynamics, and lead to creating challenging and stressful situations for staff.

Fortunately for the youth field, extensive research<sup>19</sup> proves that intrinsic motivation (such as satisfaction, enjoyment, excitement, a feeling of ownership) is often stronger than the extrinsic one (based on rewards, awards, or their opposite, punishments and penalties). An organization that invests in long-term, self-sustaining forms of motivation will find their need for external (and financial) rewards much less cumbersome.

How to do it, then?

- Create a sense of shared identity and purpose
- Establish a culture where learning and growth are essential, including fun & play (more on this later)
- Support mentoring and personal guidance
- Offer opportunities for personal and professional growth
- In your financial plan, make investing in your team a priority

Sometimes people join NGOs at the beginning of their careers, and they may be more motivated by experience and learning, than anything else. Of course, at some point, career expectations should also come into the picture. See below.

## Where to find the right people?

Volunteering experiences and camps, university events such as job fairs and other NGOs are good places to start. If the local pool is not very active, it may be useful to look abroad. For many people, an experience of long-term international volunteering (like the European Voluntary Service, or the current Solidarity Corps) is a gateway into NGO work. These people may be motivated to stay longer in the host country once the volunteering period is over.

The downside of this approach is a fast turnover of motivated and young(er) collaborators, meaning the staff will have a high rotation rate. Consider the investment of welcoming, training and developing a new member of the team, and having to repeat the process every other year. After the initial phase, the cooperation should enter a more mature stage.

## Financial aspects: compensation or other bonuses - discuss expectations in advance and negotiate together

This is where money matters should really come into focus. As our youth workers and other team members grow more experienced and older, their priorities may shift.

Life, family and financial stability may become important factors. At this point, it is important that an organization offers its senior members more stable positions, solid contracts and some benefits. The reality in the youth sector in many European countries is a constant threat of financial instability. Youth organizations operate in a constant chase for funds and support that can be challenging. From a management point of view, setting up a fundraising strategy and restructuring the team so that there is a dedicated person in charge of fundraising activities, writing projects, actively looking for donations and support, is crucial. This, together with managing team roles, should at least ensure the basis for a positive mental health supportive environment in the office.

After 2-3 years, a team member should no longer be considered “junior”. This is, frankly, a bad practice that exists in the NGO and charity field (in some countries) and is one of the reasons why many of the most talented individuals leave and move on to the corporate sector or start a freelancing career. And there is nothing wrong with that, but in order to keep these individuals engaged, organizations need to raise the bar of what they are willing to offer.

Benefits can also help to increase intrinsic (and extrinsic) motivation: things like travelling, holidays, phone or laptop, decision-making power, the supervision of a team, a new brand or personal project to manage. All these can help an individual to identify more with the organization, without having to necessarily resort to a salary increase.

### **How to incorporate positive mental health in the organization’s culture/ Creating a nurturing environment in the workplace:**

- **Make space for self-care**

The importance of self-care is now understood in many organizations and workplaces<sup>20</sup>, but it’s often left to people’s own initiative. And when people struggle to find a good balance between work and personal life, this is not enough.

Incorporating self-care practices in the workplace is effective. This is something that small (and big) companies can easily do, and so can NGOs. Having a small room dedicated to personal practices such as meditation, exercise or yoga; allowing pets; dedicating time to prepare and eat healthy food; having a small corner for book sharing. There are many tips<sup>21</sup> for implementing measures that only require small organizational changes and can have a big impact on work culture and the individuals’ wellbeing.

- **Emphasise reflection, positive communication, feedback and life-long learning**

These practices are well understood in the corporate and charity sectors. However, even though smaller organizations also acknowledge their importance, they sometimes do not implement them properly due to lack of time or resources.

Generally, these changes are not truly resource-demanding. On the contrary, they

require minor changes in the organization's culture and in the way workflows are organised. Make training on positive communication and feedback part of every welcoming process; incorporate self and group reflection sessions as part of every project cycle; and encourage constant learning and training of staff members, managers and volunteers.

This will soon reflect in the workplace culture with constant improvements, care for each other, and progress.

- **Creativity, Fun & Play**

The importance of these factors cannot be underestimated. Anyone who has had experience with children or pets can testify that they want to spend their entire time playing: and in doing so, they explore their environment, connect with those around them, and learn. As adults, somehow the importance of play is forgotten. And yet, as accredited to the Greek philosopher Plato "We can learn more about a person in an hour of play, than in a year of conversation".

Modern educational systems and workplaces have been shaped by ideas of strict discipline, standardisation, utilitarianism and efficiency to maximise outputs; however, while this was (arguably) necessary for the rapid transformations that led to the mass industrialisation of society, it also came with a steep price to pay. Work and education are often synonyms of unpleasant, even harmful experiences. It doesn't have to be this way. It is time to evolve. It is possible to create opportunities so that our workplaces and organizations become regenerative cultures, places where we can collectively treat those traumas.

Allow fun and creativity into your workplace and incorporate them in the organization's culture. This requires thinking about workspaces, furniture, habits and daily schedules, as well as allowing people the freedom to express more aspects of their personality during their work time.

And "fun" as a concept is trickier than it seems. Research shows that people may have a very different understanding of it, and what activities bring fun into their lives. Some like silly, unstructured play while others need some complicated-looking activities to release some steam (think sudoku, or a challenging board game). Some people need to be around others and socialise; others prefer personal time alone.

This is all well. People thrive when opportunities (not obligations) for fun are created, with space to express creativity. This means ideas will be generated more easily and the organization will naturally adopt a problem-solving attitude. It will also drastically increase people's intrinsic motivation to be part of the team and express more aspects of their personality by working in the organization.

With regards to "play", again it is important to remember that it should not be made mandatory (obligatory and fun are mutually exclusive concepts, really). Opportunities for play should be created, and encouraged. Some tips include: having a games corner in the workplace; having toys and arts & crafts supplies available; organising social leisure time events; trying some individual or group sports activities.

- **Avoid “crunch” culture and if necessary allow space to recover**

This is increasingly critical in the contemporary work culture dominated by tight deadlines and fierce competition for resources and funding.

The term “crunch” is nowadays predominantly used in the game industry to indicate “the practice of working long, intensive hours in order to make sure [something] is ready by its release date”.

It is tricky, because the extreme overtime is not made mandatory, but it becomes “almost so” due to a widespread culture of shame and fear and peer and workplace pressure.

“Crunch” culture does not merely exist in multi-million dollar industries such as videogames. It is also present in the NGO and charity sectors (big and small), where oftentimes the survival of a team or of the entire organization depends on a few crucial grants with tight deadlines.

How is this pressure dealt with, in each organization? Is it at least acknowledged that it exists? Is it considered a “normal” part of business or treated as an extraordinary, negative event? And if it happens, are there resources and strategies in place to alleviate its effects?

Workloads can be organised, before and after the event, so that people have a chance to focus on the deadlines and subsequently recover effectively. Teams and task forces can be rearranged to meet the extra pressure. And if (and when) it happens, maybe making sure that people volunteer for the extra workload, are relieved of the ordinary work pressure, and no “shame and blame” culture is created around this and the fact that some people may decide - for whatever reason - to opt in or out.

Once the storm has passed, arrange some proper time off to recover, and maybe some leisure-time or “fun” activities (see the previous point).

## Conclusions

All these elements (and others that we didn’t discuss here) may contribute to creating a work culture and an organization that places Positive Mental Health and the wellbeing of all its members at its core. In turn, such a culture will foster a higher and long-lasting motivation; joy for living; a better ability to deal with stress and bounce back from negative experiences; and the flexibility to always learn new things and deal with change.

All very positive assets for any organization.

## Further readings

### Articles:

- **Self-Care: 12 Ways to Take Better Care of Yourself**  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/click-here-happiness/201812/self-care-12-ways-take-better-care-yourself>
- **Gamification User Types and the 4 Keys 2 Fun**  
<https://www.gamified.uk/2013/06/05/gamification-user-types-and-the-4-keys-2-fun/>
- **All children are philosophers because all children play**  
[https://www.marc-armitage.com/blog-archive/all-children-are-philosophers-because-all-children-play\\_111s45](https://www.marc-armitage.com/blog-archive/all-children-are-philosophers-because-all-children-play_111s45)
- **Is Crunch Culture a Rising Issue in the Games Industry?**  
<https://www.sae.edu/gbr/crunch-culture-rising-issue-games-industry>

### Books:

- **“A Theory of Fun”** by Raph Koster (Paraglyph Press, 2004)
- **“Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How they Can Change the World”** by Jane McGonigal (Jonathan Cape, 2011)

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- [18] Positive Mental Health of Workers as Related to Memory Optimism, Work Competency and Personified Values (H. Meltzer, David Ludwig)  
(<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.2466/pr0.1971.28.1.223>)
- [19] <https://www.verywellmind.com/differences-between-extrinsic-and-intrinsic-motivation-2795384>
- [20] See “Impact of a Mindfulness-Based, Workplace Group Yoga Intervention on Burnout, Self-Care, and Compassion in Health Care Professionals”, by Ofei-Dodoo et al, Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 2020  
[https://journals.lww.com/joem/Abstract/2020/08000/Impact\\_of\\_a\\_Mindfulness\\_Based\\_Workplace\\_Group.5.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/joem/Abstract/2020/08000/Impact_of_a_Mindfulness_Based_Workplace_Group.5.aspx)
- [21] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/click-here-happiness/201812/self-care-12-ways-take-better-care-yourself>
- [22] <https://www.gamified.uk/2013/06/05/gamification-user-types-and-the-4-keys-2-fun/>
- [23] <https://www.sae.edu/gbr/crunch-culture-rising-issue-games-industry>

## **Chapter 5:**

# **Nonviolent Communication for the Promotion of Positive Mental Health**

*By Sara Pereira*

A well prepared, thought through and thoughtful communication across the field of youth work – stakeholders, young people and other youth workers – helps to raise awareness of the importance of this practice. Not an easy task, given that in order to be effective, the wider value of youth work must be also part of the dialogue. In general, the way youth work is communicated “(...) can never fully represent the richness and openness of practice which calls for constant reworking and re-framing of meaning”<sup>24</sup>.

Youth workers rely on their own way of communicating, developed throughout their own experience with young people, as well as their own personal experiences. Youth workers tend to apply levels of verbal communication they believe to be successful in their daily life: treating others as you would like to be treated. That said, these professionals use diverse forms of communication, such as non-verbal and written, for example, and affection, since “without the affective aspects of practice which such language expresses, youth work does not and cannot work”<sup>25</sup>.

There is also a matter of who the target group is, since the communication conveyed is also dependent on the age, background, socio-economic and cultural context of the young person. Above all, the emotional, psychological and cognitive stage of the group defines what may work with them. Therefore, the way the youth worker communicates implies adjustment – constant adjustment – balance and should be, if possible, adapted to the group/young person.

Communication also takes place between youth workers. Being a professional that promotes Positive Mental Health (PMH) in their daily work does not necessarily mean that effective and empathic communication is present. Nor that emotional discomfort or even turmoil and professional conflict does not exist, especially if there is any stressful situation regarding work. Youth workers should also practice listening skills, as well as nurture their ability to be empathic, aware and able to express their own emotions, in order to bring these skills into youth work and use them while promoting PMH.

The communication approach we suggest for promoting PMH in working with young people is called Nonviolent Communication (NVC). This approach promotes emotional learning through specific methodologies and practice steps. NVC aims to create human connections through communication skills and emotional intelligence and was developed by Marshall Rosenberg in the 60s. NVC provides the possibility of expressing and having needs met, and establishing an understanding of self-responsibility towards one’s own feelings, crucial in youth work, between youth workers, youth worker-young person (and the other way around) and between young people, by raising interdependence awareness. It does not mean the

needs of the people involved will be satisfied per se, but it does allow the connections to be rooted in compassion.

At the same time, it is relevant in how other people - parents, peers, and professionals - perceive the world around them and the struggles and privileges they are presented with. This also impacts people's mental health and, particularly, young people and youth workers:

- It affects young people, as there is a lack of trust as well as a lack of understanding from adults about how real their thoughts seem (they may be real or not) and how integrated they can become;
- It affects youth workers because they feel alienated by the value given to their profession, for example.

These are two cases where PMH is not only not taken into account, but also a fundamental way of creating meaning: grounded and engaged people, aware of their needs and compassionate with themselves and others.

Nonviolent Communication may be used in the field of Positive Mental Health as it increases emotional literacy, empathy, self-compassion, self-expression, listening skills and responsibility for our own feelings and actions. It fosters relations based on honesty and allows for personal growth, as an internal positive emotional life that is shown externally.

This is how it works:

1. **Observe** the situation without evaluating and/or judging: there is no room for comparisons, as this phase focuses on the description of facts, it is time and space specific and avoids any judgements, stereotypes, and prejudices.
2. Identify **feelings**: feelings happen in a continuum and are always present, even if we don't recognize them. The first step is to bring awareness to one's body and to identify them. It is essential to know that feelings may be triggered by others' behaviours, but neither caused by them nor their responsibility. This simply means that depending on whether needs are met or not, there may be pleasant or unpleasant feelings, respectively.
3. Identify **need** or desire: a need is always about oneself and, so, when stating them, we should rather focus on ourselves instead of what's wrong with the other. This way the possibility of finding ways to meet our needs is increased, as we become aware of alienated expressions of unmet needs.
4. Formulating a **request**: requests are not a demand and, consequently, are open to a negative answer. This means they are not simply phrased in a positive, kind way, but also in a firm and clear tone, that doesn't have a strong emotional charge. Finally, and given the need belongs to oneself, it means it can be fulfilled by more than one person, and not solely by the person that cannot meet that specific, universal and not personalized need, either because they are incapable and/or unwilling to do so.

NVC can be applied and practiced in youth work, within a varied age range, since it is effective, positive, and adaptable. At the same time, it allows for a safe communication space, in which respect is cultivated, wellbeing is highlighted, and connection is nurtured. This is only possible because terms such as "right" and "wrong" are out of the picture and judgements are redirected into understanding, openness and empathy. Based on this, the quality of

the connection becomes part of creating a safe environment in youth work, promoting PMH throughout this process, by not “diagnosing” others - their thoughts, attitudes and emotions -, but thinking inwardly and letting others express themselves without creating defensiveness on either side. PMH is promoted by the existence of positive relationships, since individuals thrive in connection with others and, at the same time, when feeling a sense of autonomy and NVC can and should be part of these processes in youth work.

The NVC approach has been proven effective in reducing the number of conflicts and increasing skills in conflicts mediation, listening and cooperation, among others. Mutual respect, less resistance to working with peers and youth workers and to participate in activities also further stimulates engaged learning, where even silence may have meaning and where conversations are welcomed. Straightforward communication is not expected from the beginning, but rather cultivated throughout.

NVC fosters emotional learning that can be put of service to young people and youth workers alike, by addressing the emotional development of individuals. It works as a competence they can apply to other contexts and real-life settings, as communication is an important factor in determining the success of social and emotional learning practices in organizations that work direct or indirectly with youngsters<sup>26</sup>.

### Suggestions for further reading

- NSW Kids and Families. (2014). *Youth Health Resource Kit: An Essential Guide for Workers*. NSW Kids and Families: Sydney.
- Rosenberg, Marshall B. (2003). *Life-Enriching Education: Nonviolent Communication Helps Schools Improve Performance, Reduce Conflict, and Enhance Relationships*. Puddle Dancer Press.
- Rosenberg, Marshall B. (2005). *Speak Peace in a World of Conflict. What You Say Next Will Change Your World*. Puddle Dancer Press.
- Rosenberg, Marshall B. (2012). *Living Nonviolent Communication: Practical Tools to Connect and Communicate Skilfully in Every Situation*.
- Rosenberg, Marshall B. (2015). *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*. Puddle Dancer Press.

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[24] Spence, Jane. (2008, p.6). What do youth workers do? *Communicating youth work*. Youth studies Ireland. 2 (2), 3-18.

[25] Ibid, page 16.

[26] Please, refer to IO1.



## Chapter 6:

# Advocacy for Positive Mental Health

By Biljana Vasilevska Trajkoska

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”*

*Margaret Mead*

### Part I: What is advocacy for Positive Mental Health?

One of the fields where youth organizations are active, while working on issues related and relevant to youth Positive Mental Health (PMH) is - advocacy! Advocacy is a tool for people's participation in decision-making processes and an exercise of power.

To advocate for PMH means to undertake a wide range of complex, context-determined initiatives towards initiating and/or influencing decisions that will enable and support young people to flourish and to improve their wellbeing. Such activities are focused on raising a voice and expressing views and preferences for systemic changes, changes in laws, policies and practices that ensure that young people are living in an environment that supports them to:

- Voluntarily maximize the realization of their potential;
- Develop functional and dignifying relationships and safe and secure attachments with people of their individual preferences;
- Cope with crisis and stressful situations;
- Develop flexibility, adaptability and critical openness for change;
- Constructively engage in community life; and
- Responsibly contribute towards building flourishing communities where people share a common purpose; care and protect each other, live in safe and just environment, with dignity and free.

There are various types of advocacy that youth organizations and their members can implement in the field of PMH, such as:

- **Self-advocacy:** when a person speaks up and undertakes activities for self PMH related needs and rights, i.e. a young person makes a social media campaign to influence local government to place PMH of young people as a strategic priority in the local youth strategy;
- **Peer advocacy:** when an individual or a group speaks up for a person or people with whom they have something in common or similar experience (age, situation, challenges, conditions etc.), i.e. young people from one neighbourhood start a petition for placing the PMH of young people as a strategic priority in the local youth strategy;

- **Group advocacy:** when a group of people with shared experience, beliefs, values, needs etc. speak up and try to influence opinions, decisions and policies about matters of their concern, i.e. an informal group of youth workers organize protest in front of the city hall to pressurise authorities into placing PMH of young people as a strategic priority in the local youth strategy;
- **Professional legal advocacy:** when a qualified legal professional is hired to represent a certain view and advocate for a certain cause, i.e. when a professional lawyer is hired to work within the legal system on behalf of young people and advocate for their PMH rights or needs;
- **Independent advocacy:** when advocates are voluntary organizations, that represent people and work on defending and improving their access to rights, i.e., a certain youth organization is organising town-hall meetings with elected officials to discuss placing PMH of young people as a strategic priority in the local youth strategy;
- **Non-instructed advocacy:** is advocating with or on behalf of a person who is unable to clearly define or express their views, needs, rights in a specific situation, i.e. a person or a group drafts a policy brief for placing the PMH of young people with fewer opportunities<sup>27</sup> as a strategic goal in the local youth strategy.

Regardless of the type of the advocacy, all advocacy initiatives implemented by youth organizations in the field of PMH need to be in line with a set of principles such as equality, accessibility and diversity, clarity of purpose, credibility, confidentiality, transparency, accountability. Following these principles, a youth organization can use different approaches in advocacy such as: person-centred approach, needs-based approach, rights-based approach, etc., to initiate and/or influence decisions.

Usually, the expected results of an advocacy action are: changes in attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, changes in policies, laws, practices, systems, etc. Therefore, advocacy in the field of PMH of young people is expected to help with changing attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, policies, laws, practices, systems... that challenge the wellbeing of young people and, with that, contribute to initiating and assuring the changes needed for creating an environment where young people can flourish.

## **Part II: How (can) youth organizations advocate in the field for positive mental health?**

Advocacy in the field of PMH involves listening, accessing and understanding information, accessing services, making, initiating and influencing difficult decisions, challenging discrimination, protecting human rights, etc. It can make youth organizations active in different areas, including the following, as listed by the World Health Organization: awareness-raising, information, education, training, mutual help, counselling, mediating, defending, denouncing, etc.<sup>28</sup>

In line with that, in the PMH field, youth organizations (can) lobby, organize campaigns, meetings with officials or roundtables and town-hall discussions, public debates, or

use different media to spread and pass the message (i.e. produce tv/radio shows and debates, write articles in newspapers, blog, adds, editorials, make podcasts, posters, memes, organize press conferences etc.). They (can) also start petitions, letters, write opinion papers, prepare policy briefs, meetings, etc.

All of these advocacy methods should contribute towards putting PMH on the agenda of politicians and other relevant stakeholders and ensuring policy responses to PMH needs and challenges of all young people. Such policy responses may include, for example: the creation of a framework for promoting PMH, the provision of adequate mental health support services available and accessible to all young people, reducing stigma and marginalization, denouncing socio-economic or other conditions that challenge flourishing possibility, etc. For example, some youth organizations might work on convincing local government to support the setup of an open informative and educational service for young people, that will provide support and information on how to cope with stress and challenges during the COVID-19 crisis, while others may ask for changes in the education system and for integrating mental health education of young people within educational programs etc.

While welcoming the fact that a significant amount of policies and mental health practice currently exist – covering promotion of mental well-being, prevention and reduction of stigma, discrimination and social exclusion; prevention of mental health problems, provision of adequate care for people that experience PMH related and relevant challenges, provision of comprehensive and effective services and interventions, supporting inclusion into society of those who have experienced serious mental health problems etc. – youth organizations should also make sure that they dedicate efforts for safeguarding, monitoring and evaluating such policies and for holding officials accountable for their implementation.

Another important area where youth organizations focus their efforts, is the area of advocating for enabling, supporting and improving youth participation in decision-making processes. In this area, youth organizations invested in supporting and empowering young people, help them to defend their rights and to communicate their views and wishes when PMH decisions are being made.

Recognizing that changes in PMH field are needed and are important for young people and societies in general, nowadays, various stakeholders such as the Council of Europe and particularly its Youth Sector, the Youth partnership between EU and CoE, The European Commission etc. are providing significant support to advocacy activities of different youth organizations across Europe so that they can voice young people's rights and needs and participate in the creation of a version of the world they would want to live in.

### **Part III: Getting ready to advocate**

Advocacy is a structured process that needs to be well planned and prepared in order to maximize its effects. Getting ready to advocate includes:

- **Identifying the problem**

The starting step requires youth organizations to identify the problem that they want to advocate for and to conduct a systemic analysis that will help them understand the contexts in which the problem/challenge/need exists, to understand why and how this situation is a problem, and whom it is a problem for; to map factors that contribute to its existence and those that go in favour of the desired change; to define what has been done so far to change the situation; what worked and what didn't, who is working in this field, etc.

- **Setting goals**

This analysis will enable the organization to identify what it is that they want to see changed and, in line with that and their expertise, experience and possibilities, to set specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound goals for which they will raise their voice believing that it will lead to the desired change.

- **Making the advocacy strategy**

During this stage, the organization needs to invest time and energy into developing its advocacy strategy. The plan should provide answers to questions such as: What is the goal and the priorities, how can an organization make the change it wants to make? What will the organization do? In what period of time? What is needed for successful completion of desired activities? Who can help? How? What will the organization achieve by doing all this? What might postpone or jeopardise the achievement of the desired results? How to prevent that from happening? How will the organization know if the strategy works, or not?

In other words, during this phase, the organization needs to:

- Define the adequate methods that will help to pass the message and reach the goal, to initiate or influence changes or to mobilize allies etc.,
- Define concrete activities that will be undertaken to pass the message and achieve the goal;
- Plan the time in which these activities will happen;
- Assess the resources needed;
- Map where and how these resources will be found;
- Define desired results;
- Assess risks and ways of addressing them and prepare monitoring and evaluation plan.

- **Identifying key stakeholders, mobilize allies and resources**

The analysis of the situation and the planning will give information on key stakeholders involved in the situation and their roles (i.e enable mapping who is mostly affected by the situation, who contributes to its maintenance, who is important for initiating/supporting change, who the organization should mobilize as ally, who might be the key opponent, etc). Once the stakeholders are identified, the organization should invest efforts in mobilizing allies and resources so as to ensure that it has the support needed for the desired impact. These allies can be other organizations, young people themselves, parents, schools, religious leaders, politicians, media representatives, business representatives etc. Besides

mobilizing allies, organizations need to also mobilize different resources such as human, financial, technological and other assets that are needed for effective advocating.

- **Implementing the strategy, monitoring and evaluating**

The next stage of the advocacy cycle is implementation. To make sure that the organization has a control of the process of implementation and that it will lead to desired change, the organization should closely monitor and evaluate what is happening. That means gathering data on what is happening, how it is done, who is involved, whether the desired result is achieved, what precisely has been achieved, what is more difficult to achieve, what contributed, what didn't work so well, what made certain activities a success, what made other efforts less successful, to what extent is the change achieved, what are the new opportunities that emerged etc.

Advocating for PMH is a complex practice. Because of its complex nature, it requires that youth organizations prepare themselves for and invest in developing a specific skillset that includes: communication, decision making, planning, assertiveness, leadership, team-work, presentation, facilitation skills, strategic planning, negotiating, lobbying, networking skills... And, most of all, advocating for PMH requires passion, dedication and time.

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[27] <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/archive/archive-resources/inclusiongroups/inclusion-offenders/InclusionOffendersWho/>

[28] Advocacy for mental health. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2003 (Mental Health Policy and Service Guidance Package).



## **Chapter 7:**

# **Working Together with Parents/Caretakers and Schools**

*By Biljana Vasilevska Trajkoska*

When working on youth issues related to positive mental health, it is crucial for youth organizations to be constantly aware of whether young people are living in isolation, and to apply the so-called systemic approach in youth work. This approach was developed as a result of the need for different disciplines to analyse the complex interactive situations in which different parts of systems (large and small) affect the life of the individual.

Applying systemic approach in positive mental health focused youth work means to constantly perceive young people as part of a variety of systems, as part of the different elements that are in continuous interaction, interdependence and influence, and to act accordingly. In other words, when trying to understand young people and work with them on positive mental health through youth work, youth organizations should consider the individual young person as part of a family, school, other different groups, wider community... and society as a whole. Through this, youth organizations can be aware that even a subtle change in one part of some of these systems, impacts young people, their existence, behaviour, thoughts, feelings, wishes, motives... practically everything in a young person's life, even though he/she is not always aware how or to what extent. In addition, it is also important to know that the young person equally influences other elements in different systems, through behaviour, emotions, thoughts... And with that - their entire existence. And this is an important point to consider when exploring the situation but also when planning different interventions.

Due to the complexity of positive mental health focused youth work, and in line with the understanding of young people as connected individuals and parts of various systems, when creating and implementing activities related or relevant to positive mental health of young people, youth organizations (should) involve different stakeholders. This will enable them to maximize the effects of activities as well as ensure continuity and sustainability,

One of the key stakeholders that organizations need to be aware of and involve in positive mental health related youth work are parents/caregivers, and schools.

Families and school are unique socialising agents for young people. Whether young people develop successfully largely depends on whether families and schools (among other socialising agents) provide the physical and psychological conditions they need so as to acquire developmental competencies.

On the one hand, as people that have enormous influence on the life of young people, these stakeholders can be valuable assets who can support and complement the work of

youth organizations. On the other hand, youth organizations themselves, through their work, can support the parents/caregivers, schools and peers in their efforts to care for young people and their development.

The primal motivational factor for parents and school professionals to be involved in youth work activities appears to be a belief that their joint actions will improve young people's learning and well-being. Therefore, if youth organizations want to involve these stakeholders in their work, they need to demonstrate to parents and school professionals how young people's health, learning and well-being can be enhanced by their engagement in such activities. In addition, parents and schools tend to be more involved if they perceive that the young people themselves want and expect their involvement. Youth organizations should assess their capacities to engage parents and schools and establish or enhance policies and procedures for parental/school engagement in youth work.

The following non-exhaustive list can give an idea of what can help to engage parents and schools in youth work activities for positive mental health:

- Having a mission that reflects the importance of parental/school engagement and establishes a foundation for parent/school engagement in youth work positive mental health activities
- Having a well-planned program for parental/school engagement
- Having internal policies and procedures in place to maximize parental/school engagement
- Having a friendly, welcoming environment for parents and school staff
- Welcoming parents/school staff to participate, either by being consulted or being involved and co-deciding with youth workers, in planning, implementing, monitoring, evaluating etc. youth work positive mental health related activities etc.
- Offer youth work services for parenting/teaching support, i.e. support parents and teachers on how to use youth work methodology, non-formal education and informal learning to foster the development of positive health attitudes and behaviours among young people and help build healthy home and school environments
- Share and provide resources that can help them to support positive mental health in young people, foster strong and caring relationships with them and help them to develop self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of agency over their lives
- Introduce parents and school staff to support networks that can complement their efforts in providing a nurturing environment for young people to flourish .
- Encourage parents, teachers and other school professionals to act as mentors, coaching assistants, monitors, chaperones and tutors for youth organizations and to volunteer in their activities etc.

Involving different stakeholders in youth work activities can be fairly difficult. By getting involved in the work of youth organizations, parents and schools can be assured that they are, at the very least, giving young people important advantages.

However, when working in the positive mental health field, youth workers need to keep in mind that they are not systemic family therapists, psychologists, social workers or any other profiles and professionals, meaning that they should be aware of and respect the limitations of their profile and their work, and avoid undertaking activities that go beyond their roles.

# **Chapter 8:**

## **Quality Management and Assurance in Youth Organizations.**

*By Carmine Rodi Falanga*

In this chapter, we will briefly discuss:

- What quality in the field of youth work and positive mental health is
- Quality for which target groups
- How to set and check standards
- How to make corrections

### **What is quality in youth work?**

There are many different definitions of “quality”. That’s because it’s very dependent on context. We compare things and decide which one is better, which is better quality. In this sense, “quality refers to how good something is compared to other similar things”<sup>29</sup>.

How is quality defined for the field of youth work?

In the 2016 Erasmus+ Experts Guide, quality (of project design and implementation) is simply defined as “the coherence of the grant request in relation to the activities and outputs proposed”. So, almost a neutral, technical indicator.

In the publication “Quality Youth Work” we read about “qualitative effects”, meaning what actually happens to young people, how they develop, as a result of their taking part in youth work.

Examples of qualitative effects on young people include:

- Perceived experiences/feelings (e.g. such as a resource or better self-esteem)
- Changed attitudes (e.g. towards immigrants)
- Developed soft skills (e.g. ability to cooperate)
- Developed skills (e.g. ability to cook)
- Gained knowledge (e.g. about the European Union)

In the field of positive mental health specifically, many factors contribute to define quality, including youth workers’ expertise concerning matters related to the life of young people, psychological and pedagogical skills, including the ability to interact and empower, as well as openness, networking and cooperating skills.

According to the same publication (Quality Youth Work) we can also look at quantitative indicators to define the quality standards of our work. Examples of such quantitative outcomes/results can include:

- More young people in education

- Lower depression rates/behavioural problems among young people
- Less drug abuse among young people
- More young people doing voluntary work
- More young people being active in civic life, e.g. taking part in elections

One very interesting definition can be: “Quality is doing it right when no-one is looking” (Henry Ford). True enough: but can we know if it’s quality, if nobody is looking?

All these definitions are very good food for thought, but which definition should we adopt? It’s probably a good idea to have this conversation in every organization and adopt a shared definition, making it part of the core values. Is the organization customer-oriented? Is it producing products or services? Is it political and value-oriented? This will inform a lot of the decisions in response to the next paragraphs.

### Quality for whom?

Can one definition fit all? This really depends on the nature and activities of each organization, but in general different groups/beneficiaries can be identified.

We can mention:

- Direct beneficiaries (= mostly young people themselves), who actually take part in activities run by the organization. They will experience the strongest and most direct benefits in terms of learning, intercultural experience, long-lasting motivation and all the positive effects on self-confidence, sense of initiative, language skills, etc;
- The communities around them, such as schools, families, possibly their towns. What benefits do they receive? An organization can bring a great added value if it takes this into account and creates multiplier events in each local community to increase the impact many times over;
- Partner organizations (and their staff), which are important in terms of networking, multiplying the results, increasing their visibility, website and social media contacts, and so on;
- And finally, other stakeholders at a more general and systemic level. Who else benefits from the activities? Local news portals? Schools? Municipalities? The natural environment? Thinking big(ger) can help to realise that multiple subjects can have very different outcomes and expectations and therefore, their definition of “quality” can be very specific.

Another important difference can be defined between the quality of the products or services created by the organization and the quality of the processes (internal and external) in which the organization is involved. These have to be considered separately, each with different indicators and sets of actions.

## How to set standards

Quality can be challenging to measure in the first place. How do we measure outcomes like “motivation”, “empowerment” or “personal growth”?

Indicators can be created to help keep track of performance. If an organization promotes positive mental health, as in our project, it can be possible to see how certain specific measurable outcomes and indicators are met over time.

Example: how many participants started a healthy habit (sports, exercise etc.) as a result of the workshop? What is the audience of our workshops? How many young people participated in our activities? What is the total reach of informational campaigns (e.g. in media or social media)? Most social media give a very precise overview about the “reach” of each post.

Other areas are less tangible. For “empowerment” or “growth” it can be useful to assess (from a long term perspective) what the observed consequences on the life of the people involved are. Did they complete their studies - with better grades? Did they start a personal project, a hobby, an informal group or organization? These are sure signs that some kind of change has been achieved.

It can be a good idea to set a few numeric indicators: for example: “The minimum objective for long term impact is that at least 30% of participants will be involved in future European mobility projects”.

## Setting the indicators

These are some examples for possible indicators that can be used to measure impact, at the different levels we examined before:

- number of local events realised by young people in 6 months;
- number of participants in local youth club activities (or % increase);
- % increase of attendance to events of one or more partner organization;
- follow-up projects submitted / realised;
- number of students from local school who register for the organization’s newsletter;
- visits and interactions with each partner’s websites and platforms.

It’s also possible to base the indicators on the feedback received in previous projects. Example: “based on a previous realised project, 85% of participants expressed a positive or very positive experience and 75% declared the willingness to be engaged in further activities following the project”. This is a solid way to set a standard to measure future performance.

## Checking the standards

To assess quality, information can be collected with qualitative and quantitative methods.

An easy tool can be a questionnaire or a poll, to be filled in by the relevant people involved in each action.

Examples of questions can be:

- Do you think you gained a deeper understanding of positive mental health as a result of participating in our project?
- Have you applied what you have learned during the course in everyday situations?
- How do you assess your own personal mental health now compared to the situation before the course/ project?
- Are you still in touch with some of the other participants?
- Are you planning any new initiatives or actions?

Another solution includes organising a focus group, 6 months after an activity: meeting with the participants, and having a conversation / interview with them to collect information about what happened after the project, and if anything changed.

If it's not possible to meet in person, it's possible to conduct the interviews over the phone or online, with a written interview, or using a mix of these methods. The results will of course be slightly different with each chosen solution.

### How to make corrections

Collecting the data may not be easy and it's just the beginning; acting on the information gathered can be an entirely different story.

This will greatly vary depending on the particular aspect of quality and specific indicators considered. However, we can list a few suggestions that can be applied in general. Each organization should have an open conversation about how these can be applied to their specific context, and if more specific measures can be introduced.

- If results are below the expectations: this can be the hardest scenario. Maybe someone's performance was not adequate - and it's definitely worth understanding why. Maybe the activities were interesting but didn't meet their intended audience: was a survey conducted before? Was it the result of a participative process? Maybe the activities were good, but not fresh enough? This may mean that the organization itself has to undergo a transformation process.
- If results are satisfying and above expectations: congratulations, time to celebrate! It's important to acknowledge good results (as well as performances below the line), but resting on laurels too much can be a mistake. What is good now may not be enough in the future. A long-lasting organization does not improvise and is always thinking strategically. How to capitalise on the good results? What is the next move? The best moment to plan a change of direction can be when in the lead.
- If results are satisfying, but only for the organization: this is positive, but things could be better. No person is an island, and the same applies to organizations. What

can be done better next time, so to extend the positive outcomes to more people other than the direct beneficiaries of the action? It's always a good idea to share in times of abundance. After all, satisfied and positively surprised partners will bring more networking, more contacts and more opportunities.

- If results are satisfying, but there has been no growth over time: this should be a little alarm bell for an organization that thinks strategically and incorporates quality in their approach. It's not enough to be good: it's also important to keep getting better. Things change fast in youth work: even a very renowned organization with a good reputation can be easily surpassed by others, or just become obsolete. So it can be useful to ask questions such as: what can be done differently next time? Can we bring our successful activity to a new target group, place or consortium? Can we improve our inclusion strategy to widen our main target group? These can help even a very successful organization to maintain their leading position and keep being inspiring for others in the field. Every next move should be a little bit bolder, more inclusive, or visible. This means to build up on success, rather than resting on it.

## Conclusions

Even if the field of Positive Mental Health can be perceived as very subjective and hard to measure, there are simple procedures any organization can adopt to ensure the quality of their work, such as setting measurable and specific outcomes of the activities and performing regular evaluation of the activities. Having clearly defined quality criteria not only gives sponsors and target groups a good impression, it also provides us, as youth workers and youth organizations, with a chance to grow, improve and have larger impact with the great work we do.

## Further readings

- **The Impact+ (with exercises) guide**  
<https://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/impact-and-evaluation>
- **Quality Youth work**  
[https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/reports/quality-youth-work\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/reports/quality-youth-work_en.pdf)
- **Quality Assurance System - A short guide for NGOs**  
**Technical Assistance for Civil Society Organizations, Kosovo Office**  
**June 2012**  
<https://www.civicspace.eu/upload/library/quality-assurance-system-a-short-guide-for-ngos-5d62917cca430.pdf>
- **5 Key Elements in Building an Effective Quality Strategy**  
<https://blog.insresearch.com/5-elements-in-building-an-effective-quality-strategy>

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[29] <https://marketbusinessnews.com/financial-glossary/quality/>



# About the Organisations

## *Anatta Foundation*

**Country:** The Netherlands

**Website:** [anattafoundation.org](http://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](http://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, 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](http://euroaccion.com)



Euroaccion is a non-governmental, independent organization 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 aged 3 to 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 -social and individual. 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/](http://www.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](http://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 led the development of the theoretical framework for this project.

## *Kamaleonte*

**Country:** Italy

**Website:** [kamaleonte.org](http://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 levels. 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](http://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](http://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](http://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 aims to increase the health and well-being 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 knowing more about this project?

**THIS YOUTH WORKERS MANUAL 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](http://www.positivementalhealth.eu)

## Other project outputs:

### 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](http://www.nuigalway.ie/hprc)

### PRACTICE BRIEF

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*. 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](http://www.nuigalway.ie/hprc)

### BACKGROUND READINGS

ALBERS, T. & SALOMONS, O., (EDS.) (2021). *Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation.

### YOUTH WORKERS' MANUAL

Atanasov, D., Paci, A., Lopez Gamez, L., Stemper Bauerova, B., & Albers T. (2021). *Designing Positive Mental Health Youth Programs. Key Characteristics and Best Practices from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation.



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