



Positive Mental Health

Designing Positive Mental Health Youth Programs

***Key Characteristics and Best
Practices from the Field***

A YOUTH WORKERS MANUAL

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Designing Positive Mental Health Youth Programs

Key Characteristics and Best Practices from the Field

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

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MANUAL

The youth workers manual, what does it offer?

Positive Mental Health (PMH) promotion requires a new approach. Mental health and wellbeing in young people cannot be forced upon them, nor is it something you can expect to happen by simply adding the right ingredients. In her book 'The Gardener and the Carpenter', Alison Gopnik describes how parents, or any other adult involved in the development of young people, should provide the right conditions for the child to develop their true potential. In this book, Gopnik distinguishes between two typical philosophical approaches in the upbringing of young people: the carpenter and the gardener.

The carpenter approach

When we translate this to youth work, a youth worker that follows the carpenter approach is one that believes that young people should be moulded, shaped or made into a well-functioning adult. This rather top-down approach stems from the belief that a youth worker knows best what the young person needs to be happy and healthy.

The gardener approach

The gardener, on the other hand, believes that by providing the right conditions and environment, the seed or the plant can develop into what it is destined to become.

It is by nurturing the relationship and the environment with young people that one allows space and time for young people to develop into flourishing, resilient and fruitful beings. You will probably understand that we believe youth workers should primarily be gardeners. With this manual, we aim to provide practical guidelines and best practice narratives to enable you to create these growing conditions for your young people to develop their true potential.



Is promoting PMH relevant for youth workers and their organisation?

We held a research involving 128 youth workers from all across Europe as part of this Erasmus+ project. PMH promotion was considered very important. 95% of the youth workers said PMH promotion is important to very important to them personally, 89% said it was important to very important to their organisation and 82% thought it was important to very important to their young people. 73% thought it was important to very important to their policy makers.

26% of the participants said they do address PMH and are satisfied with their work, but 65% of the participants said that although the organisations they work for do address positive mental health promotion, they would need more organisational resources such as knowledge, skills, approaches, strategies or networks. This manual aims to fill the gap.

Section A and section B

This manual contains two main parts: a section with general key characteristics for developing high quality PMH programs, and a section with best practices and insights from youth workers' experiences.

In appendix A you will find an overview of resources with strategies and activities for promoting social and emotional competencies. This overview contains hyperlinks to free of charge resources.

Section A: Key characteristics

We have identified 11 Key Characteristics that are generally important in the promotion of Positive Mental Health in the youth setting. The Key Characteristics aim to identify and describe how to, as a youth worker, develop high quality youth programmes.

For each Key Characteristic, we provide practical guidelines on how to implement it in the youth work setting and how to achieve high quality PMH promotion.

The Key Characteristics run horizontally across all the practices in Section B of this manual, which means that they can be applied to all chapters. In section A, you can read about these Key Characteristics and learn about how to apply suggested guidelines to improve your youth work.



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

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The Key Characteristics have been identified based in the literature on the promotion of positive mental health¹ presented in the theoretical framework, the survey held as part of this project and experiences from youth workers.

There are many more possible Key Characteristics and guidelines for high quality youth work, such as, for example, Kolb's learning cycle model. The ones presented in this manual are, however, specifically aimed at creating quality PMH promotion in youth work. They should be seen as complementary to other, more generic, youth work key characteristics and neither as substitutes or contradictory.

Section B: Best Practices

Positive mental health promotion is definitely not new. On the contrary, a lot of great work has already been done by many youth workers that, often by intuition or understanding, sense what young people actually need in order to be well. In this section we offer some best practices and insights through shared experiences from the partners involved in this project. We do not wish to claim that these are flawless or perfect examples, simply that we have noticed that these approaches worked for the young people we work with. In order to understand what you can learn from these narratives for your own practice, we provide some reflection questions.

Theoretical framework for promoting positive mental health in the youth sector

In the project 'Positive Mental Health; Promotion of wellbeing and flourishing in the European youth sector' Kuosmanen et al. developed a theoretical framework.² The articles in this publication are intended as a deepening background reading to provide context to this framework. In the articles, the authors indicate how the information relates to this framework. Below you will find a brief overview of the framework.

The framework outlines the social and emotional competencies that should be promoted in young people in order to support their positive mental health. The competencies are divided into six domains: How I think (cognitive domain), How I feel (emotional domain), How I relate to others (social domain), Values, Mindsets, and Identity.

'These domains are centered on the core concept of the observing self (I am) - an awareness of oneself, one's thoughts and feelings. The observing self does not change, and simply experiences, without

Ibid.

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judgement, what is happening within and around oneself. This awareness is crucial for taking a step back, not identifying with unhelpful emotions or thoughts regarding personal events, and for promoting contact with the present moment. Becoming aware of the observing self is the primary focus of mindfulness-based strategies. The cognitive, emotional and social domains are presented at the core of the framework, as the development of these domains starts in childhood and early adolescence and forms the basis for the positive development of values, identity and mindsets. However, all of these domains are interlinked, where, for example, valuing diversity affects how we relate to others, and, likewise, developing social awareness can facilitate the development of more prosocial values'.³

Ibid, page 3

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Figure 1: Framework for promoting positive mental health among young people⁴

Ibid.

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The 6 domains of social and emotional competencies

How I think

Cognitive domain

The cognitive domain includes the psychological skills that are needed for setting and achieving goals. These skills relate to, for example, memory and planning, concentration and focus, critical thinking and creativity.

How I feel

Emotional domain

Emotional skills needed for successfully managing one's feelings as well as understanding and empathizing with others. This includes skills related to recognizing, expressing and regulating one's feelings and the ability for perspective taking and empathy.

How I relate to others

Social domain

Social skills are crucial for building positive interactions and relationships with others. Such skills include interpreting other's behaviours and understanding social cues, conflict resolution and social problem solving, and prosocial behaviour and working collaboratively.

Identity

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

Values

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

Mindset

Perspective relates to how we understand and approach the world, and interpret and deal with situations. Having a positive mindset can help us overcome challenges, achieve goals and deal with others more successfully.⁵

11 key characteristics for high quality youth work

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

1. Take the whole human being into consideration
2. Focus on social and emotional learning
3. Start with a needs-assessment
4. Discover the motivation of young people

COLLECTIVE LEVEL

5. Be a role model of positive mental health
6. Create safe learning environments
7. Building respectful and supportive relationships with young people
8. Develop self care
9. Stimulate group reflection and self-reflection

SOCIETAL LEVEL

10. Cultivate a culture-sensitive approach
11. Dare to involve the community

SECTION A: 11 KEY CHARACTERISTICS FOR HIGH QUALITY YOUTH WORK

Introduction

A core goal of positive mental health promotion is to support flourishing of the individual, their community – such as work, school, youth work settings – and society (cultural dimension). For each of these three dimensions, we identified Key Characteristics which youth workers can take into account when designing high quality youth programs and interventions that aim at improving positive mental health.

What is a designer of positive youth programs?

As youth workers, we are all designers: we design programs, interventions, workshops etc. So you are also a designer, and this requires creativity, empathy, ingenuity and design skills. In this section we explain how to design high quality positive youth programs by taking these key characteristics into account.

How to use section A?

Individual, collective and societal level factors in PMH

Young people's mental health is determined by individual, community and societal determinants⁶. We need to consider all three levels when designing programs and interventions. The key characteristics are classified by each level: individual, communal and societal.



Figure 1: Framework for promoting positive mental health among young people⁷

Ibid.

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Kuosmanen, T., Dowling, K. and Barry, M.M., (2020). *A Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Well-being in the European Youth Sector* - is accessible from the project website at: www.positivementalhealth.eu, page 14, 15

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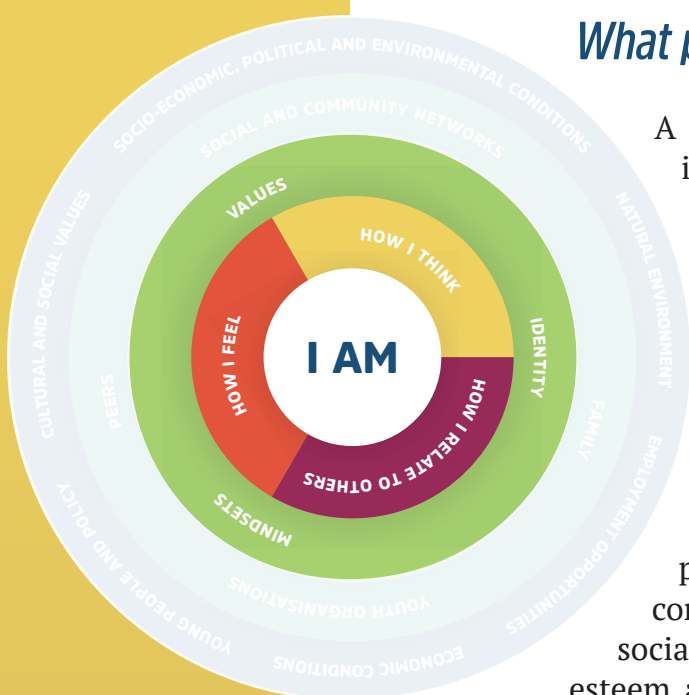
To promote positive mental health and wellbeing it is important to develop a systemic and holistic perspective of the individual, community and society levels. Health promotion is not the sole responsibility of the individual, or of youth organizations, it is also the responsibility of the community and social domain, where politicians, government, schools and companies actively contribute to promoting PMH through providing a beneficial and nurturing context for the individual.

As we can see in the theoretical framework in figure 1 above, the different layers of the model influence each other. For example, a child who is very introvert, from a low c milieu, with an alcoholic parent, has a different starting point than that of a child from a high socioeconomic milieu, with high education and high expectations. So we need to take the context into account. From a positive mental health perspective, we look at how the system can influence wellbeing and optimal functioning. Systems are: relations, peers, families, school, work environment, youth settings. Systems are also: socioeconomic, political and environment conditions. All these levels interact with each other.

Here, we put the spotlight on these different levels, but realise that they also influence each other. In the 11 Key Characteristics we will further explore this holistic and systemic view. These Key Characteristics are subdivided into three layers of positive mental health promotion: individual, community and society.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL INFLUENCES FOR PMH THE INNER CIRCLE OF THE FRAMEWORK FOR PMH

What promotes positive mental health?



A person's state of positive mental health is influenced by both risk and protective factors. Risk factors are, for example, poor child-caregiver interactions. Protective factors include, for example, the positive emotional attachment of the child to the caregiver. Although these factors are important for the wellbeing of the young person, youth work has often very little influence on these factors, if at all. What youth work can do to promote positive mental health in young people is in addressing social and emotional competencies: 'The acquisition of individual social and emotional skills, such as positive self-esteem and self-efficacy, and the ability to manage thoughts and feelings, build healthy relationships and cope with stressful or adverse circumstances, can be developed in young people and will protect their mental health and wellbeing.'⁸.

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Kuosmanen (2020). Page 15.

At the heart of the theoretical framework, we find 'I am'. In key characteristic 1, we explore this notion of 'I am': that we are not just what we think, but also what we feel and how we relate to others. In this sense, our approach is holistic and systemic, understanding that each aspect is dynamically related to others, all of them affecting each other. In Youth Work, we need to consider these three dimensions and their interactions as essential and indispensable to promote positive mental health in Youth Work.

The second key characteristic focuses on social and emotional learning. 'When young people are missing words for naming their feelings, they cannot understand them and therefore manage them.' Start by assessing needs is the third characteristic for designing high quality youth programs. Young people often would like to make a change to their world and life in order to make it happier

and healthier. Problems or situations that are not ideal are strong driving forces for change and often behaviour to make this change is intrinsically motivated. The starting point is identifying the needs of the youngster, rather than what we, as youth workers, think young people should learn.

Discover what motivates young people is important to get them moving towards their goals. 'Being self-determined means that one's behaviour is based on own will, that it comes from intentional, conscious choices and decisions.' This is the scope of the fourth characteristic.



KEY CHARACTERISTIC 1: **TAKING THE WHOLE HUMAN BEING INTO CONSIDERATION: I AM, I FEEL, I THINK, I RELATE**

'This "I Am" is beyond time and space, and it is what remains unchanged in the person through the years, whereas the remaining aspects develop and change; our body changes, our ideas, our feelings, the quality of our relations, while at the same time a place within us remains untouched by time.'

Description

Over the last centuries, our society has been mainly focused on developing our intellect or cognitive qualities. We usually feel more comfortable speaking about what “we think” of the world around us; we give opinions, constantly analyse and judge our reality without even noticing. This thinking mode has become the predominant aspect in our lives.

We know human beings are complex - we are not merely our thoughts. All our experiences involve emotional processes that affect the way we relate to ourselves, others and the world. We are not just what we think, but also what we feel and how we relate. Our approach, in this sense, is holistic and systemic, as we understand each aspect is dynamically related to others, all of them affecting each other. In Youth Work, we need to consider these three dimensions and their interactions as essential and indispensable to promote positive mental health in Youth Work.

Other than these levels of thinking, feeling and relating, there is a core dimension that gives a sense of identity that is beyond the form of thoughts, feelings and interactions. It is the “I Am”, called in many traditions “the observer”, and what the latest neuroscientific discoveries addresses as a state of the mind (brain waves). A state of AWARENESS that is present beyond thinking, feeling or relating. This dimension is an internal identity that is beyond any conditioning from our past and is not based on results in our external world. We could say that this “I Am” is beyond time and space, and is what remains unchanged in the person throughout the years, whereas the remaining aspects develop and change; our body changes, our ideas, our feelings, the quality of our relations,

while at the same time, a place within us remains untouched. The “I AM” that becomes aware of what emerges in their reality opens a door to a spiritual dimension within us.

Practical guidelines for high quality youth work

- **Choose to be in the present moment.** Your body is always in the present moment, unlike the mind that most of the time is traveling from past to future or lost in unproductive thoughts. Turn the focus of your attention to your breathing and your bodily sensations. Practice being “here and now”, giving attention to what you sense and perceive with your 5 senses, without taking the experience for granted, connecting to and nurturing from what is happening in this moment. Life is always happening in the present moment.
- **Practice entering in a meditation space,** experiencing the “I Am”. This meditative state or mind state allows us to be in the present moment without being pushed by distracting thoughts: a simple and natural state of awareness. When we contemplate a sunset with full attention, look into our lovers’ eyes, or walk barefoot in the sand, we naturally get in touch with the “I Am” that is experiencing reality.
- **Finding a dynamic coherence within;** we can align sensing, feeling, and thinking, bringing the needed internal and external coherence back. This will affect our way of relating to ourselves and others. We can see ourselves as a mixt of different aspects that live within us, each with a need for communication and space. This dynamic inner dance of feeling, thinking and relating, will help us develop and evolve as human beings while staying in touch with the I Am.
- **Practice an attitude of openness of mind, heart and body.** Practice Curiosity to develop your mind, practice Compassion to open your heart and be yourself, and practice Courage to act towards your needs and goals.
- **See your relationships as a mirror** that reflects aspects of yourself that need to be seen and integrated: you cannot change others, but you can perceive, in that mirror, what happens in you that needs your awareness. By doing this, you take responsibility for yourself and use your relationships to evolve.
- **Self-inquire.** Ask yourself questions, question your thoughts and check what effect they produce. Example: “I can’t do it” -

‘Life is always happening in the present moment. When we contemplate a sunset with full attention, look into our lovers’ eyes, or walk barefoot in the sand, we naturally get in touch with the “I Am” that is experiencing reality.’



Is this really true? How does this thought make me feel? How does my body react when I believe this thought? What do I do when I believe this thought? How do I relate to myself and others from this thought? Who would I be if I didn't believe this thought? Ask yourself questions to raise self-awareness and promote wellbeing. Being aware is an essential step for change and transformation.

As Youth Workers we can move as a train, aware of two rails. One rail refers to time and space, what changes overtime, what qualities we have and develop with experience, exploring and developing the cognitive, emotional and relational domains in youth. The other rail is the a-temporal domain, the “I Am” that is beyond form, beyond our thoughts, emotions and relationships: the observing Self within us, being the observer of our thoughts and feelings and the way we relate to others.

Undertaking the path of getting in touch with this “I AM” dimension, observing and accepting the thoughts and emotions that arise in our relations without judgement, knowing they are part of us and that we are much more, is a key element in fostering young people's PMH. The “I Am”, at centre of the wheel in the diagram of our theoretical framework, is the energetic core that makes the wheel move.

Suggestions for further learning

- López Gámez, L. (2021). Cultivating a State of Mindfulness Increases Positive Mental Health. In: Albers, T. & Salomons, O. (Eds). *Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation.
- López Gámez, L. (2021). Active Meditation Practice and the Wisdom of the Body for Positive Mental Health. In: Albers, T. & Salomons, O. (Eds). *Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation.

KEY CHARACTERISTIC 2: FOCUS ON SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Description

The foundation for positive mental health in young people's positive development is the recognition and stimulation of strong social and emotional skills and competencies. These are meant to help young people:

- acknowledge their strengths,
- cope with the normal stresses of life,
- maintain positive relationships,
- be physically and mentally healthy,
- do well academically,
- be productive, and
- become civically engaged.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices." "In their work on establishing a set of mental health indicators for Europe, Korkeila et al. claim that positive mental health includes aspects of control of self and events, happiness, social involvement, self-esteem and sociability."⁹

This means that, in order to nurture and maintain positive mental health, young people need to be provided with learning opportunities that enable them to connect with themselves, and be able to detect what they are feeling and name it, as well as to learn how to regulate their emotions. This process is about social and emotional learning – SEL – defined by the Collaborative for Social, Academic, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)¹⁰, as "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions".

We can definitely say that social and emotional learning is about becoming aware of oneself and the others. This awareness, that is meant to manifest in prosocial behaviors and leads young

Positive mental health is about asking oneself "Why am I doing this" and seeing the aim of the experiences that one wants to offer clearly.'

Antony Morgan, Candace Currie, Pernille Due, Saoirse Nic Gabhain, Mette Rasmussen, Oddrun Samdal, Rebecca Smith
Mental well-being in school-aged children in Europe: associations with social cohesion and socioeconomic circumstances. Hbsc Forum 2007

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From [https://casel.org/overview-sel/#:~:text=Social%20and%20emotional%20learning%20\(SEL,maintain%20positive%20relationships%2C%20and%20make](https://casel.org/overview-sel/#:~:text=Social%20and%20emotional%20learning%20(SEL,maintain%20positive%20relationships%2C%20and%20make) (accessed 12-3-2021)

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people towards a positive state of mind, can be attained through facilitated learning experiences, in which young people are given the opportunity to express their potential, interact with others and reflect upon what they are or have been experiencing.

This means that youth workers and youth organizations need to establish engaging and supportive learning environments where young people are challenged in accordance with their “owned” competences, giving them the possibility of discovering new things about themselves, others and their context and fulfill their human needs of belonging (feeling connected to others and relating to them) and of being acknowledged as unique.

Practical guidelines for high quality youth work

Getting acquainted with the social and emotional learning competences

It might sound obvious, but before designing any learning experience that has to do with the social and emotional learning of young people, it is essential to be familiar with the long, yet not exhaustive, list of social and emotional competencies that are available in the paragraph Key Characteristic 3: Start with a needs-assessment. Knowing what these are and mean is just a starting point.

As youth workers it is essential that we gain a deep understanding of what these competencies really mean by experiencing, reflecting upon and embodying them. Knowing how to explain them, or drawing conclusions on their significance after an activity, is not enough. It is crucial to manifest them in everything we do. If, for example, we are addressing the topic of gratitude through a specific planned experience and we never express, through our daily actions, our gratitude for people or things, acts or events we experience, then the topic is unlikely to ring true. It is therefore vital to “walk the talk” if we really want to deliver the message encompassed in the topic addressed. In this case, we can refer to caught SEL competencies, as young people learn them through modeling the adults they interact with.

Being intentional

Being intentional is about understanding what social and emotional domains are most relevant for the group of young people one is working with and bringing focus and attention to the topic(s) that they need to explore at a given moment. Intentionality is about creating environments as well as designing experiences in ways that promote social and emotional learning. It’s about asking oneself “why am I doing this” and having a clear sense of the aim of the experiences that one wants to offer. Intentionality is also about having in mind what learning objectives could possibly be achieved and how these

READ MORE

Key characteristic 3 - Start with a
needs-assessment

can be measured on a short and long term. This means that, when designing or choosing a set of activities/experiences for promoting specific social and emotional competencies, youth workers need to have, in the back of their mind, reflective questions that draw young people towards the exploration of a specific domain, as well as questions that allow for deepening what is emerging from the current reflection in order to enhance the learning experience.

In fact, young people need to be the active agents of change in their social and emotional learning and, as youth workers, we cannot force it by telling them what to learn. Ideally, articulate questions relating to what the young people are experiencing through the activities they are offered. For example, when addressing the topic of cooperative behavior, it is advisable to get them to reflect on what are the behaviors or elements that make them feel cooperating with others and which ones don't make them feel so at that particular moment when the experience is happening, rather than speaking about cooperative behavior in general or in other contexts. Always referring to what is happening in the present moment allows young people to have a clearer perception of what being cooperative means because they have a clear reference of what emotionally and physically the present experience means to them. Youth workers are required to act as social and emotional coaches by providing support, encouragement and guidance as young people learn to navigate this social and emotional terrain.

Taking care of the flow of the SEL programme

When designing a SEL programme, it's very important to focus on its flow. This means that activities and experiences should unfold progressively, in order for learnings to be repeatedly applied, over time, to the ones that follow, and the stage and maturity of the group should be taken into account.

The social and emotional domains are in fact concerned with a very intimate sphere and it is therefore crucial that the group members are provided with a set of icebreakers and getting to know each other activities that allow them to become more familiar with each other and themselves, particularly if they don't know each other well or at all. However strange it might seem, young people do learn a lot about themselves through peer relations.

Youth workers can very much support young people during this phase of identifying what their likes and dislikes, values and passions, qualities and difficulties, desires and wishes for life are, by allowing the time and creating a space where this learning can happen. Creating a trusting and safe environment, where young people can freely speak about their emotions without being judged, is essential for SEL to happen.

'The simple act of naming emotions is an important aspect of helping young people develop healthily, constructively and creatively. When young people are missing words for naming their feelings, they cannot understand them and therefore manage them.'



Taking care of the learning process

Focusing on the learners and their learning needs, rather than social and emotional competencies alone, is the foundation for a grounded and positive transformation. In fact, in a learner-centered approach, young people can take ownership of competences both in terms of understanding what they mean at a conceptual level, and in terms of being able to master and embody them.

When young people own social and emotional competences, they become active agents of their learning and, therefore, able to determine how useful or relevant these are, as well as able to build the cognitive connections to allow the learning to be retained.

Only when knowledge, skills and attitudes are “owned” by young people, or when it is all connected with their subjectivity, can they connect with all their psychological mechanisms and get a chance to be expressed in a specific situation when needed.

“Only ‘owned’ competences can become a part of a talent of a person. And the way to ‘own’ the knowledge, the skills and the attitudes is to become more aware of them through reflection¹¹”. This means that focusing on processing the learning of young people is a key factor for successful social and emotional learning. A process-oriented approach to learning social and emotional competences ensures that young people can focus on what is relevant for them, in the present moment, at a cognitive, emotional, physical/sensorial and relational level.

Creating a common understanding of social and emotional competences

In order to process the learning of social and emotional competences it is fundamental for young people to have the opportunity to connect with themselves and their context and to be equipped with the vocabulary that enables them to fully express what they are feeling and thinking in the moment, as experience is happening.

This simple act of naming emotions is an important aspect of helping young people develop healthily, productively and creatively. When they cannot name their emotions, they have difficulty in understanding what they are feeling, why they feel as they do, and in deciding how to respond to their emotions. Emotions are an important source for learning, and given the reactions they can generate, it is useful for young people (and adults) to learn how to regulate them.

When young people are missing words for naming their feelings, they cannot understand them and therefore manage them. Naming

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Aurelija, J., Ginte, J., Taylor, M. Vandenbussche, B. (eds), (2014-2015). *Holding the space. Facilitating reflection and inner readiness for learning*. Erasmus+ project REFLECT publication.

emotions is the beginning of expressing them in a healthy manner and goes a long way towards discovering socially acceptable behaviors. The ability to label emotions is a developmental skill that is not present at birth and therefore needs to be learned.

Young people who are supported in their emotional literacy tolerate frustration better, get into fewer fights and engage in less self-destructive behavior than the ones who do not have a strong foundation. These young people are also healthier, less lonely, less impulsive, more focused, and have greater academic achievement. Safe, caring, and well-managed learning environments are critical components of this emotional learning.

The group as a source for learning

A group engaged in activities/experiences can provide a live model of optimal learning possibilities for its participants. A group is like a microcosm of life, a community unfolding, and represents what may be. It encompasses human potentials as well as pitfalls, and enables conflicting or peaceful situations to emerge as a natural outcome of human coexistence. What usually takes place more privately between young people is exposed in groups in a more public space and provides the raw material on which they can build their learning.

In any group there are significant underlying dynamics and processes and youth workers should prepare groups for a level of sensitivity that allows them to become an ongoing laboratory, experiencing the topics addressed in the learning context. This allows for personal material that arises, such as feelings and ideas, to become an integrated part of the group's work and be used as part of the learning process.

In this setting, feedback is encouraged and becomes part of the ongoing process of reflection and change, creating a lived experience in which there is an ongoing interactive developmental process between the group and its individuals. Any constructive learning regarding relationships, groups and ourselves is a potential step forward in the evolution of humanity and consciousness.

Focusing also on being rather than doing only

Most educational activities are focussed on content and goal achievement, hence on doing. In a process-oriented learning approach, the emphasis is on being rather than doing. The idea of being refers to the person who performs an action. Being includes their in-the-moment experience, their sense of identity and their awareness. The intent is to work towards a seamless integration of doing and being, with a strong emphasis on contact and intimacy: the ability to listen and express intellectual, emotional, kinesthetic, visual, auditory and spiritual contents among the group members.



Suggestions for further learning

- Albers, T. (2021). Positive emotions. In: Albers, T. & Salomons, O. (Eds). *Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation.
- Albers, T. (2021). Positive Relationships and Non-Violent Communication. In: Albers, T. & Salomons, O. (Eds). *Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation.
- Vasilevska Trajkoska, B. (2021). How Youth Workers Support the Development of Youth's Resilience? In: Albers, T. & Salomons, O. (Eds). *Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation.

KEY CHARACTERISTIC 3: **START WITH A NEEDS-ASSESSMENT**

'Young people would often like to make a change to their world and life in order to make it happier and healthier.'

Description

Understanding your audience's needs is fundamental for effective youth work. In fact, the Council of Europe has identified this as one of the main functions of youth work¹². Making an assessment of young people's needs at individual, community and societal levels is important in order to promote positive mental health and wellbeing. Young people would often like to make a change to their world and life in order to make it happier and healthier. Problems or situations that are not ideal are strong driving forces for change and often the behaviour to make these changes is intrinsically motivated. To effectively address these positive mental health needs, one or more social and emotional competencies are needed.

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<https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth-portfolio/youth-work-competence>

Practical guidelines for high quality youth work

Follow these four general steps:

- 1. Start with a real 'problem' or situation young people would like to change.**

Young people are always looking to make a change to their world, be it at personal, community or societal levels. Understanding where in their personal world they feel the need to make a change is a starting point for youth programmes. The promotion of positive mental health does not limit itself to the individual and can also include making a change at policy, environmental, family or youth organisation level. Indeed, mental health promotion is a multilevel approach. You can use the framework for the promotion of positive mental health on page 7 (Figure 1) of this manual, to identify where in their world young people feel a need for change.

- 2. Problems identify conflicts with important values.**

Any situation that is perceived as undesirable or unwanted by young people is a result of certain values being in conflict with the actual situation. Values are the domains that one cares about in life and it is beneficial for young people to clarify

what these are in order to understand which direction to take. Asking young people to describe the characteristics of an ideal situation will bring the important values to the surface.

3. Identify the Social and Emotional (SE) competencies needed to make this change.

One or more SE competencies are needed in order to reach the ideal situation and make a sustainable and positive change. Knowing these competencies will help the youth workers to support and empower young people in actively and constructively addressing these needs. You can use table 1 below to make an assessment of the SE competencies that could help to address their need (the list is not exhaustive). It is important to keep in mind that when working on competency development, the need for development should come from within the young person and not be instilled or ‘forced upon’, as this will not have a sustainable impact.

4. Always reflect on the progress of the learning process.

Reflection throughout the learning process is essential to strengthen these competencies in young people.

Make it clear to the young people you are working with that competence development is an ongoing process; it is never finished. Both people and their environments are constantly changing, which means new competences will always be needed in the future.

COGNITIVE REGULATION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attention Control • Working Memory and Planning Skills • Inhibitory Control • Cognitive Flexibility • Critical Thinking 	EMOTIONAL PROCESSES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Knowledge and Expression • Emotional and Behavioral Regulation • Empathy and Perspective-Taking 	INTERPERSONAL PROCESSES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding Social Cues • Conflict Resolution/ Social Problem-Solving • Prosocial and Cooperative Behavior
VALUES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical Values • Performance Values • Civic Values • Intellectual Values 	PERSPECTIVES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optimism • Gratitude • Openness • Enthusiasm/Zest 	IDENTITY/ SELF-IMAGE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-Knowledge • Purpose • Self-Efficacy/Growth Mindset • Self-Esteem

Table 1: Six domains and related subdomains of social and emotional competencies (adapted from Jones et al., 2017)¹³

Jones, S., Brush, K., Bailey, R., Brion-Meisels, G., McIntyre, J., Kahn, J., Stickle, L. (2017). *Navigating SEL from the inside out. Looking inside and across 25 leading SEL programs: a practical resource for schools and OST providers.* Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Suggestions for further learning

- Stemper Bauerova, B. (2021). Ikigai - Discover Your Life Purpose. In: Albers, T. & Salomons, O. (Eds). *Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation.



'The quality of fulfilment of three basic psychological needs – autonomy, competence and relatedness - is highly related to the processes of motivation.'

KEY CHARACTERISTIC 4: **DISCOVER THE MOTIVATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE**

Description

The three main pillars of the European Youth Strategy are about engagement, connection and empowerment of young people. One of the most direct ways to reach this is through promoting their self-determination. Particularly during adolescence and young adulthood, which are critical phases in human development with many challenges, supporting young people to become self-determined is an important developmental task of the youth setting.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68-78.

14 One of the most influential theories on wellbeing is the self-determination theory¹⁴ (SDT), that considers human beings as active organisms focused on growth and social integration. The SDT describes three basic psychological human needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. The need for autonomy deals with the desire to be able to make one's own decision about experiences and behaviours. Feeling competent and able to use capacities leads to having a sense of mastery and confidence to take on challenges. The need for relatedness is about developing relationships, having a sense of belonging, being able to receive and give love and care to and from others and feeling accepted.

The fulfilment of these basic needs is, according to the SDT, an essential condition to be able to experience personal growth, mental health and wellbeing. The SDT describes that the quality of fulfilment of these three basic psychological needs is highly related to the processes of motivation. There are different kinds of motivation that differ from each other in the sense that the motivation is self-determined. Being self-determined means that one's behavior is based on own will, that it comes from intentional, conscious choices and decisions. Self-determined behavior is thus intrinsically motivated; the motivation comes 'from within'.

Practical guidelines for high quality youth work

Resist the temptation to make young people earn a reward.

Even though we live in a society that is highly characterized by the feeling that we have to achieve, and sometimes even having to earn one's existence, external rewards (such as money, status, power, compliments or social recognition) or punishments (including social pressure or shame) are not effective for establishing sustainable behavioral change and making young people happier.

Map personal values to understand what drives young people.

Youth work is much more effective and fun when it addresses what young people actually care about. Personal values are not objectives but rather domains of interest, such as environmental wellbeing, spirituality, humour or career. Values can function as a compass or guide in life, as these are main driving forces of young people's behaviour, and induce intrinsic motivation and foster self-determination.

Work from individual strengths and talents.

To promote the need for competence as described above, it is very effective to focus on what young people are good at and develop these qualities further instead of acquiring or developing competences that the young people do not care about or are simply not good at. If a young people are stimulated to use their strengths and talents, this will increase their sense of empowerment, engagement and thus self-determination.

Autonomy is key.

In non-formal youth work, active involvement of young people is usually a key element. Involving them in, for example, decision making or developing youth initiatives will strengthen their feelings of agency over their own personal growth, which are very important for intrinsic motivation, self-determination and ultimately wellbeing. The amount of autonomy given to the young people should be adapted and meet their capacities, and adequate guidance to achieve full autonomy is sometimes needed. Relating with young people as equals also helps to improve their sense of autonomy.

Focus on developing the specific self-determination skills.

In the table below, you'll find eight competences that directly contribute to the development of self-determination in youth work.

'Being self-determined means that one's behavior is based on own will, that it comes from intentional, conscious choices and decisions.'



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

15 **Table 2: Self-determination skills¹⁵**

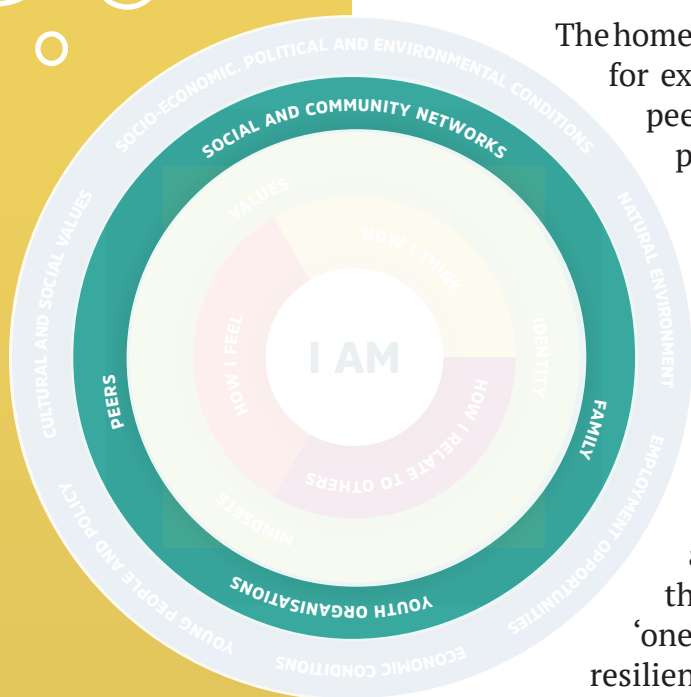
Wehmeyer, M. L., Agran, M., & Hughes, C. (1998). *Teaching self-determination to students with disabilities: Basic skills for successful transition*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Suggestions for further learning

- Albers, T. (2021). Motivation and Self-Determination as Essential Ingredients for Positive Mental Health. In: Albers, T. & Salomons, O. (Eds). *Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation
- D'Agostino, M. (2021). Less Digital, more Outdoors in Nature. In: Albers, T. & Salomons, O. (Eds). *Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation.

COMMUNITY LEVEL FACTORS TO PMH

SECOND OUTER RING OF THE FRAMEWORK FOR PMH



The home, school and out-of-school contexts - including, for example, community, youth organizations and peers - have the most immediate impact on young people's positive mental health and wellbeing. A positive sense of belonging, social support, a sense of citizenship and participation in society and having a safe and secure home environment are all linked to improved mental health and wellbeing in young people.

Although parents are probably the most important source of influence in children's and adolescents' lives, research has shown that having a positive relationship with even 'one good adult' can help young people develop resilience and overcome adversity.¹⁶

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As youth workers, we can be this significant other for young people, helping them to develop resilience and overcome adversity. It is therefore important to reflect on how we can be a role model for positive mental health - you can read more about this in Key Characteristic 5.

In Key Characteristic 6 we explore how to create safe learning environments. From a positive mental health perspective, you co-create the rules for the safe space together with the youngsters to stimulate ownership. Young people will have stronger ownership if they are involved in the process of creation.

Building respectful and supportive relationship with young people is the 7th Key Characteristic. Trying to solve situations and fix problems is in our very nature. The point of youth work is not to solve problems for young people, but to empower them to solve the problems themselves.

Kuosmanen, T., Dowling, K. and Barry, M.M., (2020). *A Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Well-being in the European Youth Sector* - is accessible from the project website at: www.positivementalhealth.eu, page 15.

Before we can take good care for others, we need to take good care of ourselves. This is the scope of the 8th Key Characteristic: develop self-care.

Facilitate reflection (Key Characteristic 9): reflection is one of the key competences in youth work and one of the most empowering processes that young people can experience. It's about questioning with the aim of encouraging participants to reflect on and be curious about how they think and feel about issues.



KEY CHARACTERISTIC 5: **BE A ROLE MODEL OF POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH**

Description

Imitation learning constitutes the primary and oldest learning model for all species. Both animals and humans learn the most basic aspects in this way. From how to feed to the way to communicate, these actions are incorporated simply by imitating and reproducing everything that significant individuals around us do.

A role model is a person whose behaviour, example, or success is or can be emulated by others, especially by younger people¹⁷. The term role model is credited to sociologist Robert K. Merton, who coined the phrase during his career. Merton hypothesized that individuals compare themselves with reference groups of people who occupy the social role to which the individual aspires. An example being the way young fans will idolize and imitate professional athletes or entertainment artists.

The Youth setting provides a learning environment for young people where opportunities for caught social and emotional competencies can develop. When we imitate, we are constantly learning, moved not by discipline or effort but from motivation and desire.

Becoming a role model for youth is one of the most successful ways to support young people in developing essential values and competences through enjoyment and in a playful way.

Practical guidelines for high quality youth work

Be authentic.

Undertake a path of self-knowledge to show and express your unique individuality. “To be authentic, we must cultivate the courage to be imperfect and vulnerable. We have to believe that we are fundamentally worthy of love and acceptance, just as we

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“Role model”. *Dictionary.com*.
Random House, Inc. 2013.
Retrieved 25 January 2014.

are. I've learned that there is no better way to invite more grace, gratitude and joy into our lives than by mindfully practicing authenticity.”¹⁸

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Brown, B. (2012). *The Power of Vulnerability*

Take responsibility.

Taking responsibility gives us a choice, that of choosing how to respond to life's challenges. To take responsibility is to assume that the way we think, feel, act and relate speaks about what is going on within, and it is up to us to learn to manage this in a constructive way - not blaming external circumstances or others but rather seeing them as an opportunity to recognize and transform needs.

Be present.

Only by being present can we be aware of our thoughts, emotions and actions, and able to realise and take responsibility for whom we are, allowing authenticity and coherence to merge with our Youth Work. Learning to identify our judgements and being able to suspend them, will enable us to truly meet ourselves and others without building barriers.

Don't take things personally.

What others do to us is not personal, and understanding that it is simply the way they can behave/express themselves at that particular moment gives us the opportunity for change. When you realise this, you are able to remain neutral and have enough hindsight to manage conflict situations in a positive way.

Always learn from experience.

Most experiences provide an opportunity for personal development, but in order to take advantage of our experiences, we need to reflect about how they can help us. Whatever experience comes into your life is a means for evolving.

Enjoy what you do.

We need to find new ways of being creative and playful with our work to ensure our wellbeing and self-care as Youth Workers. Enjoyment is essential for preserving our wellbeing and providing a nurturing presence to young people.

Manage limits.

Setting limits is essential for building healthy relationships - setting clear boundaries of what is and isn't permitted helps us create a safe space and invite an attitude of respect and freedom within the group. It also implies managing our own limits as youth workers and asking for help if needed - for example, at times when the youth worker feels they have no tools for managing the situation, or when there is a crisis situation. In doing so, the youth worker shows that

'Becoming a role model for youth is one of the most successful ways to guide young people in developing essential values and competences in an enjoyable and playful way.'

We need to find new ways of being creative and playful in our work as this will ensure our wellbeing and self-care as Youth Workers. Enjoying our work is essential in preserving our wellbeing and providing young people with a nurturing presence.'

asking for social support is a source of strength, and that we are part of a larger whole.

Integrate theory into practice.

As youth workers, we need to integrate theory into practice to be coherent with the values and competences we teach to young people. Theory alone will not lead us to transformation: only by understanding at a deeper level and integrating this knowledge in our daily life will we be able to transfer it as living experience to Young people.

Have a purpose in what you do.

It is important to know that a sense of purpose not only helps us to find and do things that add meaning to our life, it also helps to put things into perspective when challenging situations arise, allowing us to refocus on the things that are meaningful to us and to move on, evolving with the experience.

Truly care about others.

Learning to deeply understand the circumstances of young people, seeing their longing, fears and needs, will help us to value them and see beyond appearances. The relationship needs to be built on mutual trust and acceptance, letting go of any personal goal or results.

Suggestions for further learning

- Brown, B. (2012). The Power of Vulnerability, Gotham Books
- Or watch Brown's famous Ted talk: The Power of Vulnerability: https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability?language=nl

KEY CHARACTERISTIC 6: **CREATE SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

Description

The United Nations choice of “Safe Spaces for Youth” as the theme for the 2018 International Youth Day wasn’t accidental. Creating safe youth environments is an important precondition for any kind of learning and personal development processes. And in this context “safety” goes well beyond ensuring there is no threat to physical safety. According to the United Nations, “Youth need safe spaces where they can come together, engage in activities related to their diverse needs and interests, participate in decision making processes and freely express themselves”¹⁹. Hence, safe learning environments for youth equally means that young people can freely express themselves, interact with others and build social relations without the fear of being attacked, judged or discriminated against.

Simply said, we cannot promote Positive Mental Health if the essential need for safety is not met in the first place. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986) lists Creating supportive environments as one of the five key areas of action that can be applied to improving population mental health. The Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Youth Sector published as part of this project goes further and refers to the Pyramid of Youth Program Quality developed by the Weikart Centre for Youth Program Quality, which puts safe environment at the base of the pyramid, and supporting environment as the second level.

Practical guidelines for high quality youth work

First things first – ensure physical safety.

It is impossible to begin even thinking about ensuring emotional safety if young people fear being physically attacked or feel in danger. Start by setting ground rules that absolutely cannot be broken, and make sure forbidding physical violence is on the list. Ensuring those rules are respected by everyone is the next

‘Safe learning environments for youth means that young people can freely express themselves, interact with others and build social relations without the fear of being attacked, judged or discriminated against.’

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

important step, and for that you will need a committed team of youth workers who are not afraid to confront unacceptable behaviors immediately.

Co-create the safe rules.

As with everything else, young people will have much stronger ownership if they are involved in the process of creation. Whenever possible, create the rules for the safe space together, and have the young people sign them or express their agreement in another way. This way, you will ensure that both youth workers and young people have the same expectations regarding acceptable behavior, and you will have grounds for intervening when rules are broken.

Be a role model.

Talk the talk and walk the walk, otherwise young people won't take the rules seriously. Youth workers should always model behaviors that young people can refer to and copy, and in the case of creating safe environments that is absolutely essential. This doesn't just mean that you will respect the agreed rules, but that you will also defend them and react when they are broken. Only then can you expect young people to do the same and protect their peers when necessary.

Look through young people's lenses.

When creating a safe space, always bear in mind that we are talking of young people's safety, not yours. This means that sometimes you will even need to seriously consider things that might seem trivial to you. Remember that young people come from different backgrounds and experiences and be prepared for anything from their past or their present surroundings to negatively affect their mental health.

You can explore more about the topic of safe youth spaces on the official web page of United Nations International Youth Day 2018.

Suggestions for further learning

- Albers, T. (2021). Nature and Positive Mental Health. In: Albers, T. & Salomons, O. (Eds). *Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation.
- Albers, T. (2021). Trauma and the Body. In: Albers, T. & Salomons, O. (Eds). *Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation.

'Young people will have much stronger ownership if they are involved in the process of creation. Whenever possible, create the rules for the safe space together, and have the young people sign them or express their agreement in another way'

- Anatasov, D. (2021). Creating Safe Spaces for Young People. In: Albers, T. & Salomons, O. (Eds). *Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation
- D'Agostino, M. (2021). Less Digital, more Outdoors in Nature. In: Albers, T. & Salomons, O. (Eds). *Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation.
- Salomons, O. (2021). Why Connecting with Nature Stimulates Youth Wellbeing. In: Albers, T. & Salomons, O. (Eds). *Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field*. Aalten: Anatta Foundation.



KEY CHARACTERISTIC 7: **BUILDING RESPECTFUL AND SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE**

Description

Relationships are important to every living being. Relationships not only make us feel connected with others and the natural world around us, but also with our own inner world. In youth work, as in any other supportive relationship, the quality of the relationship is fundamental for the outcome of the work being done. That is, if for example when there is little trust between the young person and the youth worker, then there is no feeling of emotional safety and learning will not be optimal. If, on the other hand, there is a relationship based on trust and respect between the youth worker and the young person, growth and development can occur more easily in both a caught and taught manner.²⁰

From the youth worker's perspective, there can of course be several barriers to developing and sustaining relationships: lack of time, caseloads that are too high, too much emphasis on the bureaucratic form filling aspects of the job; a fear of complaints; accusations of over-involvement and the adverse emotional impact they have when forming close relationships with children and young people. But all of these become irrelevant in light of the positive youth outcomes that safe and trustworthy relationships bring about, even with only one adult: young people develop self-confidence, self-esteem, self-worth, self-reliance and a strong sense of identity and belonging.²¹ Furthermore, with these foundations in place, young people are supported in long term positive outcomes in education, health and overall well-being.

In the end, most of us became youth workers because we simply care about the wellbeing of young people, and that is reason enough to be taking care of the quality of the relationship we have with them.

Read more about *taught* and *caught* ways of learning social and emotional competencies on page 32 of the (full theoretical framework)

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Karen Winter (2015) in her online article provides an overview of literature around this topic: 'Supporting positive relationships for children and young people who have experience of care' has listed research that supports these claims. Visited on 3-3-2021 (<https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/supporting-positive-relationships-children-young-people-experience-care>)

Practical guidelines for high quality youth work

In our experience most youth workers are experts in building positive relationships based on trust and respect and would most likely not need any guidelines on how to develop a positive relationship with young people. If, however, you would like to develop your own relationship-building-and-sustaining qualities, following your own youth worker intuition or learning from a colleague that you and young people think is very competent in this domain, could be a good starting point. We have listed a few guidelines below that can support you in your youth worker development.

Listening without judgement

First of all, let us remind you the difference between hearing and listening. By now you certainly know that as a youth worker, the mere process of perceiving spoken language is far from enough – you need to make a concentrated effort to understand what is being said to you by the young person. Moreover, in youth work, we ought to apply not just listening, but active listening – which can be defined as a “soft skill that directs the focus from what’s in your head to the words coming from the outside”²², something that is often consciously practiced by youth workers.

In this handbook, we invite you to take yet another step in developing your listening skills. Listening without judgment means that you apply active listening without assessing or evaluating what is being said to you by the other person. It is easier said than done, however simple it may seem. That is because of how our minds work - constantly evaluating everything we hear and see. With our minds unconsciously using our own system of values to evaluate everything around us, our judgments are always based on our own perspective. Which is not always the only correct perspective, or at least not the only valid one. In youth work, it is essential to be able to see things from the perspective of the young person.

In practical terms, listening without judgment means that the next time you think that something a young person says is wrong, offending or unjustified, you should try to pause and remind yourself that you are evaluating the words from your point of view. This is not to say that you have to immediately free yourself of the judgment – or that you can even do that at all. But being aware of the fact that you are judging is the first step. Take a breath and remind yourself that the young person has their own view of things, based on their own values and conditionings – many of them completely unknown to you. To listen without judgment means to suspend taking a position according to your judgment, and accepting that what is being said might be true and

‘Trying to solve situations and fix problems is in our very nature. The point of youth work is not to solve the problems for the young people, but to empower them to solve the problems themselves.’

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University of the People: <https://www.uopeople.edu/blog/why-is-active-listening-important/> (visited on 8-3-2021)



*'Being aware of the
fact that you are
judging is the first
step'*

valid for the young person. You don't have to agree and accept everything that is being said, but let the person own their words and acknowledge their position before expressing your opinion. It's a skill that you need to practice, and with time it will become easier, even when your opinions are completely different from the ones being shared.

Being authentic

One of the unique aspects of being a youth worker is that you need to keep your authenticity at all the times. Young people are very good at distinguishing when someone is authentic or just acting. In fact, we are all quite good at that. Just think of a situation in which you have thought that someone was not true to themselves – and you were right. It is not very difficult, right?

Authenticity is important in youth work because it is the base of the relationship between young people and youth workers. For the young person to believe and follow what you are saying, they need to trust that you truly mean what you say. And even more than that – they need to see that you are true to yourself also through actions, not just words. It is often said that youth workers are seen as role models by young people, and that is a huge responsibility. If a young person sees that you are saying one thing and doing another, they might rightly presume that you are not telling them the truth. And then it becomes very difficult to convince them to follow your words. To them, you can easily turn into a hypocrite, losing all authority and trust.

Think of being authentic in the following way – if you tell young people that smoking is bad for them while smoking cigarettes in front of them, would you expect them to follow your advice? If they see you as a role model, do you think they will listen to your words, or copy your behaviour? The same applies to all areas in which we work with young people, including those related to promoting positive mental health. If you ask young people to take care of their wellbeing, you need to make sure that you are taking care of yourself in the first place. If you ask them to build healthy relationships with others, make sure that you yourself model such relationships.

In non-formal education and youth work, we want young people to learn from examples and experiences. As a youth worker, you are the one providing such experiences. Sometimes experiences are created as a planned activity, but often they just come up from daily interactions. So, next time you say or do something in front of young people, remember that they will most probably remember it, and that it will influence how they trust you in the future.

Suppressing the 'repair reflex'

Trying to solve situations and fix problems is in our very nature. Someone tells you they have a problem, and you immediately think about how the problem can be solved. Being good and fast at fixing things is usually a great skill, but in youth work it can be counter-productive. Why is that so?

The point of youth work is not to solve young people's problems, but to empower them to solve their problems themselves. You will not be always around them and able to jump in when a situation arises, and it is much more sustainable to help them develop the skills they need to solve a problem if and when it occurs. In that sense, the role of the youth worker is similar to that of being a mentor, accompanying the young person along the way and providing them with ongoing guidance.

This 'repair reflex' does not only apply to extrapersonal problems, it could just as well apply to the young people themselves. As youth workers, we often feel responsible for the wellbeing of the young people we work with, and when we see or think we see someone showing behaviours or ways of thinking that do not help them to be well, we could be tempted to 'fix them'. And that is where it can be challenging, as we may say that we do it out of compassion or care for the young person. Yet, this 'repairing' response does not help the young person to become more self-reliant and resilient. It also undermines their sense of self-esteem and self-determination.

Instead of repairing, when you observe a problem or something that you think needs fixing, start by suspending your instinctive need to jump into action. Acknowledge your need to 'repair', and then keep in mind that you want the young person to be autonomous and self-determinant. The best thing you can do for the young person is to start raising awareness of what is going on. If the young person then recognises that something has to be changed in whatever way, then you can help them identify steps needed. They may need to develop some new skills to be able to do that – and you can support them in cultivating and developing those skills.

Be close to them, but don't take control of the situation. This may require patience, as it is often much easier to 'repair' someone, then to help them 'repair' themselves. You may see them 'fail' a couple of times, but remember that this is part of learning. Becoming 'stronger' sometimes means not succeeding at first. Of course, at times, you will need to become more involved and even take things into your own hands, but even then, make sure the young person understands what is going on. Only then you will

READ MORE

Key characteristic 4 - Discover the motivation of young people



support them to grow into mature, strong individuals, responsible for their own wellbeing.

READ MORE

Key characteristic 8 - Enlarge
self-care

Getting to know your stress system

Learning about nonviolent communication

And we are back to communication. Not surprisingly, as communication is the essence of relationships. When communicating with young people, and communicating in front of young people, we should always follow the principles of nonviolence. Nonviolent communication is more than simply “not yelling”. It is about being aware of your own needs and emotions; being open to listen to others’ feelings and needs with compassion and empathy; expressing your feelings and needs in an assertive way, and facilitating a mutually acceptable and beneficial solution. When you communicate in this way, you are aware of what is important to you and to the other person, and you work on finding a mutual solution in a way that strengthens your relationship.

As with everything else, young people will learn from your communication style and will likely copy your behaviour in future situations. That is why the way you communicate is so important. At the same time, you cannot always expect that the other person will communicate in the same way. People often do not talk about feelings and needs, especially if they are angry or if they feel personally attacked, or they may simply lack the vocabulary to express what they are really feeling. In these situations, it is very easy to fall into the trap of ‘non-communication’. As a youth worker, you need to remain calm and peaceful, and bring the conversation from positions or attacks back to feelings and needs. And to achieve that, you should be the first one communicating in such a way. You can’t expect the other person to apply nonviolent communication if you don’t apply it yourself. Even if it does not feel comfortable, you should take your guard down and begin communicating with empathy and compassion, and then explain to others why is it important that they do that as well.

As a youth worker, you are the one with the power to reframe conflict from something that is dangerous and destructive, to something that can be productive and even creative. You are the one who can promote being mindful of other people’s feelings, even when we are angry with them. You are the one who can show the difference between compassionate and violent communication. And very likely, you may be the only example or one of the very few in the life of a young person, so embrace that role with respect and responsibility.

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Suggestions for videos

- https://www.ted.com/talks/frances_frei_how_to_build_and_rebuild_trust
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_4BsyZOdNXc



KEY CHARACTERISTIC 8: **DEVELOP SELF-CARE**

Description

Self-care is proactive healthcare. It is a pathway to promoting wellbeing, to feeling whole, healthy, happy and the best version of oneself. It is a way of nourishing ourselves and rebuilding energy so as to recover from the storm of stress we confront during our daily life.

How is it possible that we, as care givers, never learnt how to take care of ourselves? Self-care is essential. It is more than doing something for ourselves every now and then. Our job is emotionally demanding. We need to recover from daily stress. We feel compassion for the people we work with, but in order to be compassionate with others, we must first be able to have compassion for ourselves, otherwise we run a greater risk of burnout.

We all are looking to flourish, to experience joy, feel engaged with the world and experience meaningful lives. But the stresses and strains of our daily lives makes this a challenge. Using self-care, we learn to deal with daily challenges. How do you take care of your own wellbeing?

Practical guidelines for high quality youth work

Reflect on what went well.

Try to write briefly every day about a specific situation at work. Reflect on successful situations. You counter your own growth when you only evaluate negative situations. Our brain automatically looks at the negative, a negativity bias necessary for our survival, so we have to consciously reflect on successful situations.

When you are in touch with your core qualities and values, your psychological capital, you broaden your thinking. According to professor Fred Korthagen, expert in the field of reflection and growth, this leads to higher motivation, self-confidence and more effective behavior.

Try to answer the following questions so that it becomes clear what caused working in a flow, or when it stopped:

- What was I thinking?
- What did I feel?
- What did I want?

'We are all looking to flourish, to experience joy, feel engaged with the world and experience meaningful lives. But the stresses and strains of our daily lives makes this a challenge. Using self-care, we learn to deal with daily challenges.'

- What did I do?
- What would I have liked most?
- What qualities in me make this so important for me?
- What values are really important for me here?

Self-care is a radical act.

It means that you accept reality as it appears. Accepting a difficult situation does not mean agreeing, being passive, giving in or giving up. On the contrary, accepting reality means also accepting a situation that is not enjoyable and that triggers feelings of pain, anger or fear. It means that you slow down and quietly observe from your observing self, without judgment, taking the time to see how a situation is developing.

You do this by letting go of the fight or flight response and opening yourself from a calm, quiet position to fully experiencing reality as it is in this one moment. By being present and acknowledging what you feel and experience in your body and mind, “This evokes anger”, “this evokes sadness”, without taking action. The goal of accepting reality is to allow less suffering and a greater sense of freedom and peace. You have to take care of yourself first, before you can take care of others.

Getting to know your stress system.

Each event or information passes the checker in our brain that decides what is it or isn't safe. When we are very stressed, the checker will mark more and more situations as threatening. We enter into a survival mode and have four possible responses: fight, flight, freeze, or seek social support.

What is your inclination in difficult situations? Does the fighter wake up and tend to attack? Maybe you can no longer react at all (the freeze reaction), or you withdraw (the flight reaction) or seek social support (a way out of the stress-reaction)?

The tricky part is that, when we get into a survival mode, the switch to empathy is turned off and, before you know it, your fighter is bellowing at someone. How is that possible? This is how our brain works. It is a normal reaction of our survival mode. We don't need empathy when a lion is standing in front of us. We live with a survival system which still is adapted to surviving in the savannah.

In our current hectic environment, with a great deal of performance and work related pressure, competition and tense situations with youngsters, the survival system kicks in far too often. We have come to experience more and more situations as threatening. However, we thrive in situations where we work together and support each other, where we co-exist. Then we feel safe and able to flourish.



'Self-care is a radical act. It means that you accept reality as it appears.'

Learning to recognize your stress-reaction in your body is the first step: your heart rate goes up, you feel sick in your stomach, breathing becomes shallow, you might experience dizziness or cramped muscles. And when you notice a stress-reaction, learn to use relaxation and discover what works for you. Concentrating on abdominal breathing, listening to music, looking at nature. We can't switch off our survival system, but we can switch on our calming system, by doing activities that are soothing.

Turn on your calming system.

Researchers of the Green Mind Theory found that activities that we do with full attention, in which we are completely immersed, cause our internal buzz to calm down. Such a state of mind is also called flow. The researchers had previously discovered that nature-based activities stimulate the calming system. In nature, we get a broader, soft, easier focus, that nurtures our depleted sources of attention. Our calming system is turned on, allowing us to use less oxygen, lower our heart rate and blood pressure and increase the levels of serotonin and dopamine.

Consciously add immersive activities to daily routines and habits to allow for recovery from stress.

What do you do to nurture yourself and recover from daily stresses? Explore what kind of immersive activities you already do, and what else you would like to engage in. Ask yourself: what did I enjoy doing as a child? Find out how to make more room for these type of activities in your daily life.

Think of:

1. Nature activities: hiking, fishing, camping, gardening, walks on the beach
2. Craft activities: wood carving, drawing, knitting, baking, writing, making jam
3. Meditative activities: yoga, tai chi, mindfulness, meditation, spa days
4. Social activities: dancing, eating with friends, sex, massage, museum visits, games
5. Sports activities: running, fitness, tennis, spending time with friends

When you feel that you don't have the time to recover, remember that we need at least some nurturing micro moments dotted throughout the day.

Be aware of the empathy trap.

Understand the difference between empathy and compassion. We learn as youth workers how important empathy is. But what happens when we feel what the other person is feeling? Empathy

exhausts us and is a highway to burnout, argues Yale psychologist Paul Bloom in his book *Against Empathy, the Case for Rational Compassion*. Bloom specializes in developing and understanding ourselves and others.

How can such a wonderful quality of ‘empathizing with others’, seen by many as the ultimate source of goodness, have such disastrous consequences? We can divide empathy into cognitive empathy and emotional empathy. With cognitive empathy you try to understand what goes on in someone’s head, what gives them pain, sadness, joy, without feeling it yourself.

With emotional empathy, you feel what the other person is feeling, and this is exactly what you should try to avoid. By training our observing self²³, we can still be involved with the other person and understand what they are going through, while emotionally distancing ourselves from our own feelings. We often think that we are less caring when we don’t feel the pain of others, but compassion helps you to understand that emotional distancing does not make you a bad person. On the contrary, it makes you a compassionate listener.

What happens in the brain when we feel what others are feeling? Laboratory studies show that when people are asked to feel what another person is feeling, the experience often leaves them unhappy and gloomy. Brain researcher Tania Singer discovered that different areas in the brain light up when feeling what another person feels (emotional empathy) or understanding what another person is feeling (cognitive empathy).

For a study, Singer asked a group of subjects to feel empathy with their eyes closed for 15 minutes every day. After a week they felt more depressed. When she asked the group of subjects to not stand in the other person’s shoes, but to feel compassion - to keep an emotional distance and at the same time evoke as much warmth, care and love as possible - they felt a lot better. When we feel the suffering of others, it is exhausting and we get stressed. We can do our job much better when we connect with feelings of caring, warmth, kindness, love. It is a form of deep listening, which alleviates the suffering of the other person.²⁴

Various techniques you can train:

- Learning to recognize when the automatism concerns “feeling what the other feels”. Where do you feel the other person’s suffering in your body?
- Label your response. “Ah, my empathy button is turned on.” Recognize your emotional response, name it and switch to active listening.

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Read more about the idea of the observational self in section B, BEST PRACTICE 1: Theory U approach towards a positive mental health mindset

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Read more about deep listening in section B, BEST PRACTICE 1: Theory U approach towards a positive mental health mindset



- Be attentive to others through actively listening. This is your professional attitude, this is how you step into a conversation: friendly, compassionate, focused on the facts, summarizing, and asking further questions if necessary. And at the same time:
- Exercise courage. Courage to do whatever it takes, sometimes for the sake of something bigger than this one person.
- Feel for the other: connect with feelings of caring, warmth, kindness, love.

Develop self-compassion.

Self-compassion provides an oasis of calm to float through the raging seas of alternating positive and negative self-judgments. Beneath self-criticism there is often fear - and is that an effective motivator? Probably Not. Many people think that self-compassion is just a nice, fluffy way of pampering oneself. But self-criticism questions whether you are good enough. Self-compassion, on the other hand, is based on the question of what is good for you.

Beneath self-compassion is love, a driving force for growth. Love allows you to feel confident and safe, says Kristin Neff in her book *Self-Compassion, Stop Judging Yourself*. Fear makes you feel unsafe and threatened, causing unnecessary stress.

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'Awareness is a powerful tool to deal with the changes and challenges of everyday life and reflection is one of the most effective tools and processes for raising awareness.'

KEY CHARACTERISTIC 9: **STIMULATE GROUP REFLECTION AND SELF-REFLECTION**

Description

Young people, and particularly those from disadvantaged contexts or with little to no education and/or support, are often not aware of their strengths and frequently lack belief in their abilities to achieve anything. Luckily, EU youth programs create opportunities for young people to learn through personal experience, and promote spaces to develop self-confidence through positive individual and group experiences.

Non formal and experiential learning provide the ideal setting for young people to get out of their comfort zone, try things out, make mistakes and learn from them. In doing so, they reach a better understanding of themselves, others and the environment around them. Young people have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge as well as get in touch with their emotions and feelings, allowing them to gain ownership of their talents and learn how to use them effectively.

As stated in the framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Youth Sector²⁵, for young people, knowing who they are, by connecting to what they feel, how they think and how they relate to others, is very important for their personal growth. Being aware of their values and what they care for as well as knowing about their identity are also relevant for their development and the development of a positive mindset. Consequently, youth organizations and youth workers are key players in supporting young people to become more aware of themselves and others, through non formal activities.

Thus, creating a safe and caring learning environment as well as planning and organizing a framework for learning is fundamental. In non-formal and experiential learning activities, reflection is what contributes to raising awareness and promotes personal learning. As a result young people are empowered and become able to understand more coherently what they have learnt, how they

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Kuosmanen, T., Dowling, K. and Barry, M.M., (2020). *A Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Well-being in the European Youth Sector* - is accessible from the project website at: www.positivementalhealth.eu.

have learnt it and how they can use and benefit from the learning outcomes in the future.

Reflection supports young people – as well as youth workers – in getting to know their strengths and pitfalls better and avoid falling into routine actions that occur unconsciously and may interfere with an adequate response to what is happening in the present, when the information is drawn from a limited or partial view of reality. Awareness is a powerful tool to deal with the changes and challenges of everyday life and reflection is one of the most effective tools and processes for raising awareness.

Reflection is an introspective act in which the young person, individually or with the group, integrates the new experience with previous ones, making sense of what happens. Oftentimes, reflection is equated to evaluation, in the sense of rationally thinking about what can be improved in terms of performance. But reflection is much more than a logic cause and effect process, as it is a holistic process that involves feelings and beliefs.

Reflection is intended to explore subtle inner and relational processes, with the aim of revealing causes and personal triggers. Promoting reflection as a regular practice, either before, during or after a planned non formal activity in informal contexts, supports young people to face more complex or uncertain events and behaviours that require them to “dig deeper” to uncover explanations and possibly solutions that were not obvious.

Facilitating reflection is one of the key competences in youth work and one of the most empowering processes that young people can experience. It’s about questioning with the aim of encouraging participants to reflect on and be curious about how they think and feel about issues. It is through reflection that insights and learning can take place.

Practical guidelines for high quality youth work

Allow for reflection when needed,

in order for reflection to be perceived as a natural continuation of an activity or as an activity itself: it doesn’t have to be presented as an assignment or young people may show resistance to it. It can only be kindly invited by connecting with young people’s curiosity and involvement in the reflective atmosphere.

Reflection can take place prior to action, to explore what the personal and group emotions are when asked to jump into an activity or meet other groups/individuals. It can take place during



action, and particularly when there is a critical situation, a conflict or a crisis or when the group atmosphere feels weird. And, last but not least, post action reflection allows to review what happened, what the individual and group feelings were in relation to what happened and how these impacted the group.

Authentic reflection and deep personal insights happen when young people “own” what is being reflected upon and can connect it to their thoughts, feelings, values, intuitions and experiences. The learner is given a central role and is invited to take responsibility for his/her learning, which in this way becomes rooted in his/her perceptions and emotions. This is why it’s very important that the youth worker balances steering and not steering, guiding yet not controlling the intrinsic learning process that occurs during reflection. However paradoxical it might seem, reciprocity is fundamental in the learner-educator relationship, where the educator is co-responsible for the learning process and the learner owns his/her learning process.

Create an emotionally safe learning space.

Since reflection involves young people at an emotional and cognitive level, it is important for youth workers to create a healthy relationship with them, based on mutual trust, openness, empathy, transparency, dialogue and feedback (as a bidirectional process, from educator to the learner and vice versa). These elements contribute not only to allowing young people the right to talk about their ideas and feelings, but to also to supporting them while having those ideas and experiencing those feelings.

Create a reflective atmosphere.

It is about facilitating learning through a less direct and didactic way, with the awareness that young people slowly grow into reflection. The associative chains of thoughts and feelings contribute to creating a space for an attentive reflectiveness, meaning that young people are allowed to explore that which is at stake without having to follow a linear and logical way of thinking.

Group reflection is the ideal space for the reflective atmosphere to take place, as both interconnectedness (between young people themselves as well as with the youth worker) and collective intelligence stimulate the reflection process. Then the group reflection can become free-wheeling, in that not every idea or insight expressed is necessarily linked with the previous one. This means the reflective atmosphere is co-created, and what contributes to making a trusting and open reflective space is the youth worker’s own ability to reflect, questioning things differently, to be authentic and fully present, promoting dialogue and feedback to show openness, empathy, transparency and trust. Above all

showing trust in the learners' potential and capacity to engage in the learning process in a meaningful way.

Ask open and personalized questions.

Questions are adapted to what is happening in the here and now, bearing in mind what the learning context and the aim of the learning experience offered are. Asking open and personalized questions allows individuals to freely explore their point of view, and avoid narrowing their perspective on the issue. The questions can extend to what and when something has been noticed, how things evolved and what the impact on the person, others and context was. It's better to avoid too generic questions such as "what have I learnt?" and focus on questions that tackle the social and emotional competences addressed. Questions such as "what was triggering me when I reacted that way towards my companion" or "What made me feel satisfied about what I did in this situation" or "What didn't I do that I could have done when this happened" sound far more personalized. It also helps young people to focus more on the present moment and to avoid expressing opinions rather than reflecting. It's a matter of being process-directive rather than solely content-oriented.

Progressively deepen questioning.

Reflection always starts with a question, which requires to be very clear about the aim of the learning experience offered. The goals of the experience determine the sense of direction for the reflective process and function as a compass for questioning, which should be led from a sincere interest in the group members. A short and quick answer like "it was fun" or "I liked/didn't like the activity" can be a starting point, but doesn't bring a new meaning to the experience.

It is advisable to dig a little bit deeper as the reflection progresses, in order to get a more detailed view of the underlying arguments, assumptions and/or values. It's a matter of exploring by balancing the comforting and the confronting. So, to build on the initial answers of the previous examples one could ask "What made it fun for you" or "What made you like/not like this experience". To promote further reflection, it is also important at times to stimulate young people to question each other, such as asking "Is it clear for you what John is saying? How is it differing from or similar to what you are saying?", etc. It's always important to be careful not to ask rhetorical questions as well as always sense the group and decide, when it is the case, to stop. Sometimes, enough is enough.

Listen with attention and presence.

As previously mentioned, questioning should follow what is happening in the present, avoiding any hidden learning agenda. To build a "reflective space", questioning should be driven by the

'Facilitating reflection is one of the key competences in youth work and one of the most empowering processes that young people can experience. It's about questioning with the aim of encouraging participants to reflect on and be curious about how they think and feel about issues.'



genuine interest in young people with an attitude of non-judgmental curiosity for how they see, think and feel about that which is at stake. This means that providing too much information or interpreting what is being said generates misunderstandings and reduces the space for authentic and owned learning. When something is not clear or when one's thoughts are being steered away, it is best to check that what was said before was well understood before moving on to the next question. This attentive explorative attitude will be reflected in the group and will be modeled by the young people too.

Invite for detecting physical signals.

Being aware of one's own physical signs allows young people to better identify and engage with how they are feeling. It can give them better insights into what they like, and what makes them feel anxious, uncomfortable or angry, rather than satisfied or joyful.

Slow down and allow not knowing.

Reflection is a complex, nonlinear process that doesn't necessarily produce immediate insights. Slowing down and allowing proper time for answering is very important in the reflective process, so once the question has been asked, pause and be patient. Silence also speaks and shows something about the group process or the reflective space itself. Quick answers from young people might reveal an attempt to assimilate the answer to their prior knowledge.

Better not to expect the "right answer", but simply the answer that emerges in that moment. Making statements about what is true in the reflecting group will potentially close down the reflective space. Allowing moments of not-knowing helps young people to progressively unfold a good quality inner dialogue. Reflection is in fact a process where part of the information is elaborated unconsciously and insights are constructed via poetic arguments that are quite different from quick logical reasons.

Be a learner among learners.

It helps build the reflective space to question one's own thinking, or to allow young people to do so and explicitly value their inputs, particularly when they introduce a new element or. It is advisable to allow the dialogue to not always be centered on the knowledge and expertise of the educator, and to stimulate young people to have an open dialogue. This contributes to strengthening young people's sense of being part of a learning group and in enhancing a trusting atmosphere.

Allow diverse reflective practices.

What turns reflection into a healthy habit and consequently an effective tool for being more aware, is finding ways of making it manifest through reflective practices that young people can go

back to when needed. The underlying principle is that insights and learning can happen even well after a learning activity or experience has taken place. Reflective practice can help re-visit and strengthen neural connections, thus contributing in developing new habits, skills and mindsets.

Reflective practices are intended to support young people in learning to pay attention, listen to themselves, notice their assumptions and patterns, providing space for seeing the unseen and for looking at things from a different angle. This is reinforced by the fact that reflection is captured and expressed - written, spoken, pictorial, body posture - on a systematic basis. The idea behind this is that learning comes not just from the 'in the head' reflection but also from the process of representing the reflection itself.

Reflective practices contribute in supporting the individual's capacity to respond to challenges, make timely decisions, regulate emotions, build productive relationships and cope with stress. When the process of representation becomes a habitual activity, patterns and connections become visible. When suggesting reflective practices, it would be useful to keep in mind that individuals reflect and process information differently, according to their intelligence profile²⁶. Those who are word smart will prefer reflecting verbally or writing in a diary, those with a strong interpersonal intelligence will prefer to reflect alone or in silence with solo moments and those who have a prominent interpersonal intelligence will prefer to reflect in a group. Others with a strong bodily-kinesthetic intelligence will reflect better when doing something like walking or modelling clay. The ones with a strong naturalistic intelligence will prefer looking for an element to represent how they're feeling or what the experience means to them while walking in the woods. So bearing in mind that we are all different is very important in promoting reflection through diverse reflective practices.

Suggestions for further learning

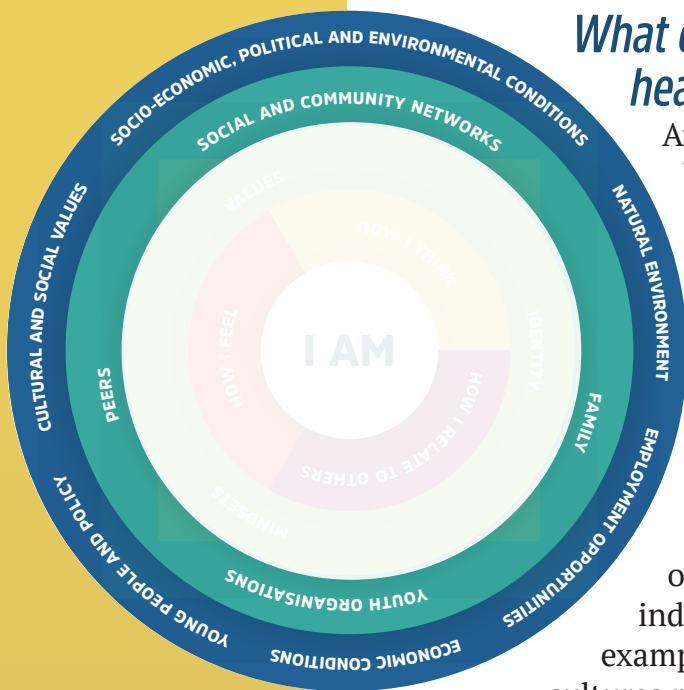
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SOCIETAL LEVEL FACTORS TO PMH

TWO OUTER RINGS OF THE FRAMEWORK FOR PMH



What does promoting positive mental health at societal level mean?

At societal level we, as youth workers, brainstorm for example on how we can create meeting places to promote wellbeing and flourishing. Active citizenship and finding a job for example are, for young people, important to feel that they can contribute to a better society.

We need to take into account that culture balance between individualistic and collectivistic orientations. The positive outcomes of a good life can apply for the individual, group or society. This means for example that young people in strong collectivist cultures may be more attuned to secure a better life for their family than for themselves.

Youth workers must therefore realise that the needs and values of young people are shaped by their cultural background. In Key Characteristic 10 you can find practical guidelines for cultivating a culture-sensitive approach.

The last Key Characteristic focuses on the importance of engaging the community while designing youth programs. Not simply because other social groups constantly interact with young people on a daily basis, but also because an essential part of young people's development is learning about their role in the society. Promoting positive mental health is most effective when there is an integrated approach, when all responsible parties are involved in contributing to young people's health and wellbeing.

KEY CHARACTERISTIC 10: **CULTIVATE A CULTURE-SENSITIVE APPROACH**

'The needs and values of young people and youth workers are shaped by their cultural background.'

Description

In positive mental health, the four pillars of a good life are: meaning, virtue, resilience, and well-being, which are all shaped by culture.²⁷ Cultures balance between individualistic and collectivistic orientations, and the positive outcomes of a good life can therefore be for the individual, the group or the society. This means for example that young people from strong collectivist cultures may be more attuned to securing a better life for their family than for themselves. For youth workers it is important to explore together with the group where they stand on the individualistic–collectivistic orientation dimension.

It is essential for young people to be in contact with their needs, and for us to realise that the needs and values of young people and youth workers are shaped by their cultural background. We often have a blind spot with regards to our own cultural background, as it feels natural, normal. We need to make the so called cultural iceberg visible.

In positive mental health, a cultural sensitive approach means that youth workers are non-judgemental of other cultures, exercising being open, curious, neutral, supporting, marvelling, active listeners - just like the anthropologist's openness to beliefs, thoughts, feelings and values of others. Youth workers also need to encourage this open mind amongst young people. By exploring culture in a cultural sensitive way, we can get the most out of cross-cultural encounters in youth settings.

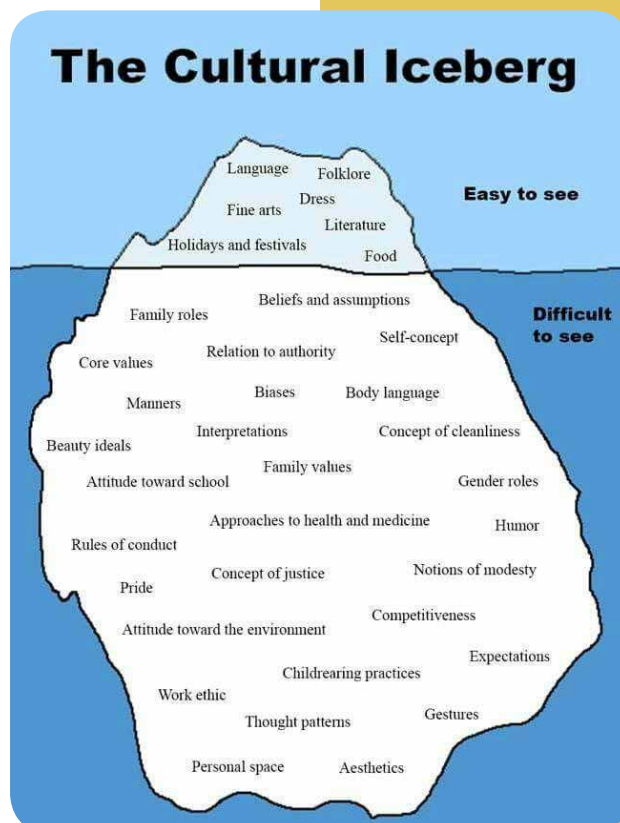
Practical guidelines for high quality youth work

Make the whole cultural iceberg visible.

The obvious parts of the iceberg are what we can see, such as musical preference, fashion, dialect; but the most important aspects of a

27

Wong, P.T.P. (2011). Positive Psychology 2.0: Towards a balanced interactive model of the good life, *Canadian Psychology*, may.



culture are often more challenging to understand. Values, or stigma around PMH are not always visible to the eye, but are often there and it is important to make them visible to be able to work with or through them. For example, when you work with young people, their idea of what happiness is, or maybe the meaning of life could be very different across cultures or generations. When you make these differences visible to both yourself as the youth worker and to the young people you work with, you can increase the impact of your programme.

Hierarchy. Be aware of the power distance dimension in relation to young people.

An important starting point in positive mental health is the equality between youth workers and young people. According to Hofstede²⁸, the power distance is one of the most important themes where cultures differ. When the power distance is small, the role of the educator is more student-centered. “Spontaneous student participation is considered normal; so is questioning and debating with the educator”. Countries with small power distance are presented as egalitarian. Interaction is thought to be independent of the actors’ authority status.²⁹

In countries with a large power distance, however, the educator is the authority figure, perceived as a ‘guru’ with ‘personal wisdom’, who outlines the intellectual paths to be followed and whose ideas are not questioned.

In youth settings, there are often young people who grew up in cultures where the educator is an authoritarian figure. This means that you need to discuss your role as a youth worker and investigate what young people’s expectations are. Youth workers can invite young people to debate and think for themselves, instead of following the leader.

Identity. Be aware that in different cultures the meaning of identity is on a continuum.

Being aware of the different orientation of cultural identities is an important step for young people to reflect on their needs. Realise that these orientations also differ within cultures, for example at a political level: where liberals have a more individualistic orientation and progressives a more collectivistic one.

Individual identity (individualism): each individual can pursue his or her own interest, without regard for others.

Group identity (collectivism): your identity is determined by the group to which you belong. The individual must be loyal to the group for the group to be loyal in times of need. People must maintain harmony with the other members of the group.

28

Hofstede, G.J. Pedersen, P.B. & Hofstede, G. (2002). *Exploring culture. Exercises, stories and synthetic cultures*, Intercultural Press.

29

Signorini, P. (2009). Developing alternative frameworks for exploring intercultural learning: a critique of Hofstede’s cultural difference model. *Teaching in Higher Education*, June

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Key characteristic 5 - Be a role model of positive mental health

‘By exploring culture, we can get the most out of cross-cultural encounters such as in youth settings.’

Intercultural learning.

Know yourself and your culture.

According to Luis Amorim³⁰, intercultural learning requires that you know yourself and where you come from, before being able to understand others. It is a challenging process as it involves very deeply rooted ideas about what is good and bad, about how you structure your world and your life. In a process of intercultural learning, what we take for granted and feel is essential is put into question. Our identity is challenged by other people's ways of doing and thinking and this occurs not always without conflict. Developing intercultural sensitivity is a gradual process, from denial to integration of difference.

Amorim points out that when you design youth programs, your intercultural learning process should be guided by the following principles:

- 'Respect for personal freedom and decision;
- Acceptance of other views as equal in value;
- Seeking reconciliation of different points of view;
- Being conscious of your personal responsibility in the process (engagement).'

Intercultural conversation.

Meet each other from an anthropologist's point of view.

Remind young people that when they meet other people, they primarily meet other individuals and not an alleged representative of another culture. This helps to prevent us from looking at others with the expectations we already have about that culture.³¹

30

Amorim, L. (2001). Intercultural Learning: A few awareness tips for European Fellows & Host Community Foundations (<https://www.salto-youth.net/tools/toolbox/tool/multicultural-groups-and-intercultural-learning-workshop.501/>)

31

Adriaansen, E. Meersschaert, E., Van Daele, S., Vogelare, W. & IJzerman, E. (2014). Blikopener. *Intercultureel leren in internationale jongerenprojecten*, Nederlands Jeugdinstituut <https://www.nji.nl/nl/Download-Nji/Publicatie-Nji/Blikopener-Intercultureel-leren-voor-internationale-jongerenprojecten.pdf>

KEY CHARACTERISTIC 11: **DARE TO INVOLVE THE COMMUNITY IN PROMOTING POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH**

*'An essential part
of young people's
development is
learning about their
role in the society'*

Description

"No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main." wrote the English author John Donne in 1624. This widely used quotation refers to the very ancient idea that human beings depend on each other and need to be part of a community to thrive. This has been long known in youth work, and engaging the wider community has always been an essential aspect of working with young people. This is important not only because other social groups constantly interact with young people on a daily basis, but also because an essential part of young people's development is learning about their role in society.

Working with the whole community is essential in promoting Positive Mental Health as well. Other social groups can be strong allies in endorsing practices that can support young people's PMH, and building healthy social relations is a central aspect of PMH in itself, as explained in the Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Youth Sector, developed as part of this project.

Practical guidelines for high quality youth work

Map the most relevant social groups.

Start by identifying the groups in your local community that have the most influence on young people. You can do this together with the young people themselves, by using participative methods such as community mapping. Such mappings allow you to not only identify the groups, but to also analyze the relations between them.

Plan both separate and joint activities.

Depending on the objectives of your activities, you need to decide

if you will work with the community groups separately or together; or start separately and then gradually bring the groups together. If you want to work on turning parents into allies, then it makes sense to plan separate educational activities for them, but if you want to increase overall community awareness of PMH, then you should definitely involve young people as well.

Go intergenerational.

Intergenerational activities are already an established practice in youth work. Bringing together generational groups that do not often meet can boost PMH on both sides. For instance, young people and seniors can share plenty of healthy practices, provide emotional support to each other and create unique learning opportunities.

Make links with existing community initiatives.

Remember that health, including Positive Mental Health, is an important concern for the whole community. There are a variety of public initiatives that support various practices important for PMH - promoting exercise, connection with nature, healthy food etc. Your community work will gain a lot of relevance if the community members see it as contributing to recognized and significant community causes.

To be successful at involving the community, we recommend that you start by acquainting yourself with the essential competences for community youth work. The Council of Europe Youth Work portfolio³² states “Support and empower young people in making sense of the society they live in and in engaging with it” as one of the competences for youth workers, while the European Training Strategy has a whole competence area called “Being Civically Engaged”³³. Take some time to assess your own competencies and look for learning activities that can support you in developing those competences.



<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680699d85>

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https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3753/180320_SALTO-CompetenceModel_Trainer_07_o.pdf

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SECTION B: **BEST PRACTICES, NARRATIVES AND INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD OF POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION**

Introduction

This section is dedicated to sharing youth workers experiences with other youth workers. Working on PMH promotion is something that requires the right approach as a youth worker and through the narratives in this section we try to give insight to how other organisations have found ways of achieving this. It is not an extensive list of resources or experiences of course. These examples come from the partners involved in this project who, like many other organisations, have success stories.

How to use Section B?

Each chapter contains the following elements:

Introduction to the approach

How can youth workers implement the positive mental health approach in their work? Get inspired by youth workers who already promote positive mental health in their daily work with young people. We selected four powerful approaches:

- **Theorie U** – Listening without judging and personal leadership,
- **Gestalt** – Awareness. Being in the here-and-now, connected to oneself, others and the environment,
- **Coaching** – How can you guide young people in a face to face setting on their flourishing path by exploring strengths, talents, goals and helping them to take the first step,
- **Positive psychology** – Focusing on young peoples positive qualities.

Narratives / case studies

Here you can read about experiences on how PMH has been used in youth work settings. Storytelling is a powerful way to share stories with the target group of youth workers. By sharing stories, we automatically make a connection with the reader. The stories told bring PMH ideas to life. We read about the power of each approach and what it brings young people and youth workers.

We read what changes and insights the method has brought. The focus is strongly on:

- What am I good at?
- What can I add to the lives of others?

Explanation of the narrative

In this part we explain elements of the approach that can be found in the narrative. What youth workers can learn from this narrative, and what the link to the theoretical framework is.

Practical strategies to use the approach by designing youth programmes and interventions

Practical tips on what to look for when getting started with each approach.

Resources / further reading

If you are inspired and want to learn more, this section provides tips for further learning.

Reflective questions

Each chapter contains some reflection questions that will help you to integrate the insights shared into your own daily youth work practice.

Read more buttons

Throughout the text you'll find link buttons to the 11 Key Characteristics explored in section A.

[READ MORE](#)

Example



Angelica Paci

BEST PRACTICE 1: 'THEORY U' APPROACH TOWARDS A POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH MINDSET

Introduction to the 'Theory U' approach

This chapter focuses both on the youth worker's competence of being able to listen with an open heart, going towards a generative listening approach, and on the young person's competence of knowing oneself and being able to operate a mind shift towards a more positive and constructive mindset. In the framework these two elements refer to:

- a. the youth worker to value diversity, build respectful, confidential, supportive and trusting relationships with young people and deal with challenging situations in a healthy and non-stigmatic manner;
- b. the young person, the areas of the framework addressed are the "I am" and "identity" domains. These two aspects jointly determine whether young people are aware of themselves, know their strengths and abilities, and understand how they see and appreciate themselves and others. "Having a positive sense of identity includes knowing and feeling good about yourself, feeling that you have a purpose and having confidence in the ability to learn and grow"³⁴.

Kuosmanen, Dowling & Barry (2020), *A Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Youth Sector*. Erasmus+ Project: Promoting positive mental health in the European Youth sector

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Key characteristic 1 - Take the whole human being into consideration

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Key characteristic 7 - Building respectful and supportive relationships with young people

About prejudice, listening and suspending judgement

As youth workers we are a point of reference for the group and, whether we like it or not, we are in a leadership position. At times, we can be confronted with challenging situations that require our full attention and presence. By presence, we mean the capacity to pay attention in the present moment, being with what is, without being judgmental or reactive.

Sometimes, a judgment is preceded by a prejudice, which occurs even before all the relevant and available facts are in. A prejudice is something that we develop from our experiences in life. It comes from our households, our cultural backgrounds, deep-seated views

and stereotypes shared about the world, personal experiences and ignorance. Prejudices provide misleading information that can create tension and conflicting situations and therefore hinder the creation of open and trusting relationships.

How to be aware of hidden biases

According to Dictionary.com, prejudice is “an unfavourable opinion or feeling formed beforehand or without knowledge, thought, or reason.” The word has two parts in the stem, “pre-” which means “before”, and “judice”, which is from the same word root as “judgment”, “judge”, and “judicial”. So literally, prejudice is judgment before the fact or facts, which happens through mental associations without awareness and intention.

Most of the time, prejudice is also accompanied by unconscious bias, so what matters is not whether we have it or not – and we all do – but to be aware of it. We can be aware of our own biases by paying very close attention to the feelings that come up for us in relation to people that we interact with. If we are aware of our hidden biases, we can monitor and attempt to improve underlying attitudes before they are expressed through behaviour.

Common sense suggests that a change in behaviour can modify beliefs and attitudes. It would seem logical that a conscious decision to be egalitarian might lead one to widen one’s circle of friends and knowledge of other groups. Being aware of our unconscious biases and wanting to overcome them is the first step towards suspending our voice of judgment and connecting empathically with others and, in doing so, allowing ourselves to be fully present.

A loving presence is a key factor in providing emotional support to others.

Minimizing the importance of the problems arising or insisting on following recommendations or offering offhand advice often causes relationship distress. So what is really needed as a youth worker is the ability to listen profoundly and be sincerely interested in the young people you’re in charge of.

Communication competency and the different levels of listening

In the Council of Europe Youth work competence³⁵ and in EU Salto’s Competence model³⁶ one of the listed youth workers’ competence is communicating meaningfully with others, with the aim of building positive relationships with individuals and groups. Among all the listed skills and attitudes, listening with openness and sincere interest is considered particularly relevant for effective communication. Listening means paying attention not only to the story, but also to how it is told, the use of language and voice and how the person is using



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Key characteristic 5 - Be a role model of positive mental health

www.coe.int/en/web/youthportfolio/youth-work-competenceYoutworker_Online-web.pdf.pdf

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A Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally (https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3460/CompetencemodelForYoutworker_Online-web.pdf.pdf)

her body. It is about being aware of the verbal as well as nonverbal messages and being present and engaged in the process. Often our main concern while listening is to formulate ways to respond and this is neither functional or generative in the communication process.

Theory U approach – be aware of the levels of listening

According to Otto Scharmer - professor at the MIT in Boston, creator of the Theory U and co-founder of the Presencing institute (www.presencinginstitute.org) - there are several levels of listening.

1. **Downloading** is the most basic and habitual form of listening. It is very direct, and usually only occurs when the individual is familiar with what they are hearing/being told, and are therefore only listening to confirm what they already know, or their current opinion, which is likely not to change. Everything they are hearing is being projected onto preconceptions of the situation, and is reflecting the past rather than the present moment.
2. **Factual listening**, which involves listening with an entirely open mind and without any presumptions or prior judgements. Individuals employing factual listening are attentive to new ideas and data, and are accepting of any differences from what they already know. The outcome is that their opinions or views about a situation may be affected by new information, which is now available to them. However, the analytic approach of factual listening is not always sufficient for bringing a positive change in the situation that's occurring.
3. **Empathic listening**, which requires an open heart and compassion, entails a deeper level of listening and a certain level of emotional intelligence. This is the ability to truly connect with the individual who is being listened to and to see the world, situation, subject or opinion as they do, through their eyes, which provides an emotional connection between listener and speaker. It involves setting aside one's own agenda, with the aim of focusing on building an emotional connection. The attention shifts from the listener to the speaker, enabling a deeper connection between the two. This provides the listener with alternative perspectives, which can help to shape and define their decision-making.
4. **Generative listening**, which implies an open will and the courage to take action and step into the unknown - a level of listening that goes directly to the source. It's engaging and explorative and resembles the art of good coaching. Scharmer sees it as the highest and most informative level of listening. It is a state of being in which everything slows down and inner

wisdom is accessed. In group dynamics, it is called synergy. In interpersonal communication, it is described as oneness and flow and requires the individual to establish a connection to the best possible future that is wanting to emerge in the present moment. This subsequently results in a profound shift and a truly deep sense of knowing and can be used to envisage personal development.

When youth workers operate a generative listening, they gain a far broader and strategic perspective on a matter as well as a far greater awareness of individuals, situations, or specific points of view. It is a competence that is particularly valuable to leaders and coaches, who need to understand and envisage the highest future possibilities. Through generative listening, youth workers become more able to envisage and put visions of the future into action. They do not see individuals and situations in relation to their past; instead, they are able to understand the young people's potential and the process that will enable a sustainable change to happen.

Narrative

Story of the youth worker who started to listen in a generative way

"I was leading a group of young people between the age of 16 and 17 with diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds from all over Italy. We were at an outdoor summer camp in the Circeo National Park in Sabaudia (Italy). This summer programme combines recreational activities in nature, such as biking, swimming, playing sports, canoeing and many other play activities, with structured educational activities that are meant to create learning opportunities for personal development and capacity building.

Among these, there are activities focusing on developing skills such as making a campfire, making knots, building a shelter with tarps, cooking food without using pots, reading a map, dealing with a budget, that also address the soft skills and attitudes of the young participants, such as teamwork, communication, orienting oneself, leadership, inclusion, etc.

The background idea for these outdoor activities is that education happens by going through real and challenging experiences in close contact with nature. This means that young people are encouraged to move on foot or by bike in a natural environment such as the sea, the lake, the forest and the promontory and to experience an essential and collective way of being together.



Key characteristic 9 - Stimulate
group reflection and
self-reflection

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Key characteristic 3 - Start with
a needs-assessment

READ MORE

Key characteristic 8 - Develop
self-care

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My personal experience begins almost at the start of the summer camp when one of the participants starts to behave in a confrontational and oppositional way. Day after day, the situation was getting worse, with this young boy targetting all the youth workers and his peers too. His behaviour was creating a sense of discomfort in all the other participants. The atmosphere was tense, heavy and disharmonious.

When we were moving between places by bicycle, this boy never respected the safety regulations. He would remove his helmet and overtake the other cyclists without respecting the line we had agreed on. He would cycle on his own, either going faster than the others or being slow and late, to avoid being in the group.

The situation culminated with the group being forced to go on foot for the rest of the journey due to this boy not respecting the safety rules. At this point, there was a very negative atmosphere. Participants were all demotivated and exhausted, including the defiant boy, who was not feeling satisfied at all, neither about himself nor about his experience. I was totally frustrated and I realised that the approach I had promoted until then was not working.

I had tried all sorts of approaches ranging from dialogue to being more rigid and demanding towards the young boy.

I also tried to involve the entire group in collective reflections about what was happening. However, this wasn't bringing any change other than hostility towards the boy and stiffness and closure in the group. My inner dialogue was constantly engaged in finding a strategy for the situation to positively evolve, and I started to become aware that the behaviour of the young boy was still dysfunctional and was not supportive, neither for his wellbeing or for the wellbeing of the group and the whole context.

The solution to my challenge, that affected the entire group, came the moment I understood his behaviour was definitely a demand for attention. I asked myself what his need could be and what to do to contribute to the young boy's wellbeing. By observing him at a closer range and chatting informally, I figured out that he might be needing to be further acknowledged for his qualities and no longer be treated as the troublemaker but as a responsible young man.

What contributed to my mind shift wasn't something he did, but in suspending my voice of judgment and stopping to think of him as the confrontational one. I was turning down the volume of my critical voice towards him and really focusing on appreciating his strengths.

The first thing I did was to assign him the responsibility of leading the group of peers during our bike transfers. He was in charge of checking that all his colleagues were keeping up and that nobody was left behind. I showed him trust and valued his ability to ride the bike. He was proud of being acknowledged for his qualities and his mind-set changed, from wanting to disturb the group to wanting to take care of himself and others. Also, the group was encouraged to see their friend from a different perspective.

My personal learning point was that it's not easy to change a point of view and suspend judgment, particularly when, as educators, we are confronted with a defiant attitude and we ourselves experience a strong emotional response. What helped me was to think about my intention and the purpose of the organization I work in, which is to take care of the wellbeing of individual persons and the group. The atmosphere became more serene and a sense of wellbeing was perceived by everyone. The young boy felt empowered and had an opportunity to work on his personal development.

Reflection brought him to approach the other activities with more involvement and responsibility. My personal reflection was on the meaning of wellbeing, adding to the physical safety the notion that it's important to acknowledge and value the quality of young people, by involving them in concrete actions, and to overcome any kind of initial prejudices, by nurturing the relationships and practicing a deeper level of listening."

Explanation of the case

Reflections on the levels of listening

The testimony above shows how the levels of listening can be applied to oneself and others. The youth worker has in fact deeply listened to himself and challenged his prejudice about young people being troublemakers and his unconscious biases of interpreting the boy's opposing behaviour as aggressive. Initially, this prejudice didn't allow the youth worker to observe and listen more deeply what the need behind that particular behaviour was. The mind shift, from "What can I do to avoid certain things to happen" to "What can I do to leverage the potential of this young boy and how can I empower him to express this potential in a positive way", happens when the youth worker opens his mind, suspends his judgment and explores with sincere curiosity what really matters to the young person. He moves from a first level of listening (downloading) where he is mainly focused on what he can confirm about what he already knows, to listening empathically.

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Key characteristic 4 - Discover the motivation of young people

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Key characteristic 6 - Create safe learning environments

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Key characteristic 7 - Building respectful and supportive relationships with young people

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Key characteristic 2 - Focus on social and emotional learning

Practicing an empathic and generative listening needs courage and intention, as it challenges one's habitual way of thinking and behaving, in favour of a more open, kind and compassionate way of looking at ourselves and others. It represents a direction towards positive mental health in youth workers, as well as young people, as it contributes to developing their social and emotional competencies in terms of creating and building positive and healthy relationships.

The quality of the relationship between youth workers and young people allows for creative spaces where young people feel free to express themselves, where they can experience flow and thrive. Moreover, practicing empathic and generative listening promotes resilience, as it represents a "brain, heart and gut" workout in the face of challenges and uncertain situations. It encourages individuals to look at things with fresh eyes and to be brave enough to leap into the unknown, with the confidence that one's intuitive mind is able to detect all the necessary data for sensing the future that is wanting to emerge.

Some suggestions for practicing the different levels of listening

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Key characteristic 9 - Stimulate group reflection and self-reflection

Reflective practices during experiential learning activities

As in the case described above, any structured experiential learning activity that engages a group of young people in problem solving - such as a hike where they need to orient themselves with a map to find the suggested camping area, or build their own shelters or setting a campfire rather than deciding on what to buy and cook - is an excellent opportunity for reflecting on the level of listening one is engaging in. Any structured activity that involves group dynamics is, in fact, an opportunity for the youth worker to observe what's happening in the present moment at individual and group levels, particularly at critical moments or in moments of crisis.

Reflection questions that challenge one's assumptions, prejudices and biases are crucial for bringing to the surface what's happening within, at either individual or group level. Young people are supported in becoming more aware of their reaction habits and unconscious biases by mentioning the facts being noticed, observing and sharing the nonverbal signals witnessed and inquiring, using reflective questions such as:

- "What are you feeling when this is happening?"
- "What are your thoughts when you are feeling this way?"
- "What would you need to overcome this?"
- "How can I and/or the group support you to overcome this?"

The U-Process Coaching circle

The coaching circle or case clinic³⁷ is a training tool developed by Otto

Source https://www.presencing.org/files/tools/PI_Tool_CaseClinic.pdf

Scharmer and the Presencing Institute to allow members of a group/team of peers to practice their levels of listening. The group/team supports, as consultants, a person (case giver) who is currently stuck in a challenging situation, to find new ways of looking at the issue and developing new approaches to respond to it. The main principles the case clinics are based on are that case givers need to be a key player in the case, and the case needs to be a current and tangible leadership challenge. There isn't any hierarchical relationship among participants and the consulting peers do not give any advice, but rather listen deeply to the resonance that the case they are hearing has on them. The invitation is to suspend judgment on what is being heard and to keep mind, heart and will open to tune into what is being narrated.

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Key characteristic 10 - Cultivate a culture-sensitive approach (on leadership)

Coaching circle process

Roles and sequence

- **Case giver:** Shares his/her personal aspiration and leadership challenge that is current, concrete, and important, and that he/she happens to be a key player in. The case is presented in 15 min and it should stand to benefit from the feedback of peers. The case giver is invited to include his/her personal learning threshold (what do you need to let go of and learn?).
- **Coaches:** Listen deeply - they don't try to "fix" the problem, but listen deeply to the case giver while also attending to the images, metaphors, feelings and gestures that the story evokes in them.
- **Timekeeper:** One of the coaches manages the time

STEP	TIME	ACTIVITY
1	2 min	Select case giver and time keeper
2	15 min	<p>Intention statement by case giver</p> <p>Take a moment to reflect on your sense of calling. Then clarify these questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Current situation: What key challenge or question are you up against? 2. Stakeholders: How might others view this situation? 3. Intention: What future are you trying to create? 4. Learning threshold: What do you need to let-go of - and what do you need to learn? 5. Help: Where do you need input or help? Coaches listen deeply and may ask clarifying questions (but don't give advice!)
3	3 min	<p>Stillness</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Listen to your heart: Connect with your heart to what you're hearing. 2. Listen to what resonates: What images, metaphors, feelings and gestures come up for you that capture the essence of what you heard?

4	10 min	Mirroring: Images (Open Mind), Feelings (Open Heart), Gestures (Open Will) Each coach shares the images/metaphors, feelings and gestures that came up in the silence or while listening to the case story. Having listened to all coaches, the case giver reflects back on what s/he heard.
5	20 min	Generative dialogue: All reflect on the case giver's feedback and move into a generative dialogue on how these observations can offer new perspectives on the case giver's situation and journey. Go with the flow of the dialogue. Build on each other's ideas. Stay in service of the case giver without pressure to fix or resolve his/her challenge.
6	8 min	Closing remarks, by coaches and by case giver: How do I now see the situation and way forward? Thanks & acknowledgment: An expression of genuine appreciation to each other.
7	2 min	Individual journaling to capture the learning points

We recommend you stick to the times suggested for this activity, as it is planned to activate the intuitive mind of participants. No need for prior preparation of the narrative from the case giver: the intention is that what is alive in the speaker is what matters the most to him/her.

The three minutes of stillness and silence is for each person in the circle, to connect with their inner source of knowing and feel the resonance of the case in them, with their whole body. This allows to steer from excessive analysis of the data and rational thinking, with the underpinning idea of listening with one own's open heart and sincere interest. The feedback, given through images, feelings, sensations and body movements that have arisen, suggests that there is no space for judgment or direct advice. We would recommend using this tool with your colleagues or with young people above 18 years old.

Suggestions for further learning and resources

- On Theory U https://www.presencing.org/assets/images/theory-u/Theory_U_Exec_Summary.pdf
- D'Agostino, M. (2021). Less Digital, more Outdoors in Nature. In: Albers, T. & Salomons, O. (Eds). Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Mental Health in Youth Work. Sharing Emerging Perspectives from the Field. Aalten: Anatta Foundation.

Reflection questions

- How often do I detect what's happening in me at an emotional level when something is happening in the group?
- To what extent and how confident am I in allowing the group to organize themselves autonomously and follow their dynamic without intervening or directing them, however assuring their safety?
- How often am I taking time and asking focused questions for the individuals and the group to reflect upon what is emerging from the experience?
- During reflection time, how attentively am I listening to the person speaking without losing contact with the others in the group?
- To what extent am I able to suspend judgment and observe with sincere interest and curiosity?
- To what extent am I asking for clarification and checks for correct understanding?
- To what extent and how confident am I to embrace what's coming from the group without judging them and at the same time offering young people constructive feedback for them to flourish?
- To what extent and how open am I to receive feedback from the young people?
- How often am I using the group as a source for learning, meaning also promoting peer coaching and collective moments for insight sharing?
- How often am I allowing moments of silence during group discussions and how confident am I to use it as a tool to facilitate the group process?
- To what extent am I allowing moments of not knowing (meaning that sometimes no answer follows a question that I ask)?
- Am I aware of my prejudices and my biases?
- Where is my attention directed when I'm listening?
- How could being more aware of the way individuals listen help my target group to further develop their social and emotional competences?
- How can practicing the levels of listening support me in identifying the social and emotional needs of my target group?
- How can practicing the levels of listening support me in understanding how the social and political field is involved in promoting positive mental health?
- How often do I let go off my plans to follow my target group's learning needs manifesting in the present moment? To what extent do I trust the process?

Laura López Gámez

BEST PRACTICE 2: GESTALT APPROACH FOR PROMOTING POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH IN YOUTH WORK

Introduction: What is a Gestalt approach?

This section is focused on showing how we can work in YW from a Gestalt approach to foster and promote PMH in the youth setting.

Gestalt therapy is a humanistic approach that comes from Gestalt psychology. This new approach to human psychology was conceived by Fritz Perls towards the end of the 1940's and has its roots in the discovery of the unconscious in 20th century psychoanalysis. It is founded on various sources, including oriental philosophy, psychodrama (as therapeutic theatre), the encounter groups of Carl Rogers, S. Friedlander's theory of creative indifference, W. Reich's bioenergetics, existential philosophy and directed dreaming.

Gestalt views human existence from a holistic perspective and is concerned with integrating its different dimensions: sensory, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual. This experience is felt in the body and translated into thoughts and words and vice versa, as words and thoughts are felt as bodily sensations.

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Key characteristic 1 - Take the whole human being into consideration

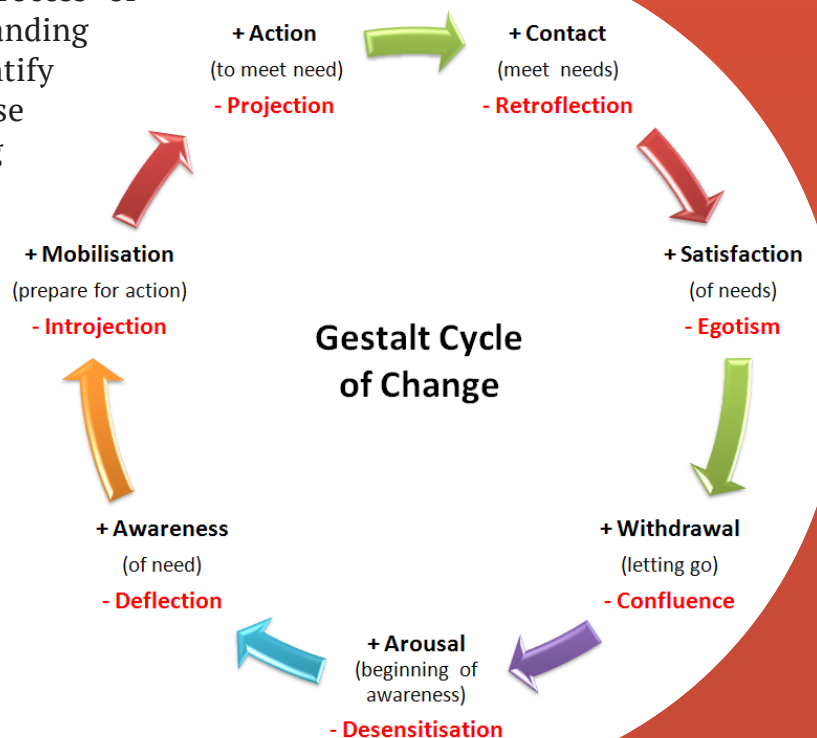
Gestalt is a way of being in the world, a philosophy of life based on being in contact with the present moment. Its main focus is on becoming aware, and it therefore places a greater emphasis on processes rather than content, on the "how" than on the "why". The focus is not on "what happens to us?", but "what do we do with what happens to us?". It's an existential question about the position we adopt in our life circumstances, based on coherence, self-esteem, responsibility and respect.

What are the principles of the Gestalt approach?

1. **Taking responsibility:** Each person is invited to take responsibility, understood as the ability to respond, for what they are thinking, feeling, sensing and expressing. This principle gives us the real possibility for change instead of blaming the outside for what occurs.
2. **Living here and now:** The invitation is to come back to the present moment, the connection to bodily sensations and breathing. In the present moment, we restore emotional contact with ourselves.
3. **Become Aware:** The intention of raising awareness on three different levels of reality. Becoming aware of myself (interior zone), of others (exterior zone), and the area in between the interaction (Phantasy zone). This awareness is related also to three different Levels of listening.
4. **The Contact and its different modalities:** The Contact with another or something different than me.
5. **Gestalt cycle of change:** The diagram below represents the gestalt cycle as process of natural regulation of the organism based on a process of contact and retrieval from which we can explain the natural and healthy contact versus a defensive contact that the mind develops in each phase.

This cycle describes a dynamic process of needs in any organism. By understanding the phases of this cycle, we can identify the difficulties we face in each phase and find healthy ways of restoring any lost balance.

The experiential understanding of this process can help us to support a creative adjustment and the healthy expression of the emotional dimension in youth, promote their Positive Mental Health, and guide us to the path we need to take in different moments.



Narrative. Projection of our Shadow

Context of the situation

We were facilitating one of our training courses with a group of 25 youngsters, aged between 18 to 30. They were at risk of social exclusion; some had been consuming or dealing drugs as a way of living, others had been part of street gangs and had already been involved in illegal situations. They came from a diverse social, economic and family background and from different EU countries.

The facilitation of the training, a five-day residential course, was done by two members of our organization, a female and male youth worker and psychologist.

Narrative. The impact of a loving attitude for promoting mental health

“The group was wide and diverse and we were at the beginning of a 5-day training course. Usually, the type of workshops that we facilitate in our organization include lot of body movement as our approach is based on gestalt therapy and gestalt theatre, in many ways body based, with contact and retrieval as an working element throughout the whole experience.

We had a young girl that was quite defensive at the beginning. It wasn't very easy for her to speak during the rounds of sharing, she didn't want to join in during some of the theatre activities offered, and her overall attitude was one of complaining and criticizing the team and the place itself. She also and felt invaded on various occasions, without there being an objective situation happening.

The main challenge we faced was her defensive attitude in general, and consequent conflict management of her aggressiveness, as she felt somehow out of her comfort zone and threatened by all the novelty she was experiencing. She thought the problem was external - us, the group, the place, the activities etc.

Right from the start we faced some challenges with this situation. The first thing for us was to not take anything personally regarding what was going on with her, and to be able to see the insecurities, fears and needs behind her behaviour.

Another challenge we faced was to maintain an attitude of non-judgment, being able to see beyond her attitude, and not staying on the surface, which enabled us to accompany her and create

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Key characteristic 5 - Be a
role model of positive mental
health

that necessary safe space for her to open up and get a different experience than the one she arrived with, so that she could leave transformed in some way. This non judgment implied accepting what she was bringing in without rejection, as it is was the only possible way to start responding to the situation, being aware that her attitude was coming from personal experiences that we are not able to see at first glance.

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Key characteristic 7 - Building respectful and supportive relationships with young people

We gave her the space to feel free to join in or not, to express the uneasiness as well as her disappointment and criticisms; and we focussed on simply remaining open, caring, not taking things personally, setting clear boundaries, asking questions to raise self-awareness and allow her to start self-inquire on what was happening to her, instead externalising responsibility. We expressed clearly we were there for her, as well as the whole group, in case we were needed, and didn't respond by focusing exclusively on her. We valued her participation and she started feeling our sincere care for her within that space of non judgement.

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Key characteristic 6 - Create safe learning environments

Within a couple of days, she was opening up, expressing more, enjoying more freedom and feeling safer with the group and the facilitators. Before the end of the course she shared part of her story with us, in private: how she had suffered from ill-treatment at home from a very early age. We gave her some private space to express and open up.

Thanks to our personal effort of remaining in this caring presence, awareness and respect, this girl was able to have a different experience and could start understanding her projections, how her past experiences were influencing the way she was relating with us, the others and the situation.

During this process, it was essential for us, as a trainers team to do a personal revision of the emotional and cognitive aspects that the young participant was triggering - any insecurities arising, how we were feeling about her attitude, etc. Only by recognizing these aspects, were we able to separate them and remain in service of the work we do.

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Key characteristic 8 - Develop self-care

In gestalt or any other approach we use to educate and support young people, we consider that a “loving” attitude is essential for the promotion of mental health. Our work in youth gives us the opportunity to grow ourselves through the interaction with the young people. By loving attitude, we mean relating from the heart, moved by a sincere and true intention, relating in a respectful and caring way, and with the capacity to show them how valuable and worthy they are for what they ARE, above anything they DO.

Explanation of the narrative

Elements of Gestalt that can be found in this case:

Projection, a defensive mechanism of the mind

The case narrated above can help us understand and explain a mind mechanism called projection. The mind uses projection to get rid of uncomfortable emotions that could not be expressed in certain situations and become an unconscious and automatic impulse. In certain situations, this unconscious mechanism gets activated and emotionally dyes our perception of our reality, repeating past situations periodically in our lives until we become aware of it and grow out of it.

Projection is the tendency to make the environment responsible for what is originated in oneself, and not objectively differentiating between the inner world and the outer world. The extreme case where projection occurs clinically is in paranoia. In paranoia, repressed aggressive emotions, wishes and feelings that were not integrated during our childhood, are unconsciously projected outwardly, onto the environment or onto others. The held idea of being constantly harmed or persecuted by others, when there is no objective situation to justify it, is a confirmation of unrecognized and repressed emotions that need to be acknowledged, expressed and reintegrated in our consciousness.

Projection is a mechanism that tends to deprive us from those internal impulses that we don't accept, by projecting them outwardly. It is a defensive mechanism of the mind, developed to avoid feeling uneasy emotions, such as fear, rage, aggressiveness or resentment. At a young age, if we didn't have the possibility to express those emotions, we repressed them to adapt to the situation, as we did not have, at that point, the resources to face such a conflict. In time, as we mature, we need to realise we still hold these emotions inside and learn to express them in a healthier and constructive way.

By projecting, instead of being active participants of our own existence, we become passive objects, and feel a victim of others and circumstances. **This is the journey we undertake in Gestalt, being able to take responsibility for what arises within us and develop healthier ways of being and relating.**

The projections are usually characteristics of ourselves that we reject: aggressiveness, sexuality, persecution, etc - a mechanism that interrupts the uneasiness that we cannot hold or accept. For example, jealousy is a behaviour that belongs to this projective mechanism. Another important class of projections are prejudices: class, gender, physical, intellectual, etc.

By being aware of the existence of these defensive mechanisms of the mind, we can understand and support young people through

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Key characteristic 8 - Develop
self-care

the process of realising what they are, through questions and self-inquiry. To help them observe and become aware, we must undertake that path of self-exploration for ourselves first. Only after processing our own realisations, can we provide them with knowledge and tools that can help them differentiate the internal world from the external world, and realise there is an intermediate zone of interpretation where all of us place many of our unsolved emotions.

Apart from the theoretical understanding of certain mechanisms that operate when we relate, the most important aspect during the experience narrated, was how we, as youth workers, educators or psychologists, stand in these situations. The posture and state of mind in the situation is essential; being present, not taking things that are happening personally, truly caring for every single person in the group, taking responsibility for our own emotions triggered by the situation, realising any false beliefs that we are holding, etc.

Understanding all experiences as an integral part of our commitment as Youth workers and facilitators, and as a necessary process of personal and professional development.

Practical strategies for a Gestalt approach on wellbeing and flourishing of young

Some essential qualities important to develop as Youth workers are³⁸:

- **Emotional Self-regulation:** Recognising, expressing, and managing our emotions in constructive ways
- **Connection:** being open to others
- **Empowerment:** The youth worker or facilitator has to go through that process himself to be able to accompany others when needed.
- **Humanity:** Truly caring for others
- **Commitment:** Being in continuous personal and professional development

What we need to AVOID as youth workers

- **Introducing Judgement:** we need to eradicate the dual “right or wrong” understanding... that is accompanied by a “you should” or the belief that we are in possession of THE truth. Most of our lives are interpretations of the reality we sense. We can and should apply discernment and hypothesis, but not presume any truth with regarding those we care for. Empowerment and humility must go hand in hand.
- **Taking things personally:** anything anyone thinks, feels or does speaks mostly about themselves, their own beliefs and difficulties. Knowing this as a YW will help us to not take others’ beliefs and emotions personally, making it easier to deal



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Key characteristic 5 - Be a role model of positive mental health yourself

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According to Fagan y Shepherd (1973) Characteristics of a Therapist/facilitator.

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Key characteristic 7 - Building respectful and supportive relationships with young people

with anything that may be arising and to be more objective. In gestalt, what we think, feel and do is our responsibility as it is happening within ourselves. There are plenty of moments when we cannot change how others think or feel, but we can change how we think, feel or act. As YW, we can guide young people to engage in their own personal transformation - their thoughts, feelings and actions - and teach them to let go of what doesn't belong to them too.

- **Helping in inadequate ways:** sometimes we can prevent self-realisations in others, when we overprotect or miss some really needed action at a given moment. Being present and connected to our bodies will help us to sense what is needed, and to what degree, in each moment. For example, when young people lack confidence, we should encourage them to do things by/for themselves even if they demand our support all the time. We should leave them to face things, so they learn to trust their own inner resources, even if they resist at the beginning as they feel uncomfortable and insecure. With time they will gain the self-confidence needed.

Gestalt understands conflict as an essential part of life and relationships, a possibility to evolve, develop and heal. When we have the opportunity of facing a conflict, we are challenged to adjust something within us that needs to be acknowledged and integrated in order to establish peace, within and with others. This way of perceiving conflict brings the possibility of internal liberation - a seeing and acknowledging that allows us to take a further step in our self-development.

Link to positive mental health

The attitude we cultivate as youth workers, educators, facilitators or other professionals working with youth will be the main pillar for promoting good levels of positive mental health in our youth work. Working at developing the qualities described above on a daily basis will bring us to a place of service, learning to respect and value others, relating from a state of awareness that allows us to naturally connect with our heart, bringing depth and quality to our interactions with young people, and becoming a living example of what we teach.

Suggestions for practical strategies for a Gestalt approach

Gestalt psychotherapy techniques revolve mainly around what Fritz Perls calls rules and games.

The rules of the game are:

1. Be Here and now, rather than being in thoughts about the past or the future most of the time.
2. Use "You" and "I" when communicating to ensure a direct and open communication, for a sense of responsibility and participation in the interactions.

3. Personal versus impersonal communication: “My voice is trembling”, instead of “the voice is trembling”. Or “I think” instead of “It is said”
4. Open communication: “Do not murmur” is an invitation for open communication, without avoiding feelings and direct contact.
5. Convert questions into affirmations: Openly expressing how I feel and what I need, instead of making demands on others in the attempt to make them cover my needs.
6. “Yes, and...” instead of “Yes, but...”. Looking for integration instead of separation.
7. Asking questions to bring awareness: favouring self-inquire to find the connection and wisdom within ourselves, rather than outside, as no one can know you better than yourself. From the outside we can simply guide and accompany.

Exercises from a Gestalt Approach

Gestalt techniques take the form of games with the purpose of making us aware of our feelings, emotions and behaviours. Games are often transformed into techniques and techniques into games. When we connect what emerges during these exercises to the person’s past, we enter into the sphere of therapy. Generally this should only be done by a trained therapist. These exercises can be used by YWs as tools that can bring self awareness and self exploration to certain situations or areas of our lives.

- **Empty chair**

This is one of the essential gestalt therapy techniques. Consists in establishing a dialogue between the person’s different/opposing parts, restoring the inner dialogue between them.

- **The Round**

When a participant has expressed a feeling that the facilitator believes to be significant and important, the facilitator gets the participant to repeat it in front of each person in the group. This method allows the participant to experience expressing the feeling in a more diverse way, and to confront the members of the group.

- **Pending Issues**

Pending issues are all the unresolved feelings and emotions, that have not been expressed either because the person did not dare or there was no opportunity to do so at the time they surfaced or when the person became aware of them.

- **Taking responsibility**

Some of the elements of this game are based on the continuum of consciousness, and all perceptions are considered as acts. When a participant expresses something that is happening to him/her, he/she can be asked to add to that perception, for example “And I



take care of it”, turning the sentence into: “I realise that my voice is calm, and I am responsible for it and take care of it”.

- **Projection games**

Very often, what we consider as perceptions are nothing more than projections. When a participant says: “I cannot trust you, you do not inspire confidence”, the facilitator can invite someone to represent the person that is not trustworthy, helping the participant to reveal an inner conflict and see it. The participant may then be asked if he/she doesn’t also have some of those traits, and whether he/she has been able to see something of himself/herself reflected in the imitation.

- **Role playing**

The demeanour shown is usually an antithesis of underlying or latent drives. In Gestalt therapy, this is usually explored through the game of antithesis, where the participant who claims to be shy or inhibited is asked to play the role of an exhibitionist. When it concerns a person who does not enforce his/her rights and who is excessively gentle with other people, he/she will be asked to play a selfish and evil person. With this game, we try to develop the inner inhibited polarity, and release the energy it contains, expanding and improving our resources.

- **Contact and retrieval**

Gestalt therapy is greatly interested in vital processes, which leads it to emphasize the polarity nature of our behaviour. This behaviour polarity can reach extremes, where our ability to love is hampered by the inability to resist rage.

Rest is necessary to restore energy. Activity is followed by rest, the day is followed by the night. These are all vital processes.

- **Exaggeration**

This game is also related to the principle of consciousness continuum. On numerous occasions, involuntary movements or gestures seem to have a meaning, but such movements may be incomplete and not reach their full development when they enter into the field of unconsciousness. The participant will then be asked by the facilitator to make that movement and slowly exaggerate it, if necessary, trying to get him/her to manifest the inner meaning that the gesture may be trying to express.

Suggestions for further learning and resources

- Brownell, P. (Ed.), (2008). *Handbook for Theory, Research and Practice in Gestalt Therapy*, Newcastle, UK, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

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Reflective questions

- How do you prepare yourself mentally and emotionally before starting to work with vulnerable groups?
- What are the biggest challenges you've faced/still face working with young people? How do/did you manage(d) them? What strategies do/did you use?
- Do work challenges affect you at a personal level? If so, how do you deal with these moments? If not, what do you think makes a difference for this not to happen?
- Do you believe you have a loving attitude towards young people you work with? How do you express it?
- Do you have time and space in your workplace to go through your own emotions? How does that help your daily work?
- Did you go through a process of self-exploration? Was that also applied to better understand the young people you work with?
- What would you say your main competences/qualities/attitudes are in dealing with your own emotions? And with challenging situations?
- How is it for you to be bodily connected to your emotions and mind? Do you believe it is important for your work with young people? Why?
- Were you trained in conflict resolution? If not, how important would that be for you? If you were, how did that change the quality of your work and your own posture?
- Finally, do you see implementing activities that use Gestalt approach as possible? How? In which cases?



Dragan Atanasov

BEST PRACTICE 3: **THE COACHING APPROACH TO STIMULATE POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH**

Introduction to the coaching approach for PMH

This section talks about coaching and the potential of its application in youth work and in promoting positive mental health.

A common way of defining coaching is as a developmental process in which a more experienced person, a coach, supports another individual in achieving specific personal or professional goals by providing ongoing training and guidance. Coaching is a dialogue-based technique that applies listening skills, questioning, clarifying and reframing in one-on-one conversations as the main type of interaction. It focuses on specific skills and goals development, and breaks these down in small and concrete tasks that the coachee can accomplish over a shorter period of time. Hence, coaching is strongly focused on empowering the coached individual to unleash their potential and take charge of their life.

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Coaching can be applied in different ways, depending on the context where it is used. Traditionally, it has been most commonly used in the business sector, where it is focused on improving performance, developing skills and achieving professional goals. When used in other sectors, its purpose can be different and more related to one's personal development. In recent years, the practice of life coaching has emerged as the most encompassing form of coaching, focusing on supporting clients to improve their relationships, careers, and day-to-day lives.

Coaching in youth work

While coaching is far from a new approach, it is still somewhat rarely used in European youth work, and the number of organizations that offer coaching services for young people is quite small. There are however many organizations that incorporate aspects of coaching in their work. One may even argue that, given the nature of their work, many youth workers are already applying coaching informally in their interactions with young people.

Coaching in youth work can be used in combination with other methodologies, as a tool that is exclusively suitable for individual work with young people. It is not appropriate for working with groups and it is also not effective for short-term results. Coaching relies on a strong interpersonal relation between youth worker and young person, and requires a dedicated, long-term one-on-one commitment. When applied in youth work, coaching can provide holistic and lasting results that can impact the overall quality of life of the young person.

In some places, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, coaching young people is already an established practice, as it also is outside of the youth sector. The UK-based life coach directory lists youth coaching as a branch of life coaching. According to this directory, “youth coaching can help young people develop life skills and learn how to manage some of the stresses that come along the way”³⁹. It goes on to say that young people who work with a youth coach can benefit in the following ways⁴⁰:

- They get the opportunity to talk about difficult subjects, such as bullying and relationships.
- They are encouraged to see the world from a fresh perspective.
- They can begin to set goals for self-improvement.
- They learn to handle and manage emotions.
- They get support from an objective and non-judgemental mentor.
- They learn to build confidence and social skills.
- They will leave with a new sense of motivation and inspiration boost.

The international organization Youth Social Rights Network works on improving access to social rights for all young people, particularly those from disadvantaged neighborhoods, deprived of some of the basic necessities and/or young people facing a variety of disadvantages. According to their experience, coaching young people at risk helps them develop feelings of security. It makes them feel that someone cares for them and “is there to help and support them in their transition and access to rights, as well as in overcoming the obstacles that they are facing”. Furthermore, it helps young people “in setting goals, assessing and further developing their potential, and motivating themselves in realization of the set goals.”⁴¹

There is a great overlap between the benefits of coaching for young people and the goals of youth work. In addition, the competencies expected in a coach are, to a great extent, the ones expected from a youth worker. Examples include empathy, capacity for self-reflection, and communication and conflict resolution skills. The main principles of coaching are also relevant for the youth work field, such as supporting young people to take personal responsibility and providing learning

<https://www.lifecoach-directory.org.uk/articles/youth-coaching.html>

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Ibid

<https://ysrnetwork.weebly.com/neet-and-coaching.html>

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Key characteristic 6 - Create safe learning environments

opportunities. Hence, coaching is an approach that can be seriously considered in supporting young people in the youth sector.

Having said that, it should not be assumed that coaching is the same as youth work. The methodology of youth work is much wider than coaching, and youth workers apply a variety of approaches in supporting individuals and groups of young people – depending on the context, needs and resources. At the same time, coaching has a variety of different uses that go beyond the goals of youth work – such as coaching in the business sector. What is important, though, is that there are certain areas of youth work in which applying coaching can be effective and beneficial for young people. Promoting positive mental health is an example for that.

Narrative – a case study

Context of the situation

The narrative of this story is based in a youth cultural centre run by a youth organization. The centre was, at the time, an innovative environment in the city – a multifunctional space that hosted an art gallery, an educational centre, a bar area and the offices of the youth organization.

One of the main purposes of the youth cultural centre was to provide an environment where young people could come and spend their time, learning and interacting with peers. Three of the organizational staff worked as part-time youth workers. Their responsibility was to plan and implement non-formal education activities with groups of young people, which were mainly organized as short workshops. There was also a youth club that young people could become members of and through which they could organize youth-led activities and events.

Due to the high intensity of youth and cultural activities, the youth workers were not able to work individually with the young people on a daily basis. Instead, they were focused on supporting the development of young people's competencies through group non-formal education activities.

Narrative of the case – the power of individual coaching by assessing needs and identifying goals

One day a young man appeared in the youth centre. He had heard about the place and was interested to hear about what activities he could join. We gave him orientation and signed him up in some of the educational workshops.

Within a very short period of time, this young person started visiting the youth cultural centre regularly. He would attend a workshop, come for an event, interact with the others, or simply hang out. As time passed, we saw more and more of him - as if he had all the time in the world and no other obligations. He would pop-in out of nowhere and ask if we needed any help. Or he would ask if he can sit in the office and just talk to us.

This behaviour caught our attention. The other youth workers and I started wondering about him – whether he was just very friendly and outgoing, or whether he was seeking our attention. Did he go to school, or maybe to work? Did he have any friends of his own age? Did his parents know where he was spending most of his time?

To get answers to these questions, one of my colleagues started interacting more with him. In an informal manner, he would ask him questions about his life and the things he was doing. Gradually, the two of them started building a connection and the young person was becoming more open and forthcoming in the conversations. All of that was happening inside the youth centre, and with other youth workers present.

Eventually we learnt that the young person was not at school and was unemployed. He had graduated high school, but hadn't enrolled at university. He lost the connection with most of his friends and generally did not do much else than visiting our youth centre. But there was a lot more that we learnt about him. My colleague found out he was very good at drawing, and very skilled at handicraft. He could do a lot with his hands, and, more importantly, he liked it.

So, my colleague decided to start working with him more closely. He started inviting him whenever we were doing something practical – like building furniture, reorganizing the space, making decorations. He also involved him in handicraft and artistic workshops, not only as a participant, but also to present some of the work he was doing. And often my colleague would simply ask him to bring his tools and materials when he came to the youth centre. Then the two of them would sit together and create some designs. And if my colleague was busy doing other work, the young person would make bracelets and wallets out of recycled materials. And all the while, they would talk.

It is difficult to find the moment when my colleague started coaching the young person “officially”. It was a gradual process of building the relationship, identifying needs and finding interests, that slowly evolved into identifying goals and



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Key characteristic 4 - Discover the motivation of young people

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Key characteristic 7 - Building respectful and supportive relationships with young people

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Key characteristic 3 - Start with
a needs-assessment

agreeing on tasks that the young person would do - related to himself and his own life, and not related to the youth centre. The conversations between the two of them grew from informally chatting about whatever, to discussing about what the young person wanted to do in life and where he wanted to be. Those conversations kept the informal format, but they started happening regularly, and very often with a clear purpose. At some point, all of us could recognise that my colleague was working individually with the young person, applying the basic principles and steps of coaching.

This process lasted for about a year. During this time, the youth worker and the young person jointly identified many challenges that the young person wanted to work on – relationship with his parents, addictions, lack of motivation to study, inability to find an engaging job. Each time they talked, they would come up with a step the young person should take in response to those challenges. The steps were small and achievable – such as having a meal with his parents, or spending a day not drinking alcohol. Next time they would meet, the youth worker would help the young person reflect on what happened in the meantime, and together they would discuss the way forward.

A lot happened. The young person managed to make new friends, further develop his skills, find a job. He took part in a youth exchange abroad, volunteered in many events, improved his English through interacting with the international volunteers in the youth centre. Some challenges persisted, such as his occasional abuse of alcohol and drugs. But the young person was clearly moving forward, in the direction that he chose for himself. And most importantly, he was feeling better and better about himself and his future.

Explanation of the case

What can youth workers learn from this case?

What we saw at play in the youth centre was a process of coaching – in fact, a pretty typical way of how coaching can happen in a youth work environment. Even though we would not refer to what was happening as coaching. In youth work, this is what one would often consider as “working with individuals”. But working with individuals is a very wide term, and it does not go into defining the methodological approach that is employed. For example, working with individual young people could also be mentoring, or even providing counseling services as certified counselor.

For us, what made this process coaching was the joint work done in assessing needs and identifying professional and personal goals, and then working together towards them. The young person was aware and agreed to the process. It was clear that he had ownership of the discussed issues and the agreed steps, and he had the motivation and persistence to work on himself. Meanwhile, the youth worker was providing ongoing guidance, support and reflection – most of it done through informal conversations. To a certain extent, the youth worker also provided training, by involving the young person in educational activities that could help him apply and further develop his artistic and handicraft skills, while helping him identify his personal interests and opportunities for future employment.

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Key characteristic 3 - Start with a needs-assessment

What my colleague was doing in this case was fundamentally different from the way we worked with young people in general. When working with groups, it was difficult or even impossible to follow the personal and professional development of each of the young persons and their own work towards achieving goals. The group activities supported the development of competencies, but through a general approach in which everyone was offered the same opportunity to learn. Youth workers at this centre had no time to build personal connections with each young person, and to individually develop trust and provide a safe space so that they could open up and discuss about their personal challenges. **Working with groups of young people is valuable and can impact their personal growth a great deal, but some young people will benefit much more from a committed one-on-one process.** Youth workers should keep a lookout for young people who are facing challenges and who are prepared to start working on themselves to tackle those challenges and create a better future for themselves. The way my colleague did with that young person.

Coaching and positive mental health

Links between coaching and positive mental health promotion can be made from the very definition of coaching as a developmental process. If coaching is about empowering individuals to take charge of their own life, then it follows that it also supports their resilience and well-being. According to the life coach directory mentioned above, youth coaching provides young people with an outlet for their stresses and anxieties. Building confidence, managing stress and learning how to deal with difficult issues are just some of the ways in which coaching supports positive mental health.

In the article “Flourishing Youth Provision: The Potential Role of Positive Psychology and Coaching in Enhancing Youth Services”, a group of authors from the Coaching Psychology Unit of the University of Sydney suggests that there is a growing evidence that coaching can support positive mental health in young people. In their work, they



Clive J.C. Leach, L.S. Green
and Antony M. Grant. 2011.
Flourishing Youth Provision:
The Potential Role of Positive
Psychology and Coaching in
Enhancing Youth Services.
International Journal of Evidence
Based Coaching and Mentoring,
February 2011.

42

43

Ibid

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Key characteristic 2 - Focus on
social and emotional learning

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Key characteristic 4 - Discover
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people

present findings of studies that show the positive impact of coaching on young people's well-being, resilience and hope.

In the case of well-being, the article uses two approaches as a measurement of well-being: Subjective Well-Being (SWB) and Psychological Well-Being (PWB). The first one measures how happy and satisfied we are in life, while the latter is about the level of engagement and meaning in our lives. According to the article, coaching impacts both subjective and psychological well-being: "incorporating coaching methodologies into youth work has considerable potential to add the youth worker's tool kit in terms of enhancing both SBW and PWB, and in doing so provide young people with an enhanced sense of positive affect, purpose, meaning, control and connectedness."⁴² With regards to resilience, the article suggests that "access to training in evidence-based coaching methodologies would help youth workers and managers further develop their skills in resilience building"⁴³. What is meant here by "evidence-based coaching" is applying knowledge and critical thinking integrated with practitioner expertise – an approach that also strongly resembles the way youth work approaches supporting young people.

Since coaching can focus on various aspects of the coachee's life, it can contribute to virtually all domains of positive mental health in young people described in the Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Youth Sector, developed as part of this project. By empowering young people to solve their challenges by/for themselves, coaching helps them develop cognitive, emotional and social skills. When coached, young people develop critical thinking skills and practice decision making and goal setting. They also learn how to recognize, manage and express their emotions.

When coaching is focused on improving their relationships, it also provides an opportunity for practicing communication, conflict resolution, teamwork and other social skills. Coaching can also support the positive development of values, identity and mindsets, which are also among the six domains described in the framework. For example, it can help young people develop the wish to perform to their highest potential, nurture values such as positivity and ambition, help them find a sense of purpose and develop their self-esteem.

Applying coaching approaches when working with young people on a daily basis can have a strong role in positive mental health promotion. According to the theoretical framework developed in this project, "mental health promotion is 'the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals and communities to take control over their lives and improve their mental health. Mental health promotion

uses strategies that foster supportive environments and individual resilience, while showing respect for culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity.’ (Joubert et al., 1996)”⁴⁴. According to what we know, coaching can do much of the above.

That said, it should not be assumed that anyone can do coaching. While you don’t have to participate in impressive and expensive coaching courses, you should nevertheless have at least a basic understanding of what coaching is, how it works and what the main steps of the process are. There are plenty of handbooks and other resources you can check, but there are also Erasmus+ coaching courses you can take. That said, what will help you more than anything is practice. Once you think you know something about coaching, start practicing with your friends, colleagues and even your family members.

Practice will help you improve your coaching skills, learn how to manage different situations, but also to start distinguishing cases when coaching should be applied versus other methodological approaches. And to knowing what the limits of coaching are and when a different approach is required is crucial, particularly when promoting positive mental health in young people.

Practical strategies to apply coaching to support young people

When coaching to support young people, it is important to apply the general rules of coaching. There are different ways of approaching coaching and different approaches have specific guidelines, but all follow some general rules about the process. The following phases are some of the broad steps to follow when coaching young people, which you will also recognize from the example shared above.

- **Establishing connections:** Since coaching is an approach that is based on the relationship between the coach and the coachee, it is important to start with a gradual process of building personal connections between the two. The relationship in coaching should be based on trust, which takes time and patience. Once established, relationships should be sustained and nurtured throughout the whole coaching process.

In youth work, trusting and healthy relationships between youth workers and young people are essential. Considering that coaching is just one of the approaches a youth worker would use, the importance of personal relationship goes beyond coaching itself. In fact, the Framework for promoting positive mental health developed in this project lists “Building relationships with young people based on confidentiality, respect and trust”⁴⁵

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Kuosmanen, T. Dowling, K. & Barr, M. 2020. *A Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Youth Sector*. Erasmus+ Project: Promoting positive mental health in the European Youth sector

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Key characteristic 7 - Building respectful and supportive relationships with young people

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Ibid

as one of the key competences required for youth workers to promote positive mental health and wellbeing among young people.

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Key characteristic 3 - Start with a needs-assessment

- **Assessing needs:** Being coachee-based, coaching inevitably starts from identifying the personal needs and competences of the young person. No two people have identical needs, hence no coaching process will be the same. The way you proceed with supporting the individual depends on the outcomes of this initial discovery phase. When assessing needs, it is important to focus not only on the needs, but also on the strengths and competences of the coachee. At the same time, it is important that those are identified through a joint process based on a two-way communication. The coachee needs to have ownership of the process and of the identified needs and competences.

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Key characteristic 1 - Take the whole human being into consideration

- **Defining goals:** Through a similar participatory process, the coach and the coachee agree on a set of goals that are to be achieved over the upcoming period. Again, it is of crucial importance that the goals are acknowledged and owned by the young coached person, so that there is commitment and motivation from their side. When defining goals, it is also important that they are concrete, specific and achievable over a given period of time. The sense of accomplishment that comes with achieving concrete steps is essential for the coachee's further motivation to work on themselves. According to the Framework for promoting positive mental health, setting and achieving positive goals is essential in the process of social and emotional learning, which leads to social and emotional well-being.

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Key characteristic 4 - Discover the motivation of young people

- **Motivating and creating support systems:** It will be very difficult for the coaching process to produce results if the young coachee is not motivated to work on themselves. It is the responsibility of the coach to sustain the coachee's motivation and interest in the process. The coach should stay in touch with the coachee and perform regular check-ins, accompanied by additional motivational activities. Creating a motivational environment is central to youth work in general, and coaching can benefit a lot from that. Another supporting component for the coaching process is the support system that normally exists in youth settings, from youth workers and other young people. Youth workers should work proactively on strengthening the role of the surrounding community and social networks in supporting the coached young person.

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Key characteristic 9 - Stimulate group reflection and self-reflection

- **Evaluation and feedback:** Once goals are jointly set, the coach should support the young person to create and follow an action plan. The plan should consist of concrete steps that

the coachee agrees to take, accompanied by indicators that will help them assess how successful they are with the plan. The coach should help the coachee evaluate progress, and provide timely and constructive feedback. According to the Framework for promoting positive mental health, the development of competences can be enhanced by providing positive feedback. The coach should focus both on what works well, and what needs to be improved, and should make sure that all successes are celebrated. The evaluation and joint reflection process will help the coachee to set new goals, or review the ones that are difficult to accomplish.

Tips for coaching for positive mental health

The phases of the coaching process described above are adjusted to coaching young people in a youth work setting, but they are valid for any coaching process. In coaching for positive mental health, however, there are some additional aspects to be mindful of. The following list provides practical tips on how to more successfully promote positive mental health among young people through coaching:

- **Create a safe space:** “Providing a safe and supportive environment for young people is the first step in engaging them in social and emotional learning.”⁴⁶. For anyone who is involved in youth work, this should not come as a surprise. We cannot expect learning and personal growth to take place if the young person does not feel safe, physically and emotionally. Effective coaching requires a safe environment all the more.
- **Focus on all domains** as described in the Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Youth Sector. When coaching, remember that positive mental health has different domains. Different young people will have stronger needs in different domains, and that should be discovered during the phase of assessing needs. Don’t underestimate any of the domains, and focus on what the young person sees as a priority – whether it is their relationships, personal identity, or their outlook on life. Remember that the importance of domains may change over time.
- **Follow their pace:** this is certainly one of the basic principles of coaching, and perhaps even more important in coaching for positive mental health. Don’t rush the process and don’t put pressure on the young person to accomplish the agreed goals. While it is still important to constantly provide feedback and motivate the young person to work on themselves, you should adjust the pace to their abilities and readiness. When coaching in youth work you have the advantage of your relationship with the young person being broader and not time-restricted

Key characteristic 6 - Create safe learning environments

[READ MORE](#)

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Ibid page 36

[READ MORE](#)

Key characteristic 4 - Discover the motivation of young people

[READ MORE](#)

Key characteristic 6 - Create safe learning environments

to the coaching process; use that. Be patient and wait for the moments when the coachee is ready to push harder.

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Key characteristic 8 - Develop self-care

- **Know your limits:** another youth work classic. Whenever you are coaching or otherwise supporting young people, you should know your limits as a youth worker. Keep a lookout for any warning signals and know your own limits – and the limits of coaching. If you sense that a challenge or a young person's need is beyond your limits as a youth worker and a coach, don't hesitate to ask for support from other professionals. The mental health and well-being of the young person is far more important than your success as a coach.
- **Celebrate small successes:** this has already been mentioned, but it's worth repeating: make sure to acknowledge small achievements and celebrate them in appropriate ways. Individual progress takes time and sometimes it will go slower than what you would like to see. If the set goals are too large, don't hesitate to break them down in smaller chunks – baby steps are better than no steps at all.
- **No need to name it as coaching:** While setting coaching as a structured process is more effective, sometimes putting a formal frame can be intimidating. See coaching as just one of the techniques that you are using as a youth worker, and frame it under the overall work you are doing. If you assess that the young person is not ready to engage in a more formal coaching process, simply use individual coaching techniques to support their positive mental health.
- **Let them take ownership:** at the end of the day, coaching is about empowering young people to take charge of their lives. This goal fully overlaps with the third goal of the European Youth Strategy: Empower – developing skills and competencies in young people that will allow them to take charge of their own lives. Start by letting young people take charge of their own development during the coaching process. That will positively impact the development of their self-esteem and autonomy, which in turn will support them in building strong values and character, and a positive outlook on life.
- **Suppress the repair reflex:** it is very natural to feel the desire, and even the urge, to help someone in need. Especially as youth workers, we often feel a very strong need or desire to repair or fix the life of the young person we are working with. When coaching or otherwise supporting young people, it is important to stop yourself from trying to fix everything for the young person, as that will take away their own motivation for positive

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Key characteristic 4 - Discover the motivation of young people

change and might even have adverse effects. Also, remember that there is no guarantee that the young person sees the same need for fixing as you do. Coaching is all about supporting young people to identify their own problems and come up with their own solutions.

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Key characteristic 7 - Building respectful and supportive relationships with young people

Suggestions for further learning and resources

- Leach, C.J.C.Clive, Green, L.S. & Grant, A.M. (2011). Flourishing Youth Provision: The Potential Role of Positive Psychology and Coaching in Enhancing Youth Services. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, February.
- Agostino, M. d', Butt-Pośnik, J., Butt-Pośnik, M., Chaumette, P., Enn, Ü., Hornig, H. & Kriauciunas, N. (2006). *Coaching Guide: Youth Initiatives and Participation*. SALTO Youth Initiatives Resource Centre
- <https://ysrnetwork.weebly.com/neet-and-coaching.html>
- <https://www.lifecoach-directory.org.uk/articles/youth-coaching.html>

Reflection questions:

- How do I see myself as a coach? Why do I want to do coaching? What are my competences that will make me a good coach? What are the areas in which I need to further develop myself? What are my limits?
- What are the positive mental health domains I feel the most comfortable coaching in? Where do I think I can contribute the most?
- Knowing the young people I work with, where do I see the need and space for coaching? Which of those young people have the greatest need for coaching? Which of them are prepared to engage in a coaching process?
- What prior experiences as a youth worker are relevant for my future coaching practice? Have I used coaching techniques so far? What can I adapt in my practice as a youth worker to introduce more coaching approaches?
- Where could I start? Which of the aspects of coaching do I feel the most comfortable introducing? Who can help me practice my coaching skills? How can I further develop myself as a coach?



Thomas Albers

BEST PRACTICE 4: **POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AS AN INTEGRAL APPROACH TO WELLBEING**

Introduction to the positive psychology approach

In this chapter we will explore a positive psychology approach that focuses on young people's positive rather than negative qualities. It is an approach that has many positive outcomes, is fun to work with and is applicable in youth work with all kinds of young people. We begin with a narrative of a youth worker who shifted the focus of young people's lives from a disability centred life to a value & talent centred one. We then analyse this case study and explain its working elements using Positive Psychology as a framework. Finally, we provide some exercises, further resources and reflection questions for your own youth work setting.

Narrative – A case study of positive psychology

Context of the narrative

This is the story of a group of young people who took part in an Erasmus+ youth exchange for young people who stutter in the summer of 2017. The exchange programme aimed to promote the well-being of the participants through a series of workshops and activities that focussed on social and emotional competence development. As it is quite easy for any young person with a disability to identify her or himself with it, the programme focussed on guiding the participants to explore how their sense of identity was centred around their disability rather than their abilities and how this affected their positive mental health.

Lastly, the young people were invited to explore what their life could be like if they lived a value & strength centred life instead, and how to take a few steps towards this new life focus. To help this process we did not speak of 'stutterers', but of 'people who stutter' (pws) - the general used term internationally - which forms a totally different relation to the disability.

Narrative - Experiences of working on PMH with young people with a speech disability

“This year was the second year in a row that we organised an exchange with this specific group of young people aged 20 to 30 years old. Almost all group leaders and facilitators had a speech disability themselves, so they could easily understand how it would be for a young person who stutters to arrive to a foreign location with a lot of unknown people. Any person would feel vulnerable in such a situation, and particularly young people with a stutter as they prefer to avoid social situations whenever possible. Not because they don’t want social contact or to be part of a group, but because they don’t want to be confronted with the one thing that makes their life so challenging.

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Key characteristic 2 - Focus on social and emotional learning

Social engagement is, in fact, the one thing in life they actually need the most in order to feel mentally well. The fact that they came from all over Europe to this unique exchange programme was already an important way of opening up to a new experience.

I was one of the few organisers that did not have a speech disability, unlike all other staff members. This was an essential element for the organisation of this project, because it helps to understand the needs, desires and pitfalls of the participants better, which is important for creating an emotionally safe learning environment.

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Key characteristic 3 - Start with a needs-assessment

One of the pitfalls of young people who stutter is to ‘hide’ behind their disability, which usually comes out in social situations when they choose, for example, not to join a public event because they are ashamed of their stutter. I call it ‘hiding’ because I believe that a lot of young people feel uncomfortable in unknown social situations and those who stutter simply have an easier way out. In an exchange programme for participants who stutter, it is difficult to use the stutter as a valid excuse to not partake in activities, unlike other daily life situations. One of the participants on the first day told me with a smile on his face: “hmm there is no way out”.

What becomes evident quite quickly when you work with these young people is that they identify themselves with what they are not good at, which is speaking fluently. Now I believe that this is not unique to young people who stutter; any young person would generally find it easier to name what they are ‘not-so-good-at’ than their ‘super power’. For a young person who stutters, this is just more obvious to observe and it becomes a central theme in their daily lives. Life then revolves more around avoiding certain uncomfortable situations than about

feeling confident enough to place yourself in a situation where you can get the best out of yourself, which is an important element of wellbeing.

Somehow in our societies there is a lot of focus on our ‘not-so-good-at’ qualities; we always seem to have to improve ourselves and learn more which can give a sense of not being enough as we are. In the preparation meetings with the other organisers and the young people that were actively involved, we discussed how important the need for young people who stutter to shift their focus was - from a ‘stutter-centred life’ to a ‘value-and-strength centred life’. During the youth exchange we did this through a couple of workshops that helped young people identify their unique strengths and talents, something every person has. Maybe we are not as talented as a Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo, but we all definitely have our own talents.

A talent or strength is something that gives you energy and joy when you use it –you can call this flow – and sometimes other people recognise this more easily in you than you can recognise yourself. For young people with a stutter, it can be challenging to ‘learn to see your positive qualities’ and it can be an enlightening moment. You create a different perspective of what you have to offer to the world.

My friend and fellow organiser Sybren – who also has a stutter – named his stutter his ‘super power’ because it teaches other people to listen. I really liked how he learned to see it this way, as he focussed more on what the disability brought him than how it limited him. His self-acceptance and the acceptance of his stutter were quite evident; he simply saw it as one of the many qualities he had. To many of the participants this was quite a new way of looking at their disability and it made him a sort of role model. This ‘rolemodelship’ was not exclusive to group leaders or other staff members. Soon the young people turned out to become each other’s peer role models. One of the female participants stated that one of the most important things she learned was that other pws showed her that having a stutter doesn’t have to be limiting her: “at first I thought that there were certain professions I could not do, but other pws showed me that it is possible.”

Explore life values

A second topic that we addressed was to explore life values, those life domains that people really care about. These are not objectives that one can reach, but more general domains such as wellbeing, spirituality, nature-connection or family life. If

Key characteristic 5 - Be a role
model of positive
mental health

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Key characteristic 4 - Discover
the motivation of
young people

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you sense your values clearly, these function as a compass in life. They can change over time and can help to live a life that matters to you and others.

To young people who stutter, this focus on what they care about in life is often not at the centre of their focus. To a greater extent, their stutter becomes an obstacle for living a value-centred life. Pws have -like any other person- an important (positive mental health) need for meaningful relationships, for a sense of belonging, for social interaction and for making a meaningful contribution to society, but when most of their focus is on why this “would not be possible”, living a life that matters to them seems to falsely become unattainable.

During the organised workshops we therefore focussed on these values, and helped them to build up a vocabulary of domains and explore their importance to them. A benefit of clearly sensing your values is that it makes it easier to go through challenging situations, because you know that, in the long run, it is something that you care about. As a combined last step, an action plan of how to express strengths and values more in daily life was made.

When young people who stutter have a clear sense of their values, it helps them to experience a life that matters to them, something that became evident once participants shared the brave new leaps they had taken back at home.

Lynne (UK) is someone who really enjoyed the idea of acting in a theatre as artistic expression is something she values, but with her stutter she never dared to join a theatre group. Although the stutter and the fear of being on stage is still there, she nevertheless goes to her theatre class because it does make her happy in the long run. She realised that she didn't need to wait for the fear or the stutter to be gone for her to join theatre classes. **It is not that she no longer feels vulnerable or scared of being on stage, but it is less relevant as focussing on the enjoyment is more important to her.**

Explanation of the narrative

The main goal of the narrative based on the youth programme was to show how important it is for the wellbeing of young people to focus on what does add value to one's and others' lives, instead of what limits living a full life. Of course, it would be too simplistic to attribute the whole 'mental health gain' to the workshops that were



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Key characteristic 6 - Create
safe learning environments

offered. Without an emotionally safe space where young people who stutter can be their authentic self and be with peers who become inspiring role models, no gain would be possible at all. This safe space had the function of creating a fertile ground where positive change is possible, and the workshops had the function of facilitating or guiding the change of direction into higher levels of positive mental health and wellbeing.

Positive Psychology as an approach to positive mental health promotion

Somehow in our societies we have learned to focus on what we are not good at or where we should improve ourselves, and there is actually hardly any focus on finding out what we are good at and care about. The problem with this is that we start to believe that we are not good enough as we are right now and that makes it hard to feel self-esteem and self-love.

As you could see in the case of the young people who stutter, they are focussed on avoiding situations in which they are confronted with their disability and in trying to ‘resolve the problem’. This is of course understandable, as most people just want to fit in and will do a great deal to achieve that. But with stuttering, the challenge is hard, and a huge gain for wellbeing lies in accepting or reframing the ‘negative’ into something positive.

This different focus on “what works” instead of “what’s broken” is characteristic in the scientific field of positive psychology, which was founded in 1998 by Martin Seligman. The term positive may somewhat be misleading as it is often confused with being positive, whereas positive psychology actually means to focus on “what works”. In our modern day, the approach of ‘helping young people live fully engaged lives’ is one of the main pillars of youth work, and plenty of examples (maybe unknowingly) of applied positive psychology can be found. The approach of positive psychology is, in its essence, a positive mental health approach as it contributes to helping (young) people flourish in life.

In recent years there has been criticism that positive psychology was too much focussed on the positive side, and that we also need to look at the positive effect of so called negative emotions. When we are sad for example, it can be a motivation to seek help. Or when we are bored, it can trigger us to do something. Likewise, positive emotions can also have a dark side. This resulted in a new dimension - Positive psychology 2.0.⁴⁷ Here, the focus is on the dynamic relation between positive and negative well-being. We all have a bright and a dark side, positive and negative emotions, and we all have setbacks. From this vision we explore how to embrace adversity and flourish from it.⁴⁸

Ehrenreich, B. (2009) *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*; Henry Holt and Company: New York, NY.

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Ivtzan, I.; Lomas, T.; Hefferon, K.; Worth, P. (2015) *Second Wave Positive Psychology: Embracing the Dark Side of Life*; Routledge: New York, NY.

Wong et al.⁴⁹ mentioned four pillars of positive psychology 2.0: virtue, meaning, resilience, and well-being. ‘These four pillars incorporate many areas of mainstream research which recognizes the moral imperative, the centrality of meaning, the intrinsic human capacity for resilience, and the universal human yearning for happiness and a better future. Logically, it is difficult for people to survive and flourish lacking any of these four ingredients.’ These four pillars can also be found in the theoretical framework for promoting positive mental health.

The strengths & talents approach

In the narrative with the young people who stutter, the positive psychology approach is evident in the focus on strengths & talents. Through a predominant focus on what you are good at instead of what you are not so good at, you can lean more into a direction of applying unique character strengths. In the maybe more dominant approach to personal development from the past, focus would go out to working on your ‘weaknesses’ and trying to improve those, whereas it is actually more ‘energy efficient’ to improve even those competences that you are naturally good at as it usually brings people more energy and joy.

There are some things that each individual is simply not good at by nature – for example, speaking fluently in the case of pws – and working on improving these may just not make the people happier or help them flourish in life. What does help to increase well-being is to find what you are naturally good at and learn how you can apply this more in life.

Now, it is important to understand that we do not mean that you should not learn anything new nor pay attention to what you are not-so-good at. The key is in the balance. Science does not show any ratio of what this should be, but we can definitely state that there should be a more dominant focus on strengths rather than ‘weaknesses’.

Values and life direction

Clarifying one’s values and organising life around them can make a huge contribution to one’s positive mental health. Values are those domains that you care about in life and it is beneficial to young people to sense them clearly in order to understand which direction to navigate life in. Young people are often asked what they would like to become or study, and making this decision can be very difficult, especially if what they care about is not clear. When young people have a clear sense of what their values are, finding the right study or profession can be a lot easier. Often the question “to which problem in the world would you like to help find a solution?” can produce remarkable answers.

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Wong, P. T. P. Positive Psychology 2.0: Towards a Balanced Interactive Model of the Good Life. *Canadian Psychology/ Psychologie Canadienne* 2011, 52 (2), 69.

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Key characteristic 1 - Take the whole human being into consideration

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Key characteristic 3 - Start with a needs-assessment

When values, and thus what gives one's life value, are clear to young people, dealing with uncomfortable or difficult situations along the way can be easier, particularly if they are obstacles to overcome in order to navigate towards a life of value. In the narrative of the people who stutter, this is clear in Lynn's example: Lynn knew that artistic expression was important to her and the fear of being on stage became an obstacle to overcome.

How do values and strengths contribute to wellbeing?

Knowing your strengths & talents and having a clear idea of what gives life value are two important assets that will help promote self-determination. Working towards something that adds value to your life will promote agency in life, as you can be in charge of how you want to live your life. This will increase intrinsic behaviour and foster self-determination, which is an important aspect of mental health promotion. Applying your strengths and talents will feed the human psychological need for competence or mastery which is an important ingredient for well-being according to the Self-Determination Theory

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Key characteristic 4 - Discover
the motivation of young
people

The value and the strength approaches are complementary to each other as applying your strengths to work towards something you care about will inevitably bring joy and energy in the long run. For a young person who stutters, this shift of focus from a stutter-centred to a value-and-strength centred life, with emotional support and encouragement from peers, can bring about very positive life changes.

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Key characteristic 5 - Be a role
model of positive
mental health

Practical strategies for the positive approach

Strengths:

You can do an online strength finder test. One of the most used ones is the VIA Character strengths test. It is free and you can find it on www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths

Values:

There are several online value finder tools that can help you identify your own values and develop a strategy to apply them more in your life. www.lifevaluesinventory.org

Suggestions for further learning and resources

- Toolbox: Switch It On – Manual of Practices for YouthWork (downloadable from www.positivementalhealth.eu)
- Albers, T. (2021). Motivation and self-determination as essential ingredients for Positive Mental Health, In: Albers, T.

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

Reflection questions

- What are your driving values for being involved in youth work?
- Have these values always been the same and equally important as they are now?
- How can the way you do your youth work be (even) more in line with what adds value to your life?
- Do you know what your strengths are (they usually give you energy and joy when you apply them)?
- How can you apply your strengths more in youth work to deal with difficult situations?



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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

Organization: Anatta Foundation.

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

Organization: creACTIVE

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

Organization: Euroaccion

Angelica Paci has, for over 10 years, been training and facilitating groups and individuals in their personal and professional growth and well-being through experiential learning programmes, where reflective practices have been a core element for learning and development. In recent years, she has been working in Kamaleonte for non formal school programs on the topics of leadership, multiple intelligences and emotional intelligence. She is also a founding member of the international nonformal network of "Via Experientia" and of ALP - activating leadership potential. She believes in the power and value of collective intelligence. She sees

the group as a source for learning and thinks that diversity is a value that enriches people and the context in which they live, learn and work. Otto Scharmer's "Theory U" and Arawana Hayashi's social presencing theatre are her source of inspiration and their practices are currently integrated in her work.

Organization: Kamaleonte ASD

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

Organization: Vice Versa CZ



ABOUT THE ORGANISATIONS

Anatta Foundation

Country: The Netherlands

Website: anattafoundation.org



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

creActive

Country: Macedonia

Website: kreaktiv.mk



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

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

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

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

Euroaccion Murcia

Country: Spain

Website: euroaccion.com



Euroaccion is a non-governmental, independent organisation for the support of youth and adult learning, professional and personal development of people with fewer opportunities. Our vision is based on personal change for broader social change. Our mission is to inspire and stimulate human potential through experiential learning, non-formal education, volunteering and social inclusion-related projects.

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

At a local level, we work mainly in schools, with the students, parents and teachers. One of our main services is ICARO—a project about Emotional Intelligence for children and young people 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/



The Health Promotion Research Centre (HPRC) at the National University of Ireland Galway produces high quality research that supports the development of best practice and policy in the promotion of health. The HPRC collaborates with national and



international agencies on the development and evaluation of health promotion initiatives and has an active multidisciplinary research programme in place. Designated as a World Health Organization Collaborating Centre since 2009, the Centre has substantial experience in the management of large-scale national and international research projects. See further details at: www.nuigalway.ie/hprc

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

Kamaleonte

Country: Italy

Website: kamaleonte.org



Kamaleonte promotes the development and psycho-physical health of groups and individuals through outdoor experiential learning programs held at a local, national and international 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 in-formal network “International Academy of Experiential Education” (www.viaexperientia.net), that has been researching on experiential learning as an innovative and holistic methodology for developing the transversal competences of adult trainers and educators.

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

Vice Versa

Country: Czech Republic

Website: viceversa.cz



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

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

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



About the Project

The Erasmus+ funded project Positive Mental Health 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

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

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

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.





Positive Mental Health

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www.positivementalhealth.eu

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