"Supporting Resilience: Equipping Youth Workers to Address Trauma"

ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΝΕΟΛΑΙΑΣ & ΔΙΑ ΒΙΟΥ ΜΑΘΗΣΗΣ

Co-funded by the European Union

Youth Line FAMILY

🔷 TC "Supporting Resilience: Equipping Youth Workers to Address Trauma"

This guide, titled **"Supporting Resilience: Equipping Youth Workers to Address Trauma,"** was created as part of the Erasmus+ training course:

🔷 **Project number:** 2024-1-EL02-KA153-YOU-000205883

🔷 **Dates:** 18–26 May 2025

🔷 **Location:** Corfu, Greece

▼ Introduction

▼ Why Trauma-Informed Youth Work Matters

Youth work is about creating safe, empowering spaces for young people to grow, express themselves, and build their future. But many young people come with invisible stories — shaped by stress, loss, instability, or abuse — that may not be visible on the surface, yet deeply affect how they connect, behave, and learn.

Trauma-informed youth work recognises this reality. It does not assume that something is wrong with a young person — but that something may have happened to them. This approach is based on empathy, safety, and understanding rather than judgement, pressure, or control.

In a time of increasing mental health challenges, war, displacement, and inequality, it is essential that youth workers understand how trauma shapes behaviour — and how to respond in a way that supports healing and connection rather than harm.

A trauma-informed approach helps youth workers:

- create environments of psychological safety;
- support emotional regulation and resilience;
- avoid re-traumatisation;
- and maintain their own wellbeing while supporting others.

This is not therapy — but it is about bringing care, patience, and awareness into every youth activity. By doing so, we make our work more inclusive, sustainable, and impactful — not only for the young people we serve, but for ourselves and our professional communities.

▼ Who This Guide Is For and How to Use It

This guide is for **youth workers, educators, trainers, facilitators, social workers**, and all those who work with young people in non-formal or informal learning settings. It was created by youth workers — for youth workers — with the aim of making trauma-informed approaches more accessible, practical, and grounded in real experience.

Whether you're just beginning to explore mental health topics or already working with vulnerable youth, you will find tools, reflections, and methods here that can support your everyday practice.

You can use this guide to:

- **understand core trauma and resilience concepts** in youth work;
- **learn methods** that promote emotional safety and empathy;
- **adapt activities** for your own workshops or training sessions;

- **reflect on your own role and wellbeing** as a youth worker;
- **introduce trauma-informed principles** to your team or organisation.

You do not need to read the guide from beginning to end. Feel free to explore the chapters that speak to your needs, and return to them whenever you need support, ideas, or inspiration.

Most importantly, use this guide as a **living resource**. Try out the tools, adapt them, talk about them with your team, and make them your own.

▼ Understanding Trauma in the Youth Context

▼ What Is Trauma?

Trauma is not just what happens to someone — it's how the person experiences and processes it. Trauma can result from any event or series of events that overwhelm a person's ability to cope, leaving them feeling helpless, unsafe, or disconnected.

In youth work, trauma may not always be visible. Many young people carry **emotional wounds** from experiences such as:

- violence or abuse;
- neglect or emotional rejection;
- war, displacement, or forced migration;
- family breakdown, poverty, or chronic stress;
- bullying, discrimination, or social exclusion.

Two young people may go through the same event — but one may be traumatised, while the other is not. What matters is the **individual's sense of safety and support** at the time.

Trauma affects the brain, nervous system, and behaviour. It can impact:

- how young people **learn, trust, and concentrate**;
- how they **regulate their emotions** and respond to others;
- how they **perceive authority, group dynamics, and rules**.

As youth workers, we don't need to "fix" trauma or act like therapists. But we do need to understand that what we see on the outside — withdrawal,

aggression, avoidance — may be connected to **something deeper**. By recognising this, we can respond with **patience, empathy, and appropriate support**.

▼ ACES and Its Limitations

The **ACES framework** (Adverse Childhood Experiences) is one of the most well-known tools used to understand how early life experiences affect long-term health, behaviour, and wellbeing. Originally developed in the U.S., it identifies 10 types of serious adversity in childhood, including:

- physical, emotional, or sexual abuse;
- neglect;
- household dysfunction (e.g. domestic violence, substance abuse, incarceration of a parent, mental illness in the family).

The more ACES a person has, the higher the risk of negative outcomes later in life — such as depression, chronic illness, addiction, or involvement with the justice system.

While ACES is a helpful tool for raising awareness, **it has limitations**:

- It focuses on individual experience and risk, but not on **resilience** or protective factors.
- It does not include wider **social, cultural, or economic trauma** (e.g. racism, war, discrimination, poverty).
- It does not explain **how people heal** or why some thrive despite adversity.

In youth work, it's important to **not reduce young people to their ACES scores**. Instead of asking "What's wrong with you?" or "How many ACES do you have?", we can ask:

> "What happened to you?"
>
> "What support do you need?"
>
> "What strengths have helped you survive?"

Understanding ACES can help us be more trauma-aware — but we must always see the **whole person**, not just their past.

▼ Common Trauma Responses

When a young person experiences trauma, their brain and body may respond in ways that are automatic, protective, and deeply rooted in survival. These responses are not conscious decisions — they are **biological reactions** to perceived danger or overwhelm.

In youth work, understanding these responses can help us interpret behaviours with more empathy and less judgment.

The most common trauma responses are often summarised as:

- **Fight** – becoming aggressive, confrontational, or overly controlling.
- **Flight** – withdrawing, escaping situations, or avoiding connection.
- **Freeze** – shutting down, becoming silent, dissociating, or immobile.
- **Fawn** – people-pleasing, avoiding conflict, over-adapting to others' needs.
- **Flop** – collapsing physically or emotionally, showing helplessness.

These are not "bad behaviours" — they are **adaptive survival strategies** developed to cope with past or current stress.

For example:

- A young person who seems "lazy" or disengaged may be in a **freeze** response.
- One who interrupts or argues constantly may be operating from **fight** mode.
- A quiet, overly helpful participant may be showing **fawn** behaviour.

By recognising these patterns, youth workers can:

- avoid escalating conflict;
- offer appropriate emotional support;
- create safety through **predictability**, **choice**, and **connection**.

Above all, trauma responses are **signals, not problems** — and when we respond with understanding, we create space for trust, healing, and growth.

▼ The Role of Youth Workers

Youth workers are not therapists — and they don't need to be. But in many cases, they are the first adults a young person **trusts enough to open up to**. That trust is powerful. It creates an opportunity not to "fix" a young person's past, but to support them in building a more stable and empowered future.

In trauma-informed youth work, the role of the youth worker is to:

- **Create safe, predictable spaces** where young people feel respected and in control.
- **Model emotional regulation and healthy boundaries**, especially in times of tension or emotional overwhelm.
- **Notice behaviour with curiosity**, not judgement — asking "What might be behind this reaction?"
- **Offer consistency and patience**, even when a young person tests the limits of trust.
- **Empower young people** to identify their own strengths, needs, and coping strategies.
- **Take care of their own wellbeing**, so they can show up fully and sustainably for others.

Trauma-informed youth work doesn't require special qualifications — it requires a mindset. One that sees **behaviour as communication**, values connection over control, and understands that **healing happens in relationship**.

Youth workers can't change the past. But they can be a **key part of someone's recovery** — simply by being present, kind, and aware.

▼ Resilience and Inner Resources

▼ Defining Resilience in Practice

Resilience is often described as “the ability to bounce back” after difficulty — but in the context of youth work and trauma-informed practice, resilience is much more than that. It’s not about being strong all the time, ignoring pain, or pushing through at any cost. Instead, resilience is about **adaptation, flexibility, and the capacity to recover over time with support**.

For young people who have experienced adversity, resilience is not something they are born with or without — it is something that can be **cultivated through connection, safety, and meaningful support**.

In practice, resilience looks like:

- a young person **asking for help** when they need it;
- trying again after a setback;
- recognising and expressing emotions safely;
- making healthier choices over time;
- feeling a sense of belonging and purpose.

As youth workers, our role is not to force resilience, but to **create the conditions where resilience can grow**. That means:

- supporting young people’s sense of **agency and voice**;
- helping them identify their **inner strengths** and **external supports**;
- encouraging **self-reflection**, **connection**, and **compassion**.

Resilience is not a straight line. It fluctuates, especially for young people navigating complex challenges. But with the right environment — one that’s patient, safe, and empowering — young people can develop the tools they need not just to survive, but to grow.

▼ The “Resilience Tree” Method

The **“Resilience Tree”** is a powerful visual tool that helps young people explore and reflect on what supports them — internally and externally — in difficult times. It turns the abstract concept of resilience into something **tangible, creative, and personal**.

This method was used during the training course and resonated strongly with participants, as it encouraged **storytelling, symbolism, and emotional awareness** in a non-threatening way.

How It Works

Participants are invited to draw or build a symbolic tree, where each part represents a different aspect of their resilience:

- **Roots** = Sources of support

  Examples: family, friends, teachers, culture, faith, nature, community groups

- **Trunk** = Inner strengths and coping tools

  Examples: creativity, humour, problem-solving, courage, hope

- **Branches** = How they support others

  Examples: listening to friends, sharing skills, helping siblings, volunteering

Optional additions:

- **Leaves** = Hopes, dreams, goals
- **Storms** = Difficult past events (drawn in the background or sky)

This method encourages reflection through both **images and conversation**. Some youth workers may use cards (like Dixit), magazines for collage, or natural materials — depending on the setting and group.

Why It's Effective

✅ It helps youth **recognise their own resilience** — even if they don't yet believe they are "strong."

✅ It makes invisible things (like emotional resources) **visible**.

✅ It encourages **peer sharing**, creating connection and trust.

✅ It can be adapted for **individual or group work**, with any age group.

Tips for Youth Workers

- Make sure participants know they don’t have to share anything personal unless they want to.
- Focus on **strengths and support**, not just difficulties.
- Allow time for debriefing — let them explain what their tree means in their own words.
- Consider pairing this activity with a **grounding exercise** afterwards.

The “Resilience Tree” is not just a drawing — it becomes a **map of identity, strength, and support**, which youth can return to when they face new challenges.

▼ Storytelling, Symbols, and Visual Tools

Young people often struggle to express their inner world with words alone — especially when it comes to painful, confusing, or overwhelming experiences. That’s why storytelling and visual tools are so important in trauma-informed youth work: **they offer alternative pathways to self-expression, meaning-making, and healing**.

These methods are not only creative — they are also **non-threatening**, **inclusive**, and adaptable across languages, cultures, and literacy levels.

Storytelling

Stories help young people:

- make sense of their own experiences;
- feel seen and validated when others share similar stories;
- build connection and empathy within a group.

You don’t need to ask participants to share personal trauma stories. Instead, you can invite:

- **symbolic stories** (e.g. using Dixit or image cards);
- **fictional narratives** based on characters or objects;
- **future stories** — imagining how a challenge might be overcome.

Prompt examples:

- “Tell the story of a rock that survived a storm.”
- “Imagine a young person like you who finds something that helps them grow.”
- “Describe a moment of change or strength — real or imagined.”

Symbols and Metaphors

Metaphors allow young people to speak **indirectly** about difficult topics. This reduces emotional pressure while still supporting deep reflection. Common symbolic tools include:

- weather (e.g. cloudy, stormy, sunny);
- journeys (e.g. mountains, crossroads, maps);
- natural elements (e.g. trees, rivers, animals).

By using metaphor, youth can **externalise emotions**, reflect more safely, and explore new perspectives.

Visual Tools

Visual methods encourage engagement, especially for participants who are quiet, neurodivergent, multilingual, or simply prefer non-verbal ways of working.

Examples include:

- drawing or collaging emotions;
- building symbolic objects or figures;
- using colour to map energy or resilience levels;
- creating posters, timelines, or comics.

These tools:

- invite personal reflection and group sharing;
- can be kept by the young person for future use;

- help facilitators understand unspoken dynamics in the group.

In trauma-informed youth work, storytelling and symbolism aren't just artistic — they are **relational, reflective, and empowering**. They help young people say:

> "This is my experience."
>
> "This is what matters to me."
>
> "This is how I want to grow."

▼ Building Capacity in Young People

Resilience is not something we give to young people — it's something they build within themselves. As youth workers, our role is to **create the right environment, relationships, and opportunities** for that growth to happen.

Building capacity means helping young people:

- understand themselves and their emotions;
- believe in their ability to cope with challenges;
- connect with supportive people and systems;
- take meaningful action in their lives and communities.

What Capacity-Building Looks Like in Practice

In trauma-informed youth work, capacity-building includes:

- **Emotional awareness**: naming feelings, recognising patterns, and understanding responses.
- **Self-regulation skills**: using techniques (like grounding or breathing) to manage stress.
- **Decision-making and agency**: supporting youth to make choices and take responsibility in safe ways.
- **Goal-setting**: working towards personal or shared aims, even small ones.

- **Social connection**: creating belonging, peer support, and trust in relationships.
- **Creativity and expression**: helping youth explore identity through art, music, movement, or storytelling.

These elements don't always need a formal workshop — they can happen **in a conversation, a game, a moment of support**. What matters is being intentional and consistent.

Our Attitudes Matter

The way we approach young people makes all the difference. Capacity-building happens when youth workers:

- **Focus on strengths** instead of deficits
- **Listen without fixing**
- **Allow space for mistakes and learning**
- **Celebrate small progress**
- **Model boundaries and self-care**

Even when young people don't appear engaged, they are often watching, absorbing, and testing the environment. That's why **how we show up** — with patience, presence, and respect — is part of the impact we make.

When youth feel seen, supported, and empowered, their capacity grows — sometimes quietly, sometimes visibly — but always in their own time.

▼ Creating Safe Learning Environments

▼ The 6 Principles of Trauma-Informed Care

A trauma-informed approach is not just about what we do — it's about **how we do it**. The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) outlines six core principles that define trauma-informed care across sectors. These principles are especially relevant to **youth work settings**, where trust, safety, and connection are key.

Here's how the six principles translate into **daily youth work practice**:

---

1. **Safety**

Both physical and emotional safety must be present.

> In practice: consistent routines, clear expectations, respectful language, and spaces free from bullying or ridicule.

---

2. **Trustworthiness and Transparency**

Young people need to know what's happening and why.

> In practice: be honest, set boundaries clearly, explain decisions, and follow through on what you say.

---

3. **Peer Support**

Support from others with shared experiences can be powerful.

> In practice: create time for youth to share, support one another, and recognise common struggles — in pairs, small groups, or circles.

---

4. **Collaboration and Mutuality**

Power should be shared — not imposed.

> In practice: involve youth in decisions, co-create group agreements, and treat them as experts in their own lives.

---

5. **Empowerment, Voice, and Choice**

Young people must feel that their voice matters.

> In practice: offer choices (how to engage, how to express themselves), highlight strengths, and encourage self-expression.

---

6. **Cultural, Historical, and Gender Sensitivity**

Respect identity and context.

> In practice: be aware of bias, use inclusive language, and honour cultural differences in how trauma and resilience are experienced.

These six principles are not a checklist — they are a **mindset and a compass**. When embedded into daily youth work, they build environments where healing, growth, and genuine connection can take place.

▼ Emotional Safety, Boundaries, and Consent

Emotional safety is the foundation of all meaningful learning, growth, and connection — especially in trauma-informed youth work. Young people cannot engage, explore, or express themselves if they feel judged, unsafe, or exposed.

Creating emotional safety means building spaces where young people feel:

- respected,
- accepted as they are,
- in control of what and how they share,
- free from humiliation, pressure, or emotional harm.

Why Boundaries Matter

Boundaries are not walls — they are structures that create safety. They help both youth and youth workers know what is okay and what is not. Without boundaries, young people may:

- test limits to feel protected,
- become overwhelmed by too much openness,
- feel unsafe when others overstep or dominate.

Youth workers can set boundaries by:

- clearly defining roles and limits (e.g. “I’m here to support you, but I’m not a therapist”);
- being consistent and fair in group management;

- modelling self-respect and emotional regulation.

Boundaries are especially important when youth have previously experienced chaos, instability, or violation of personal space.

Practising Consent in Youth Work

Consent is not just for physical situations — it applies to emotional sharing, touch, participation, and even attention.

In trauma-informed youth work, consent means:

- **asking before inviting deep sharing**, not pressuring;
- **allowing youth to say "no"** without punishment or guilt;
- **checking in**: "Is it okay if we talk about this now?"
- **offering choices** for how to engage: writing, drawing, speaking, or just listening.

Group agreements are a great way to co-create a consent-based space:

- "Share what you want, not what you don't."
- "Listen with respect, but you don't have to comment."
- "Take space, make space."

Emotional safety is not guaranteed by intention alone — it is built through **daily actions, group culture, and conscious facilitation**. When young people know they can set boundaries, say no, and still belong — that's when trust grows, and resilience has space to develop.

▼ Grounding Exercises and Group Agreements

In trauma-informed youth work, it's essential to create a **stable emotional foundation** — not just at the start of a programme, but throughout. Two of the most effective tools for this are **grounding exercises** and **group agreements**.

Grounding Exercises

Grounding refers to simple practices that help young people reconnect with the present moment — especially when they feel anxious, overwhelmed, or disconnected.

These exercises support:

- emotional regulation,
- nervous system balance,
- a sense of safety and control.

Examples of grounding activities in youth work:

- **5-4-3-2-1** method: name 5 things you see, 4 you can touch, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, 1 you taste.
- **Breathing with movement**: arms rise on inhale, lower on exhale.
- **Feet on the ground**: feel the connection with the floor, press gently.
- **Touch objects**: hold a stone, textured card, or soft item.
- **Name colours or shapes** in the room.

You can use grounding:

- at the beginning or end of a session,
- after intense activities,
- when you notice group tension, or
- as an individual support strategy.

Grounding builds emotional literacy and gives youth **practical tools for self-regulation** they can use anywhere.

Group Agreements

Group agreements are **co-created rules** that help participants feel respected, safe, and empowered. Unlike top-down rules, they are made **with the group**, not for the group.

Key principles:

- created during the first day or session;

- visible in the room (e.g. on flipchart);
- referred back to regularly;
- flexible and revisited as needed.

Common group agreement examples:

- “Speak from the I” (I-statements, not generalising);
- “Confidentiality — share stories, not names”;
- “Pass is always an option” (you can choose not to speak);
- “Phones off or away unless needed”;
- “Listen to understand, not to respond”.

Creating these agreements builds a **sense of ownership and mutual respect**. It also reduces anxiety because everyone knows the shared expectations.

By combining grounding and group agreements, you create a space that is both **emotionally supportive and collectively held**. These tools are simple, but their impact on trust, safety, and learning is profound.

▼ Managing Emotional Triggers in Group Settings

Even in the safest environment, difficult emotions can arise — especially when activities touch on personal topics like identity, relationships, or inner struggles. For young people with traumatic experiences, certain words, sounds, or situations can **trigger intense emotional reactions** — often without warning.

Triggers are reminders (conscious or unconscious) of a past experience that felt overwhelming or unsafe. They can be activated by:

- a tone of voice or body language,
- a story that resembles a personal situation,
- physical closeness or sudden movement,
- being put on the spot, ignored, or misunderstood.

How Triggers Can Appear

In a group setting, a young person might:

- suddenly withdraw or go silent,
- become defensive or angry,
- appear dissociated or “zoned out”,
- laugh inappropriately or interrupt repeatedly,
- avoid participation or leave the space.

These behaviours are **not disrespect** — they are **protective responses** to a perceived threat.

How Youth Workers Can Respond

The goal is not to prevent all triggers — that’s impossible — but to create **a group culture where emotional reactions are normalised, supported, and managed with care**.

What you can do:

- Stay calm and grounded yourself.
- Give space without forcing the person to explain.
- Offer options: “Would you like to take a break?”, “Want to go for a short walk?”
- Use a buddy system so peers can offer support.
- Reassure the group without over-dramatising: “Let’s take a breath together.”
- Follow up privately, later, if appropriate.

Where possible, prepare the group by:

- explaining that emotional responses are okay and expected;
- offering opt-out or alternative ways to engage (e.g. drawing instead of speaking);
- using grounding or closing rituals after emotionally intense exercises.

Long-Term Prevention

- Design activities with **choice, safety, and flexibility** in mind.
- **Debrief regularly** — even short reflections can help release tension.
- Check in with individuals you know may be more sensitive.
- Collaborate with co-facilitators or team members to monitor group energy.

Triggers can be challenging — but they're also **opportunities to build resilience, awareness, and trust**. When handled with care, they can become moments of deep learning and connection.

▼ Empathy and Communication Tools

▼ Active Listening Techniques

In trauma-informed youth work, listening is not just about hearing words — it's about creating a space where young people feel **seen, heard, and valued**. Many young people — especially those with difficult life experiences — have not often been truly listened to. Active listening is a powerful way to **build trust and safety**.

It requires full presence, patience, and openness — even when the story is difficult, unclear, or emotional.

What Is Active Listening?

Active listening means:

- paying full attention to the speaker;
- showing interest with body language and short verbal cues ("I see," "Go on," "That makes sense");
- not interrupting, correcting, or rushing;
- reflecting back what the person said, to check understanding.

It also means listening for what's **not being said**:

- tone of voice, energy, pauses, emotion behind the words.

Simple Techniques for Youth Work

The Trio Method

Participants work in groups of three: speaker, listener, and observer. Each person rotates through all roles. The listener's task is only to listen — no advice, no reactions, no solutions — just presence.

> Afterwards, the observer gives feedback: Did the listener make eye contact? Were they fully present?

Paraphrasing

After someone shares, try saying:

> "What I'm hearing is..." or "It sounds like you're feeling..."
>
> This helps the speaker feel understood and gives them a chance to clarify.

Listening Without Fixing

Sometimes young people just want to be heard — not told what to do. You can say:

> "That sounds really tough. Do you want me to just listen, or help you think through it?"

Silent Conversations

Let participants write their thoughts or feelings on paper in silence, then respond to each other in writing. This method is especially helpful for introverted or anxious youth.

Why It Matters

When youth workers practise active listening:

- young people feel respected and empowered;
- difficult emotions can be processed more safely;
- deeper connections are built — even without "big conversations".

Listening is one of the simplest tools we have — and one of the most transformative.

▼ Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a communication method developed by Marshall Rosenberg. It supports people in expressing themselves honestly and listening to others empathetically — even in conflict or emotionally charged situations.

In youth work, NVC offers a way to reduce misunderstanding, build connection, and **respond to difficult behaviour with compassion instead of control**.

The Four Steps of NVC

1. **Observation** – Describe what you see or hear without judgment.

   > Instead of: "You're being disrespectful."
   >
   > Say: "You interrupted me during the group activity."

2. **Feelings** – Name the emotion you're experiencing.

   > "I feel frustrated / confused / worried..."

3. **Needs** – Identify the underlying human need behind the feeling.

   > "Because I need clarity / respect / cooperation..."

4. **Request** – Ask clearly and respectfully for what you would like.

   > "Would you be willing to let me finish before responding?"

Why NVC Helps in Trauma-Informed Work

Youth affected by trauma may struggle with:

- trust,
- expressing needs,
- managing frustration,

- feeling misunderstood.

NVC helps shift communication from blame or reaction to **empathy and clarity**. It teaches young people how to:

- name their feelings and needs,
- express themselves without attacking others,
- listen to others with openness,
- build emotional literacy and conflict resolution skills.

Practising NVC With Youth

Start with **simple exercises**, like:

- identifying emotions using cards or drawings;
- translating “jackal” statements (blaming) into “giraffe” language (empathetic);
- using roleplay to practise calm responses in conflict.

Example:

- “He always ignores me!” → “I feel invisible when I’m not included, because I need connection. I’d like to be asked to join next time.”

Remind participants: **NVC is not about being perfect or nice all the time** — it’s about expressing the truth in a way that others can receive.

Practising NVC takes time, but it helps build communication habits based on **mutual respect, emotional awareness, and shared humanity** — the core of trauma-informed youth work.

▼ Supporting Without Fixing

One of the most important — and most difficult — lessons in trauma-informed youth work is this:

We are here to support, not to fix.

When a young person shares something painful or confusing, the instinct of many youth workers is to offer advice, solve the problem, or try to

“make it better.” While well-intentioned, this can unintentionally:

- take away the young person’s sense of agency,
- create dependency on the adult’s opinion,
- send the message that “your feelings are a problem that needs solving,”
- or shut down further sharing.

What Support Really Means

Support means being **present**, **available**, and **compassionate** — even when we can’t change the situation.

It looks like:

- listening deeply without interruption,
- validating emotions: “That sounds really difficult,”
- asking open-ended questions: “What do you think you need right now?”,
- reflecting back strengths: “You’ve been handling a lot and still showing up — that’s powerful.”

The Power of Not-Knowing

You don’t need to have the answers. In fact, saying “I don’t know, but I’m here for you” is often more healing than giving advice. It builds trust, because it shows that:

- you’re not judging,
- you’re not taking control,
- you believe in the young person’s capacity to find their own way — with support.

Boundaries Are Support Too

Sometimes, support means saying:

- “I hear that this is serious — and I think you might need someone with more experience than me.”
- “I can support you emotionally, but I can’t fix this for you — would you like help finding more resources?”
- “I care about you, and I’m not going to disappear — even if I don’t know what to say right now.”

Support without fixing is **humble, kind, and powerful**. It gives young people space to **own their process**, while knowing they’re not alone.

▼ Practical Exercises for Youth Work Settings

The best way to develop communication and empathy skills is through **practice in safe, structured environments**. Below are simple, adaptable exercises used during the training course, suitable for many youth work contexts. They help young people **listen actively, express themselves, and reflect on emotional dynamics**.

---

1. The Empathy Circle

Participants sit in a circle. One person shares a short story or reflection. The next person reflects what they heard using phrases like:

> “What I hear is...” or “It sounds like you felt...”

Each person takes a turn sharing and reflecting. This builds active listening, mutual understanding, and trust.

---

2. Buddy Walks

Participants pair up and go for a walk. One speaks for 5 minutes while the other listens silently. Then they switch. Walking side-by-side (rather than face-to-face) reduces pressure and encourages openness.

Great as a closing or debrief activity.

---

3. Feelings Cards

Use illustrated emotion cards (or create your own). Ask participants:

- “Which one reflects how you feel today?”
- “Which card would you choose for someone in crisis?”
- “What emotions do you find hard to express?”

This builds emotional vocabulary and empathy.

---

4. Roleplay: Support or Fix?

In pairs, one plays a young person sharing a problem. The other first responds by “fixing,” then by “supporting without fixing.”

After each round, reflect: How did it feel? What helped? What didn’t?

This exercise makes the difference clear — and memorable.

---

5. Listening Trios

As used in the training: participants rotate between the roles of speaker, listener, and observer. The observer gives feedback:

- Did the listener interrupt?
- Did they reflect emotions or just facts?
- Did the speaker feel heard?

Helps develop self-awareness and group feedback skills.

These tools are adaptable for different ages, settings, and group sizes. What matters is creating a space where youth **feel safe to explore and grow**, without judgment.

▼ Non-Formal Methods for Trauma-Sensitive Youth Work

▼ Theatre and Movement-Based Methods

Trauma lives in the body as much as in the mind. That’s why movement-based and theatre methods are so powerful in trauma-informed youth work: they allow young people to express, release, and explore emotions **without needing to explain everything in words**.

These methods are especially helpful when working with:

- participants who are emotionally blocked or overwhelmed;
- groups with language barriers or diverse backgrounds;
- young people with limited attention spans or discomfort with traditional discussions.

Why Use Theatre and Movement?

These activities:

- support self-awareness and emotional regulation;
- help participants recognise and embody different emotions;
- allow safe exploration of tension, conflict, and relationship dynamics;
- strengthen group connection and non-verbal communication;
- provide physical release of stress.

They are not about acting talent — they are about **presence, engagement, and shared experience**.

Example: “Trauma Responses in the Body”

Used during the training, this exercise helped participants explore **fight, flight, freeze, fawn, and flop** responses physically.

Instructions:

1. Call out each response and invite participants to embody it (e.g. “freeze” = frozen posture, tight muscles).
2. Explore transitions between states.
3. Debrief: How did each state feel? When have you seen these in real life?

This makes the concept of trauma **memorable, embodied, and humanised**.

Example: “Status Walk”

Participants walk around the space exploring different “status levels” — high (confident, open posture), medium (neutral), low (small, closed posture).

> Debrief: How did each status feel? What emotions or memories did it evoke?

Great for building awareness of power, self-image, and social dynamics.

Example: “Emotion Sculptures”

In groups, participants build human sculptures to represent emotions (e.g. anxiety, hope, trust). Others guess the emotion, then discuss what elements helped them identify it.

This works well to **externalise emotions**, build empathy, and reflect on body language.

Tips for Youth Workers

- Always **offer opt-out options** — participants can observe instead of act.
- Include **warm-up and grounding exercises** before and after.
- Focus on **process, not performance**.
- Debrief every activity to help integrate insights.

Theatre and movement unlock access to **layers of experience** that words alone cannot reach. Used with care, they are a **powerful tool for healing, reflection, and connection**.

▼ Visual & Creative Reflection Tools

In trauma-informed youth work, **reflection is essential** — but it doesn’t always need to be verbal or linear. Visual and creative methods give young people alternative ways to process experience, explore meaning, and express emotions **in a way that feels safe and authentic**.

These tools are particularly helpful for:

- participants who struggle to put feelings into words,

- neurodivergent young people,
- multilingual or mixed-language groups,
- emotionally charged or sensitive topics.

Why Use Visual Reflection Tools?

- They help **externalise emotions** and thoughts.
- They make the **invisible visible**.
- They create lasting, personal artefacts of the experience.
- They offer **quiet, individual processing** after intense sessions.
- They allow youth to reflect **without fear of being judged**.

Tools That Work Well

✅ **Drawing Emotions**

Ask participants to draw how they felt during a session or experience.

Options: colours, shapes, faces, abstract art.

✅ **Mood Maps**

Create a line across a paper (from low to high). Let youth map their emotional journey across a week, day, or activity. Add colours or symbols to show energy, challenges, or highlights.

✅ **Postcard to Myself**

Participants create a visual message or drawing to their “future self” — a reminder of what they learned or want to remember.

✅ **Symbol Cards (e.g. Dixit)**

Let participants choose a card that represents how they feel or what they take away.

Prompt: “Which card reflects your learning today?”

Then they can share (or not) as they choose.

✅ **Collage or Vision Board**

Using magazines, images, or drawings, create a collage around a theme (e.g. “What helps me feel strong?”, “How I want to show up in the world”).

Integration and Debriefing

These tools work best when combined with:

- a short sharing circle,
- journaling or written reflection,
- a debrief question (e.g. “What did you notice about your drawing?”)

Let participants decide how much to share. The focus is on **process, not product**.

Materials You Can Use

- markers, crayons, coloured pencils
- paper of different sizes
- scissors, glue, old magazines
- symbol cards or image decks
- stickers, string, stones, natural objects

Visual and creative tools open up space for **intuitive, embodied learning**. They remind young people that there’s more than one way to process experience — and that their unique way is welcome.

▼ Case Study Practice: Group Analysis

Working with real or fictional **case studies** is one of the most effective ways to help youth workers explore complex, trauma-related situations in a **safe, structured, and collaborative** way. It builds critical thinking, empathy, and confidence in applying theory to practice.

This method was used during the training course and received excellent feedback from participants.

How It Works

1. Participants work in small groups to create **realistic youth work case studies**, inspired by their professional experience.

   > Example: “A 16-year-old refugee shows aggressive behaviour and refuses to engage in group activities.”

2. Each group writes their case on a flipchart or worksheet, including:
   - background context,
   - observable behaviour,
   - key challenges,
   - questions for the group.
3. The cases rotate between groups. Each group analyses a case they didn’t create and discusses:
   - what may be happening beneath the surface (trauma responses, triggers),
   - what emotional needs may be unmet,
   - how to respond in a trauma-informed way,
   - what boundaries, support or referrals might be helpful.
4. Groups present their ideas and receive peer feedback.

Benefits of This Method

✅ Encourages empathy without judgement

✅ Deepens understanding of trauma-informed principles

✅ Promotes collective problem-solving

✅ Bridges theory and daily youth work challenges

✅ Highlights cultural and systemic factors affecting young people

---

Facilitator Tips

- Ensure psychological safety: remind participants that it’s okay to “not know” or disagree.

- Clarify that cases should remain anonymous and respectful.
- Use a **trauma-informed analysis sheet** with guiding questions (e.g. “What might be the unmet need here?”).
- Include time for **reflection and emotional closure** at the end.

This method strengthens the ability of youth workers to **navigate complexity, stay grounded, and support young people effectively** — even in situations that feel confusing or overwhelming.

▼ Peer-to-Peer and Experiential Activities

One of the most impactful ways to solidify learning is to **turn participants into facilitators**. When young people or youth workers share knowledge with their peers, they develop ownership, confidence, and real-life application of skills. This is especially true in trauma-informed learning, where **experience and reflection** are more powerful than theory alone.

During the training course, participants were invited to **co-create and lead their own short sessions**, drawing on everything they had learned.

Why This Works

- It transforms learners into leaders.
- It builds confidence in using trauma-informed approaches.
- It encourages creative adaptation to different contexts.
- It reinforces key principles through practice.

How It Was Done in the Training

1. Participants were divided into small teams.
2. Each team chose a topic explored during the week (e.g. resilience, grounding, emotional expression, listening, trauma responses).
3. Their task was to **design a 20–30 minute activity** that would be suitable for use in their local youth work setting.
4. Teams presented their activities to the group.

5. After each session, there was space for **peer feedback and collective reflection**.

What Participants Learned

- How to **adapt theory into practice**
- How to facilitate sensitive topics safely
- How to balance structure and flexibility
- How to give and receive constructive feedback
- That they are capable of leading meaningful processes in their own communities

---

These peer-led, experiential moments were among the most **empowering parts of the course**. They showed participants — and the facilitators — how much learning had taken root, and how ready the group was to take that learning forward.

▼ The Resilient Youth Worker Manifesto

▼ Collective Principles and Statements

At the end of the training course, participants came together to reflect on their learning and **co-create a shared statement** of values and practices — titled the **“Resilient Youth Worker Manifesto.”** This document captured the **spirit, priorities, and intentions** of the group, based on what they had experienced, understood, and envisioned for their work with young people.

Why This Matters

Creating a collective statement:

- helps participants **consolidate their learning**;
- reinforces a sense of shared mission and direction;
- gives youth workers a reference they can bring back to their organisations or teams;

- acts as a **symbol of unity, care, and responsibility**.

What the Manifesto Included

While each group may design their own version, our manifesto included:

- **Core values** of trauma-informed youth work (empathy, presence, safety, voice, respect);
- **Key principles** such as “We hold space, not answers,” and “Support without judgement”;
- **Commitments** to self-care, peer care, inclusive practice, and continuous learning;
- A reminder that **resilience is relational** — it grows in safe, trusting environments.

The tone of the manifesto was **hopeful, grounded, and realistic** — not idealistic. It acknowledged that youth work is emotional labour, and that **taking care of ourselves is part of taking care of others**.

Use of the Manifesto

Participants were encouraged to:

- present it within their organisations or networks;
- use it as a **starting point for team reflection**;
- adapt it into local languages or visual formats;
- refer to it when facing challenges in their daily work.

Creating collective principles turned individual learning into **shared direction and purpose** — a reminder that trauma-informed youth work is not done alone, but **in community**.

▼ Applying the Manifesto in Real Youth Work

Creating a manifesto is only the first step — its true value comes when it is **applied in real-life youth work settings**. After the training course, participants were encouraged to reflect on how the shared principles

could shape their **daily practice, team dynamics, and organisational culture**.

The goal was not to follow the manifesto like a fixed rulebook, but to use it as a **living guide** — something to return to, adapt, and be inspired by in moments of uncertainty, stress, or growth.

From Words to Action

Participants reported using the manifesto in various ways after the training:

- as a reference point when designing or reviewing youth activities;
- to guide conversations in team meetings and staff development;
- to introduce trauma-informed approaches to new colleagues;
- to explain the values of their organisation to young people and partners;
- as personal inspiration when facing challenges in emotionally demanding work.

Adapting to Context

The manifesto was intentionally broad and adaptable, so each youth worker could translate its meaning into their unique environment. For example:

- a social worker in Romania used it to revise their **approach to crisis conversations** with teens;
- a youth leader in Germany presented it during a workshop on **mental health in youth work**;
- a volunteer in Lithuania integrated it into a small group programme on **peer support and resilience**.

Keeping the Spirit Alive

Participants were reminded that applying the manifesto is not about perfection — it's about **practising with intention**. That means:

- revisiting the principles regularly;
- using them to reflect on what is working and what needs care;
- sharing them with others as a conversation-starter, not a finished product.

Some organisations began **developing their own internal versions** of the manifesto based on the original, adapted to their community and language — a sign that the learning was truly taking root.

The "Resilient Youth Worker Manifesto" is more than a product — it's a **collective compass**, co-created by youth workers who are committed to doing their work with care, courage, and humanity.

▼ How to Use It With Your Team

The tools, methods, and principles in this guide are not just for individual youth workers — they are meant to **strengthen entire teams and organisations**. Trauma-informed practice becomes truly effective when it is **shared, discussed, and reflected on collectively**.

Here's how you can use this guide with your team or colleagues:

Team Reflection Sessions

Choose one topic or chapter (e.g. "Resilience Tree", "Grounding", or "Trauma Responses") and invite the team to:

- read the section in advance or together;
- reflect on how it applies to your current work;
- share experiences, questions, and challenges;
- brainstorm how to adapt it for your specific context.

Even 30–60 minutes of shared discussion can deepen mutual understanding and spark positive change.

Internal Training or Peer Learning

Use the guide to organise:

- internal workshops or practice sessions,
- peer-to-peer skill-sharing,
- co-facilitation of new activities.

Let team members **take turns leading short sessions** based on the guide. This supports confidence-building and shared ownership.

Policy and Practice Review

Reflect on how your organisation currently approaches:

- safety and consent,
- boundaries and emotional support,
- crisis or conflict response.

Compare current practices with the principles in the guide. What aligns? What could be improved?

This process can lead to:

- updates in programme design,
- improvements in team culture,
- more intentional support for staff wellbeing.

Ongoing Use

- Include the guide in **onboarding packs** for new staff or volunteers.
- Translate key concepts into visual reminders in your workspaces.
- Use excerpts to advocate for trauma-informed funding, training, or partnerships.

You don’t need to use the whole guide at once. Even a single idea — shared with care — can create ripple effects across your team, organisation, and community.

▼ Conclusion

Youth work is more than organising activities — it is about creating space where young people feel **seen, heard, and safe**. This is especially vital when working with those who carry invisible wounds, chaotic experiences, or deep emotional challenges.

Trauma-informed youth work is not a specialised niche — it is an **essential approach** for anyone who wants to meet young people with compassion, dignity, and care.

Throughout this guide, we've shared reflections, tools, and practices that were tested and developed through real experiences — by youth workers from across Europe, united by a common desire to grow in awareness and impact.

What we've learned is this:

- You don't need to be an expert to start making a difference.
- Safety and trust are built over time, through consistency and presence.
- Listening — truly listening — is one of the most powerful things you can offer.
- Supporting others starts with taking care of yourself.
- Growth happens when we work **with** young people, not on them.

We hope this guide helps you feel more equipped, inspired, and supported in your journey. Use it, adapt it, share it — and keep building spaces where **resilience can grow**.

The work is not always easy. But it matters deeply. And you are not alone in doing it.

Website

Instagram

Facebook

Linkedin