

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY



A practical,
supportive guide for
youth workers to
understand mental
health, from building
basic awareness to
addressing the
specific challenges
young people face.

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CHAPTER 1

Understanding Mental Health: The Basics



Welcome to the first chapter of our guidebook for youth workers - Understanding the basics of mental health. In this chapter, you will have an opportunity to understand better:

1. What is mental health literacy?
2. Distinction between mental health and mental illness
3. How to break down stigma in and through youth work?
4. Learn to distinguish signs and symptoms
5. Hands-on-activities you can implement.

We hope this chapter will be useful for you and that it will increase your capacity to address the needs of young people - especially the ones struggling with mental health challenges.

What is mental health literacy and why is it important in youth work?

Mental health literacy refers to the knowledge, skills, and awareness needed to understand, manage, and support mental well-being. It includes recognizing mental health conditions, understanding their causes and effects, knowing where to seek help, and reducing stigma. It also involves promoting positive coping strategies and resilience.

In youth work, mental health literacy is especially important because young people face unique challenges—academic stress, social pressures, identity development, and uncertainty about the future. You, as youth worker, often serve as trusted mentor, making your role crucial in:

1. Early recognition and support - Young people may struggle to identify or express their emotions. A youth worker with strong mental health literacy can recognize signs of distress and guide them toward appropriate support.
2. Reducing stigma - Many young people avoid talking about mental health due to fear of being judged. By fostering open conversations, youth workers can create a safe space for discussion and self-expression.
3. Empowering young people - Teaching mental health literacy equips youth with coping mechanisms, emotional regulation skills, and knowledge on when and how to seek help, promoting long-term well-being.
4. Finally, but not the least important is: creating inclusive environments - Understanding mental health enables youth workers to support diverse needs, including neurodivergent individuals or those facing additional challenges like eco-anxiety or discrimination.

Now that we understand better what is your role as a youth worker, let's understand the basics behind mental health literacy. Welcome onboard!

Mental health vs. Mental illness

This subchapter will provide youth workers with a clear understanding of what mental health is, how it differs from mental illness, and why this distinction matters. By exploring key concepts, we aim to create an open and stigma-free learning space.

1.1 Understanding mental health

💡 What comes to your mind when you hear "mental health"?

Many people associate "mental health" with problems, disorders, or struggles. However, mental health is much more than that—it is a part of everyone's life, just like physical health.

Definition: Mental health refers to our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and behave in daily life. It also influences how we handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions.

✅ Good mental health includes:

- The ability to cope with life's ups and downs
- Having positive relationships
- Managing emotions effectively
- Feeling a sense of purpose and self-worth

🧠 Mental health exists on a spectrum, meaning it is not simply "healthy" or "unhealthy" but rather fluctuates over time.

1.2 Understanding mental illness

Mental illness refers to conditions that significantly affect a person's thinking, feeling, behavior, or mood. These conditions may be temporary or long-term and can impact daily functioning.

Definition: Mental illness (or mental disorder) is a clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior. It is diagnosed based on specific criteria, often requiring professional assessment and support.

Common examples include:

- Anxiety disorders (e.g., generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder)
- Mood disorders (e.g., depression, bipolar disorder)
- Psychotic disorders (e.g., schizophrenia)

It is crucial to recognize that mental illness is not a personal weakness or failure. Just as people can experience temporary or chronic physical illnesses, mental illnesses are real health conditions that require understanding and appropriate care.

What is important for you to know?

Being a youth worker is not enough to qualify you for addressing mental illnesses – thus, it is important that you are aware of their existence, possible challenges people face when having them and being open to instruct these people towards appropriate help figures and channels.

What you can do:

- ✓ Recognize when someone might need support
- ✓ Listen without judgment
- ✓ Reduce stigma through open discussions
- ✓ Guide young people toward professional resources

What you shouldn't do:

- ✗ Diagnose or assume you know what's wrong
- ✗ Offer solutions beyond your expertise
- ✗ Minimize or dismiss their feelings
- ✗ Keep serious concerns to yourself—know when to escalate

Breaking down stigma

Stigma around mental health is one of the biggest barriers preventing young people from seeking support. As a youth worker, you have the power to create a safe, non-judgmental space where mental health is treated with the same care and openness as physical health.

2.1. What is stigma?

💡 Imagine you twist your ankle. Would you hesitate to tell someone? Probably not. Now imagine you're struggling with anxiety or depression. Would you feel as comfortable sharing that? Why or why not?

Stigma is the negative attitude, belief, or discrimination against people struggling with mental health challenges. It can come from society, communities, and even within ourselves (self-stigma).

Two main types of stigma:

1. **Social stigma:** When people with mental health issues are labeled, stereotyped, or treated unfairly. (Example: "He's just lazy, not depressed.")
2. **Self-stigma:** When someone internalizes negative beliefs about mental health and feels ashamed to seek help. (Example: "I should just toughen up, I don't need therapy.")

Stigma exists because many people misunderstand mental health. The media fuels stereotypes, making struggles seem exaggerated or dangerous. In some cultures, talking about mental health is seen as a weakness, leaving people afraid of judgment. This fear keeps many from seeking the help they need.

2.2. The problem?

Stigma stops young people from seeking support, talking openly, and feeling safe in their communities. The solution? We will offer you some tips and tricks on how you can start breaking stigma within people you are working with!

1. **Normalize it:** Talk about mental health as casually as physical health. Instead of making it a "special topic," integrate it naturally into discussions.
2. **Avoid judgmental language:** Replace phrases like "He's crazy" with "He's struggling with his mental health right now." Use person-first language ("a person experiencing schizophrenia" rather than "a schizophrenic").
3. **Model openness:** If you feel comfortable, share stories about mental health challenges (either your own or anonymized real cases).

✚ You can do the following: Start your sessions with a simple check-in, e.g., "How's your energy today on a scale of 1-10?" This helps young people feel comfortable talking about emotions.

Something more you could do is:

1. Introduce "Mental health buddies" – Pair up young people to check in on each other. Use small discussion circles where participants feel safer opening up.
- 2.2. Debunk common myths together – Ask them to write down stereotypes they've heard and then discuss why they're untrue.

✚ You can do the following: Run an "Anonymous Q&A" where young people submit mental health questions (without their names), and you answer them in an open discussion.

Signs vs symptoms

As a youth worker, you are not a mental health professional, but you are in a position to notice when something might be wrong. Understanding the difference between signs and symptoms can help you identify when a young person may need support—and how to direct them toward help.

Signs → What you can see

Symptoms → What they feel (but you can't directly observe)

✓ Signs are observable behaviors that indicate someone might be struggling with their mental health.

✓ Symptoms are internal experiences that the person feels and may or may not share with others.

Example:

Sign: A young person is withdrawing from activities and skipping sessions.

Symptom: They may feel hopeless or exhausted, but they haven't said it out loud.

You might notice a young person...

1. Becomes withdrawn, overly energetic, irritable, or expresses hopelessness.
2. Avoids interactions, loses interest in hobbies, stops showing up.
3. Always tired, unexplained weight changes, frequent headaches.
4. Uses substances, self-harms, or talks about death (take seriously!).

 **In these cases, as a youth worker you can:**

Check-in privately – Find a calm moment to talk one-on-one. Example: "Hey [Name], I've noticed you seem a bit down and haven't been yourself lately. Is everything okay? No pressure, but I'm here if you ever want to talk."

Listen actively – Show empathy, avoid interrupting, and validate their feelings. Example: "I hear you. That sounds really tough. You don't have to go through this alone."

Normalize and reduce stigma – Reinforce that struggling with mental health is normal. Example: "A lot of people feel this way sometimes, and it's okay to ask for help. You're not alone."

Encourage seeking support – Gently suggest professional help if needed. Example: "I know a great counselor/helpline that has helped others. Would you like me to help you find some support?"

To tackle these aspects, we provide you with the concrete sessions you can do to improve the general understanding of mental health basics. We encourage you to use these sessions in your future work and help young people deal with their challenges.

Workshop sessions for mental health

Session 1: Unmasking mental health – Challenging stereotypes

Duration: 90 minutes

Objective: Help participants recognize and challenge mental health stigma through real-life experiences and practical exercises.

We will use Kolb's experiential learning cycle, a methodology that emphasizes learning through experience. Kolb's model consists of four stages: Concrete experience (actively engaging in an activity), reflective observation (thinking about the experience), abstract conceptualization (gaining theoretical insights) and active experimentation (applying learning in real-life settings).

The session begins with a stigma walk (20 min), where participants physically position themselves in response to stigma-related statements, creating a concrete experience of how diverse perspectives exist. This is followed by group discussions (20 min) to reflect on personal experiences and societal influences on stigma (reflective observation). A short presentation (25 min) introduces key concepts, including types of stigma and their impact on help-seeking behaviors (abstract conceptualization). Then, participants will engage in rewriting the narrative (25 min), where they transform common stigmatizing phrases into supportive language, practicing how to challenge stigma in their work (active experimentation).

Session 2: Creating safe spaces for mental health conversations

Duration: 90 minutes

Objective: Give participants practical tools to build trust and encourage safe, open conversations about mental health.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) by Marshall Rosenberg, a methodology focused on empathetic listening, reducing judgment and fostering open dialogue, will be used for this session. NVC consists of four components: **Observations** (describing without judgment), **feelings (expressing emotions)**, **needs** (identifying underlying needs) and **requests (encouraging positive actions)**. This approach ensures that youth workers develop trust-building skills and learn how to facilitate sensitive mental health discussions effectively.

The session begins with **“Breaking the silence” (20 min)** where participants write their fears about discussing mental health and anonymously place them in a box. The trainer categorizes them into themes and facilitates a guided reflection, using NVC’s **observation and feeling** components to explore why these fears exist and how they affect conversations. The trainer will explain the NVC principles to participants (reflecting emotions, asking about needs and making supportive statements without judgment).

Then, in **“Empathy in action” (40 min)**, participants will engage in a structured **active listening exercise** where one participant shares a minor challenge and the listener must respond using NVC principles. The group then debriefs on what responses felt validating or dismissive. Finally, in **“Navigating hard conversations” (30 min)**, participants work in trios (speaker, listener, observer) to practice responding to a young person struggling with mental health concerns. The observer provides feedback based on NVC’s approach and the trainer models effective responses.

Session 3: Recognizing signs vs. symptoms

Duration: 90 minutes

Objective: Empower participants to identify mental health concerns in young people and know when to step in.

We will use the **Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Action Plan – ALGEE Model**, which helps youth workers recognize mental health concerns and respond appropriately. The **ALGEE** model consists of five steps: **Assess for risk of harm, listen non-judgmentally, give reassurance and information, encourage professional help** and **encourage self-help and support strategies**. This framework ensures that youth workers can distinguish between external signs (observable behaviors) and internal symptoms (subjective experiences) while knowing how to intervene effectively.

The session begins with “What do you see?” (20 min), where participants receive flashcards with different behaviors (social withdrawal, mood swings, excessive fatigue). They categorize these as signs or symptoms and discuss how they might present differently in young people. This activity strengthens their ability to assess for risk of harm by identifying red flags in behavior.

Next, in “Recognizing signs in youth” (40 min), participants examine short descriptions of young people displaying mental health concerns. Working in pairs, they discuss what signs stand out, which symptoms may be underlying, and how to approach the situation without jumping to conclusions.

The trainer then introduces the MHFA framework, highlighting the importance of recognizing patterns rather than isolated incidents. To deepen their understanding, the session moves into “Beyond the obvious - subtle signs” (30 min), an interactive exercise where participants analyze less noticeable indicators of mental health struggles.

They explore non-verbal cues such as changes in speech patterns, social interactions and body language. In small groups, they review fictional messages (“I’m just tired all the time” or “I don’t feel like hanging out anymore”) and discuss what underlying mental health concerns these statements may suggest. This exercise challenges them to think critically about the difference between typical emotions and persistent warning signs.

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CHAPTER 2

Depression in Focus: Recognizing and Managing Symptoms

This chapter is divided into eight sections:

I. Understanding the Different Nuances of Grief, Mourning, and Melancholia—What is Depression?

- Defining depression as a complex emotional and psychological experience.
- Differentiating between mourning, melancholia, and depression.

II. Types of Depression

- Exploring major depression, dysthymia, and other forms of depressive disorders.

III. How Depression Manifests in Different People

- How depression appears in different age groups and genders.

IV. Self-Care Strategies for Managing Depression

- Practical ways to support mental health and emotional well-being.

V. Crisis Intervention

- Recognizing and responding to a mental health crisis.

VI. What to Do If Someone is Struggling with Depression or Suicidal Thoughts in Bulgaria

- Emergency contacts, helplines, and mental health resources.

VII. Activities for youth workers

VIII. General Guidelines for Facilitators



1. Understanding the Different Nuances of Grief, Mourning, and Melancholia—What is Depression?

Depression is not just sadness—it is a profound psychological state that can impact emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. It can arise from loss, unfulfilled desires, or deep internal conflict.

While mourning, melancholia, and depression share similarities, they are distinct experiences:

1. Mourning (Grief After a Loss)

- A natural response to loss (death of a loved one, end of a relationship).
- Involves confronting and processing the loss, often through symbolic expression (writing, rituals, storytelling).
- Outcome: Over time, mourning allows for healing and reintegration into daily life.

2. Melancholia (Closely Related to Depression)

- A pathological response to loss is where the person unconsciously identifies with the lost object rather than processing grief.
- The ability to express emotions through language is impaired—feelings of loss turn inward, leading to self-blame, guilt, and a loss of personal identity.
- Outcome: The melancholic individual remains stuck in despair, unable to move forward.

3. Depression (A Loss of Meaning and Motivation)

- A state of psychic collapse, often marked by loss of pleasure, energy, and meaning.
- More than sadness—it involves deep apathy, fatigue, and emotional numbness.
- May result from unresolved grief, trauma, or existential crises.
- Outcome: Without intervention, depression can lead to long-term suffering, but therapy, medication, and lifestyle changes can help restore emotional balance.

II. What Are the Different Types of Depression?

1. Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)

- Persistent sadness or loss of interest in activities for at least two weeks.
- Can interfere with daily life, work, and relationships.

2. Persistent Depressive Disorder (Dysthymia)

- Less severe but long-lasting depression (lasting two years or more).
- Can make people feel as if they have always been "this way."

Other types include:

- Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD): Occurs during winter months due to lack of sunlight.
- Depression with Psychotic Symptoms: Includes hallucinations or delusions alongside depressive episodes.
- Bipolar Disorder: Alternating between depressive and manic episodes.

Depression in Different Life Stages

- Perinatal Depression: Occurs during or after pregnancy (postpartum depression).
- Hormonal Depression: Linked to menstrual cycle, menopause, or hormonal shifts.

III. Does Depression Look the Same in Everyone?

Depression affects different people in different ways.

Depression in Different Age Groups

- **Children:** May act **anxious, irritable, or clingy** rather than sad.
- **Teenagers:** More likely to experience **irritability, social withdrawal, or reckless behavior**.
- **Young Adults:** Increased **negative thinking, weight gain, and sleep disturbances**.
- **Middle-Aged Adults:** Experience **low energy, decreased libido, and insomnia**.
- **Older Adults:** May express **physical symptoms** (pain, memory problems) rather than emotional distress.

Depression in Men vs. Women

- **Men** may display **anger, irritability, or substance abuse** rather than sadness.

Women are more likely to experience **rumination, anxiety, and social withdrawal**.

IV. How Can I Take Care of Myself?

Self-care strategies for managing depression:



Move Your Body: Even a 30-minute walk daily can improve mood.



Sleep Routine: Maintain a consistent bedtime and wake-up time.



Eat Regularly: Balanced nutrition can help stabilize emotions.



Reduce Stress: Avoid overwhelming commitments and take breaks.



Stay Connected: Talk to friends, family, or a therapist.



Avoid Alcohol and Drugs: Substance use can worsen depression symptoms.



Postpone Big Decisions: Depression can impair judgment –wait until you feel better before making life-changing choices.

V.Crisis Intervention: Recognizing a Mental Health Emergency

A crisis occurs when someone is at risk of harming themselves or others.



Warning Signs of a Mental Health Crisis

! Talking About:

- Feeling trapped or in unbearable pain.
- Wanting to end their life or "disappear."
- Expressing hopelessness.

! Behavioral Changes:

- Increased alcohol or drug use.
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities.
- Giving away personal belongings.
- Sudden reckless or aggressive behavior.

How to Help Someone in Crisis

✓ Start the Conversation

- Find a private place to talk.
- Let them express their emotions without judgment.
- Say things like:
 - "I'm here for you."
 - "You are not alone."
 - "Let's find help together."
- Ask directly: "Are you thinking about suicide?"

✓ Take Action

- If they are in immediate danger, call emergency services.
- Stay with them and remove anything they could use to harm themselves.
- Encourage them to seek professional help (therapist, psychiatrist, hotline).

VI. What to Do If Someone is Struggling with Depression or Suicidal Thoughts in Bulgaria

● Emergency Help

☎ Call 112 – Bulgaria's emergency number for immediate crisis intervention.

☎ Mental Health and Crisis Hotlines

- National Psychological Support Hotline: 0800 11 466 (10 AM - 10 PM, anonymous and free).
- Crisis Hotline (Suicidal Thoughts & Depression): 02 981 76 86 (24/7).
- Suicide Prevention Foundation: 0700 40 150 (24/7).
- Child Helpline: 116 111 (24/7, free, anonymous).

📍 Emergency Psychiatric Help

- St. Naum Psychiatric Hospital - Sofia (02 9702 310).
- Center for Mental Health - Sofia (02 944 02 87).
- Psychiatric centers available in Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, and other cities.

How to Support Someone with Depression

- ✓ Show them they are not alone.
- ✓ Listen without judgment.
- ✓ Encourage professional help.
- ✓ Stay with them if they are in immediate danger.



VII. Activities for youth workers

Activity: "Tracing Roots"

Participants create a personal timeline to explore key emotional events and how they may have influenced their mental well-being.

Discussion: Explore the role of early experiences and family dynamics in shaping mental health.

- Time: 25 minutes (10 minutes for drawing the river, 15 minutes for sharing)
- Materials: Paper for each participant, Markers, pens, pencils
- Emotional music: Intouchable from the Intouchables Soundtrack

Procedure:

1. The facilitator hands out paper and drawing materials to each participant.
2. Explain the activity: each participant should draw a river that symbolizes their life journey. Along the river, they will place symbols like stones or turns to represent challenges and significant life events.

They should write down the most important experiences that shaped them into the person they are today, leading to the present moment. The river should begin from their earliest memory and flow to the present.

3. Once the instructions are clear, the facilitator guides participants to take a few deep breaths to relax and set the tone for self-reflection. Soft emotional music is played in the background.
4. Participants have 10 minutes to draw their river individually.
5. Afterward, those who feel comfortable are invited to share their river and the experiences they represented. Sharing is voluntary, and participants can choose how much or how little they wish to disclose.

VIII. General Guidelines for Facilitators

1. Establish Psychological Safety from the Beginning

- Create a safe space: Emphasize that this is a judgment-free and confidential space where participants are encouraged to share only what they feel comfortable with.
- Consent matters: Let participants know that they don't have to share anything they are not ready for.
- Offer grounding techniques upfront: Begin with a short grounding exercise (deep breathing, mindful body awareness) to help participants feel present and connected.
- Normalize strong emotions: Acknowledge that discussing emotions can sometimes be difficult, and it's okay to step away if needed.

2. Facilitation

- Avoid forcing deep emotional recall: Instead of asking direct personal questions (e.g., "Describe your worst experience"), use gentler prompts (e.g., "What is something that has helped you through a tough time?").
- Provide alternative ways to express emotions: Some people may find writing, drawing, or movement-based activities easier than verbal discussion.
- Encourage agency and control: Let participants set their own boundaries (e.g., allow them to skip an activity if they don't feel ready).
- Use grounding techniques regularly: If an activity becomes too overwhelming, gently guide the group back to the present with breathing exercises, stretching, or a mindfulness pause.

3. Prepare for Emotional Reactions and Triggers

- Watch for signs of distress: Look for body language cues (e.g., fidgeting, zoning out, shallow breathing) that may indicate discomfort or dissociation.
- Have a 'safe corner' or break option: Let participants know they can step out at any time if they feel overwhelmed.
- Offer a grounding object: Having small stress balls, soft objects, or textured items can help participants stay present.
- Check-in individually (if needed): If someone appears deeply distressed, offer to speak with them privately after the session.

Tips for Specific Activities

1. Managing Emotional Reflection Activities

For exercises that involve recalling past experiences (e.g., "Tracing Roots" or "Words as Medicine"):

- ✓ Clarify that it's okay to keep things general (e.g., "Write about a challenge you've overcome" rather than "Describe your worst moment").
- ✓ Use "past-present-future" framing: If discussing a tough time, encourage reflection on how they moved forward or what helped them cope.
- ✓ Always close with a positive or grounding question (e.g., "What small act of self-care can you do for yourself today?").

2. Keeping Discussions Balanced

For open discussions (e.g., "Loss of Self and Reconnecting with Identity"):

- ✓ Reframe painful topics in a constructive way (e.g., instead of "What is something you regret?", ask "What is something you've learned from a past experience?").
- ✓ Use "I" statements to encourage self-reflection rather than comparison (e.g., "I feel... I have noticed...").
- ✓ Encourage listening over problem-solving: Sometimes people don't want advice—just to be heard.

3. Regulating Intensity in Creative Expression Activities

For activities that explore strong emotions through art or movement (e.g., "Externalizing Anger"):

- ✓ Provide multiple expression options (writing, drawing, movement, etc.) so participants can choose what feels safe.
- ✓ Keep prompts open-ended (e.g., "Express your emotions visually" rather than "Draw a painful memory").
- ✓ Use a calming transition before and after the activity (breathing exercises, stretching, or listening to soothing music).

How to Handle a Participant Becoming Overwhelmed

If someone starts to dissociate, become panicked, or withdraw, follow these grounding techniques:

1. Grounding Techniques for the Group

✦ 5-4-3-2-1 Sensory Grounding Exercise:

Ask participants to:

- ✓ Name 5 things they can see
- ✓ Name 4 things they can touch
- ✓ Name 3 things they can hear
- ✓ Name 2 things they can smell
- ✓ Name 1 thing they can taste

✦ Breathing Exercise (4-7-8 Method)

- Inhale for 4 seconds
- Hold for 7 seconds
- Exhale for 8 seconds
- Repeat until they feel more present

✦ Encourage Physical Movement

- Stretching, shaking hands, or stamping feet lightly on the floor can help reconnect with the present moment.

2. Individual Support Strategies

If a participant is crying, zoning out, or visibly uncomfortable:

- ✓ Offer a private space where they can step away.
- ✓ Ask, "Would you like to take a break?"
- ✓ Use soft, non-judgmental language:
 - DO say: "You are safe here. Would you like to step outside for a moment?"
 - DON'T say: "Don't cry" or "You need to participate."
 - ✓ Offer a grounding object (stress ball, soft fabric, stone).
 - ✓ Remind them that they are in control of how much they share.

After the Session: Closing and Follow-Up

1. End on a Calming Note

- Gentle reflection prompt: "What is one thing you're taking away from today?"
- Play soothing music to help transition back to a relaxed state.
- Encourage self-care: Suggest participants do something comforting (drink tea, go for a walk, listen to music).

2. Follow Up with Participants Who Showed Distress

- Check-in privately: "I noticed today's session might have been difficult for you. Would you like to talk or take some time for yourself?"
- Provide resources for further support (helplines, therapists, journaling prompts).

3. Self-Care for Facilitators

- Debrief with co-facilitators or a trusted colleague.
- Reflect on what went well and what could be adjusted in future sessions.
- Practice your own grounding (meditation, movement, or journaling).

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CHAPTER 3

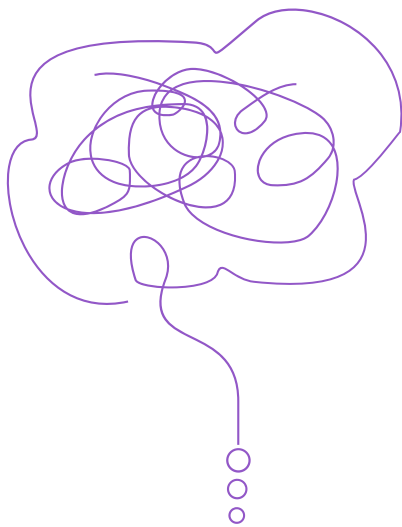
Managing Stress and Anxiety

This Chapter is divided into 5 parts:

1. **UNDERSTANDING STRESS AND ANXIETY-** definitions and examples
2. **IDENTIFYING AND DIFFERENTIATING STRESS AND ANXIETY** Differences and symptoms
3. **WORKSHOP PLANS FOR YOUTH WORKERS** Proposals of non-formal base workshop outline
4. **FOLLOW-UP AND IMPACT TOOLS-** practical tools to measure impact and follow-up activities
5. **TIPS FOR YOUTH WORKERS** – practical tips for identifying needs and possible solutions based on experiences



1.UNDERSTANDING STRESS AND ANXIETY



stress

vs



anxiety

Stress is a physiological and psychological response triggered by external demands or perceived threats. It activates the body's "fight or flight" response, leading to increased heart rate, muscle tension, and heightened alertness. While stress can serve as a motivator in certain situations, such as preparing for an important exam or meeting deadlines, prolonged exposure to stress without adequate recovery can negatively affect both mental and physical health.

Anxiety, on the other hand, is more than just a response to external stressors. It is a continuous state of worry or fear that can persist even when no immediate threat is present. Unlike stress, which typically subsides once the challenge is addressed, anxiety tends to linger and can interfere with daily life. People with anxiety often experience excessive rumination, difficulty concentrating, and a sense of unease that may not be linked to any specific situation.

Both stress and anxiety can manifest in similar ways, including difficulty sleeping, irritability, and restlessness. However, chronic anxiety can also lead to long-term emotional distress and physical symptoms such as digestive problems, headaches, and rapid heartbeat. While occasional stress is a normal part of life, recognizing when stress transitions into chronic anxiety is crucial for seeking appropriate interventions.

2.IDENTIFYING AND DIFFERENTIATING STRESS AND ANXIETY

Stress and anxiety often overlap, making it challenging to distinguish between the two. However, understanding their differences is crucial for effective management and coping strategies.

I.Examining the Source

Stress is usually tied to an external factor, such as work deadlines, school exams, or conflicts in relationships. It is a reaction to a specific demand or pressure. Once the situation is resolved, stress tends to decrease. Anxiety, on the other hand, is often internal and can persist even in the absence of an identifiable stressor. It involves excessive worry about potential or hypothetical situations, sometimes without any real threat.

II.Duration and Persistence of Symptoms

Stress is generally short-term and fades when the stressful event passes. For example, stress before an important job interview typically subsides once the interview is over. Anxiety, however, lingers for extended periods, sometimes weeks or months, even in calm conditions. If nervousness, worry, or unease persists long after a situation has ended, it may be a sign of anxiety rather than stress.

III.Physical and Emotional Symptoms

The physical symptoms of stress include increased heart rate, muscle tension, headaches, and temporary difficulty sleeping. These symptoms typically lessen once relaxation techniques are applied or when the stressor is removed. Anxiety, however, can cause prolonged physical symptoms such as nausea, dizziness, chronic fatigue, and tightness in the chest. Unlike stress, anxiety can persist even without a specific trigger, often leading to sleep disturbances, excessive nervousness, and overthinking.

IV.Behavioral Responses

Stress tends to encourage action. For example, if a person is stressed about an upcoming exam, they may study harder or create a structured schedule. Anxiety, however, often leads to avoidance behaviors. A person experiencing social anxiety may completely avoid gatherings or public speaking due to fear of embarrassment, even if no immediate stressor is present. If feelings of distress prevent someone from participating in daily activities, it is likely an anxiety-related issue.

V.Thought Patterns and Cognitive Impact

Stress-related thoughts are often situational and focused on problem-solving. A person under stress might think, "I need to organize my time better to finish this project." Anxiety, however, tends to involve irrational and exaggerated worries, such as, "Even if I do everything perfectly, I will still fail, and everyone will judge me." These persistent negative thought patterns create unnecessary worry and can be difficult to control.

VI.Response to Relaxation Techniques

Stress generally responds well to relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, or exercise. Once the stressor is removed, the body's response returns to normal. Anxiety, however, may not always subside with these techniques and might require a more structured approach, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) or medication. If relaxation methods provide only temporary relief and the worry quickly returns, it is more likely to be anxiety rather than stress.

By understanding these differences, individuals can better assess their emotional state and apply the appropriate strategies for relief. While stress management techniques like time management and relaxation can help in stressful situations, chronic anxiety may require professional support or therapeutic interventions.

Varieties of Stress

Stress can be categorized into different types based on its duration and impact. Understanding these varieties can help individuals recognize and manage stress effectively.

Acute Stress: This is the most common form of stress and occurs in response to immediate challenges or pressures. It is short-term and usually subsides once the situation is resolved. Examples include preparing for a presentation, running late for an appointment, or dealing with an argument.

Episodic Acute Stress: Some individuals frequently experience acute stress due to their lifestyle or personality traits. People with perfectionistic tendencies or those who take on too many responsibilities may suffer from episodic acute stress, leading to constant tension and exhaustion.

Chronic Stress: This occurs when stress becomes long-term and persistent, often due to ongoing life challenges such as financial difficulties, an unhealthy work environment, or relationship problems. Chronic stress can contribute to severe health issues, including cardiovascular diseases and weakened immune function.

Traumatic Stress: This type of stress results from experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event, such as an accident, natural disaster, or violent encounter. It can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and requires professional intervention for management.

Varieties of Anxiety

Just as stress has different types, anxiety also exists in various forms, each affecting individuals in unique ways. Understanding these types can help identify the right coping strategies and professional interventions when needed.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD): This form of anxiety involves excessive, uncontrollable worry about everyday situations, including work, health, or relationships. People with GAD often anticipate disaster and experience symptoms such as restlessness, muscle tension, fatigue, and difficulty concentrating.

Social Anxiety Disorder: This condition is characterized by an intense fear of social interactions due to a fear of judgment or embarrassment. People with social anxiety often avoid public speaking, meeting new people, or participating in group activities, even when they wish to engage socially.

Panic Disorder: Individuals with panic disorder experience sudden and intense episodes of fear, known as panic attacks. These attacks can cause a racing heart, chest pain, dizziness, trembling, and shortness of breath, often making individuals feel as if they are losing control.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD): OCD is marked by persistent, intrusive thoughts (obsessions) that cause anxiety, leading to repetitive behaviors (compulsions) aimed at reducing distress. Common compulsions include excessive hand washing, checking behaviors, or counting rituals.

Phobia-Related Disorders: A phobia is an intense, irrational fear of a specific object or situation, such as heights (acrophobia), enclosed spaces (claustrophobia), or flying (aviophobia). These fears can lead to avoidance behaviors that interfere with daily life.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): PTSD can develop after exposure to a traumatic event, such as an accident, violence, or natural disaster. Symptoms include flashbacks, nightmares, heightened anxiety, and emotional numbness. Therapy and structured interventions are often needed for PTSD management.

3.WORKSHOP PLANS FOR YOUTH WORKERS

This workshop outline is designed to engage young individuals in understanding and managing stress and anxiety using non formal education methods. The workshop consists of **three 90-minute sessions**, focusing separately on stress and anxiety, with interactive activities, discussions, and practical strategies.

Workshop Outline: Stress and Anxiety Management for Youth Workers

Session 1: Understanding and Managing Stress (90 minutes)

- Icebreaker (10 min): A fun group activity such as a movement-based game to energize participants and create a comfortable learning environment.
- Discussion (15 min): Group brainstorming on what stress means, its causes, and how it affects daily life.
- Activity: Stress Role-Play (20 min): Participants act out different stressful situations (e.g., exam pressure, family expectations, peer conflicts) and brainstorm solutions together.
- Practical Exercise: Deep Breathing & Mindfulness (15 min): Introduction to relaxation techniques through guided breathing exercises and mindfulness practices.
- Group Work (20 min): Teams create a “stress relief plan” using visuals, including techniques they can implement in their daily routine, and present their ideas to the group.
- Reflection (10 min): Each participant shares one key takeaway from the session and how they plan to apply it in real life.

Session 2: Managing Stress and Anxiety (90 minutes)

- Icebreaker (10 min): Emotion mapping - participants use colors or symbols to express their current emotional state and discuss their choices.
- Discussion (15 min): Understanding the differences between stress and anxiety, identifying personal triggers, and learning about different types of anxiety disorders.
- Activity: Anxiety Triggers and Coping Strategies (20 min): Participants work in small groups to list common anxiety triggers and brainstorm ways to manage them.
- Guided Meditation (15 min): A session on grounding techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation and visualization to calm anxious thoughts.
- Creative Expression (20 min): Participants create personal "calm kits" with affirmations, relaxation techniques, sensory objects, and supportive messages.
- Closing Reflection (10 min): Participants share what they found most useful and set a personal commitment to a stress/anxiety management strategy.

Session 3: Coping Strategies and Preventive Approaches for Stress

Goal: To develop effective methods for preventing stress and anxiety on both individual and group levels.

Opening and Warm-Up (15 min)

- Icebreaker: "Circle of Joy"
- Participants form a circle and take turns sharing a small moment that made them happy in the past week.

Main Activities (60 min)

Activity 1: Stress Management Techniques Workshop (30 min)

- Participants form small groups and explore different coping strategies:
 - a. Breathing and Relaxation Techniques
 - b. Time Management and Prioritization
 - c. Positive Thinking and Reframing
 - d. Support Systems and Solidarity
- Each group develops three practical suggestions and shares them with others.

Activity 2: Personal and Organizational Action Plan for Stress Prevention (30 min)

- "Future Me": Participants write a letter to themselves, imagining a less stressed version of themselves three months from now.
- "Organizational Stress Map": Small groups brainstorm ways to reduce stress in youth centers and develop recommendations.

Closing and Reflection (15 min)

- "Create Your Own Metaphor": Each participant expresses how they perceive stress management using a metaphor.
- Participants share key takeaways and reflections to conclude the workshop

Learning outcomes:

- Stress and anxiety are natural responses to life's challenges, but they do not have to control our lives. By understanding these emotions and applying practical coping techniques, individuals can build resilience and improve their overall well-being. Encouraging self-care, healthy habits, and social connections can lead to a more balanced and fulfilling life.
- Managing stress and anxiety requires continuous self-awareness and proactive efforts. Learning to recognize personal stressors, adopting coping mechanisms such as mindfulness, physical activity, and relaxation techniques, and seeking support from friends, family, or professionals can significantly enhance emotional resilience. Building healthy habits, such as maintaining a structured routine, practicing gratitude, and setting realistic goals, can help prevent overwhelming stress and persistent anxiety.
- Additionally, fostering open discussions about mental health can break stigmas and create a supportive community where individuals feel safe to share their experiences and seek help when needed. Schools, workplaces, and communities play a crucial role in promoting mental well-being by providing accessible resources, workshops, and safe spaces for individuals to express their concerns and find solutions collaboratively.

4.FOLLOW UP AND IMPACT TOOLS

1)Pre- and Post-Workshop Self-Assessment Surveys

Purpose: Measure participants' understanding and confidence in managing stress before and after the workshop.

Method: Conduct a self-assessment survey before and after the workshop. Use a Likert scale (1-5 or 1-10) to measure changes in stress awareness, coping skills, and emotional well-being.

Example questions:

"On a scale of 1 to 10, how well do you understand your stress triggers?"

"How confident do you feel in using stress management techniques?"

Analysis: Compare pre- and post-survey results to assess knowledge gained.

2)Follow-Up Reflection Forms (After 1-3 Months)

Purpose: Track whether participants apply workshop techniques in their daily lives.

Method: Send a Google Form or QR-based survey to participants after one month and three months.

Example questions: "Which stress management techniques from the workshop have you used?"

"Has your ability to manage stress improved? If so, how?"

"What challenges do you still face in stress management?"

Analysis: Identify which techniques are most effective and areas needing improvement.

3)Stress Diary (Personal Tracking Tool)

Purpose: Encourage participants to self-monitor their stress levels and coping mechanisms.

Method: Provide a digital or printable stress diary template where they can track:

Daily stress level (scale of 1-10).

Stress triggers they faced.

Coping strategies used.

How effective each strategy was.

Follow-up: Encourage participants to share insights in a peer group or coaching session.

4)Peer Support & Group Check-ins

Purpose: Strengthen long-term impact through shared learning and accountability.

Method: Online peer group (WhatsApp/Telegram) where participants share experiences.

Monthly virtual or in-person check-in sessions to discuss progress and challenges.

Benefit: Creates a supportive network for stress management beyond the workshop.

5.TIPS FOR YOUTH WORKERS

1)Behavioral Changes

Increased Withdrawal or Isolation – A normally social young person suddenly avoids activities or prefers to be alone.

Loss of Interest – Lack of enthusiasm for hobbies, school, or social events they once enjoyed.

Restlessness & Agitation – Constant movement, fidgeting, or difficulty staying still.

Excessive Perfectionism – Extreme fear of making mistakes, over-apologizing, or seeking constant reassurance.

2)Emotional Signs

Frequent Mood Swings – Sudden changes in emotions, from happy to irritated or sad.

Overwhelming Worries – Constantly expressing fears about the future, failure, or what others think.

Increased Sensitivity – Easily upset by small things or reacting strongly to minor stressors.

Low Self-Esteem – Making negative comments about themselves (“I’m not good enough,” “I always mess up”).

3)Physical Symptoms

Frequent Headaches or Stomachaches – Complaining about unexplained physical pain, often due to stress.

Changes in Eating Habits – Eating significantly more or less than usual.

Shortness of Breath or Fast Heartbeat – Especially before stressful situations (e.g., speaking in public, exams).

Nail Biting, Skin Picking, or Hair Twisting – Repetitive, unconscious stress-related habits.

4) Social & Communication Clues

Struggles to Express Feelings – Difficulty putting emotions into words or responding with "I don't know" often.

Tension in Peer Relationships – Frequent conflicts with friends or sudden withdrawal from social groups.

Over-explaining or Over-apologizing – Feeling the need to justify their actions constantly.

Difficulty Focusing on Conversations – Appearing distracted, zoning out, or struggling to follow discussions.

What Can Youth Workers Do?

- Build Trust and Open Conversations
- Use active listening—avoid judgment and let them express themselves freely. Say, "I've noticed you seem a bit different lately. Is something on your mind?" Encourage self-expression through creative activities like drawing, writing, or music.
- Observe Patterns Over Time; one bad day is normal—chronic stress is a pattern. Look for consistent changes over weeks. Keep informal notes on behavior changes to track patterns.
- Create a Safe & Calm Environment; offer relaxation spaces in the youth center. Introduce simple breathing exercises or mindfulness activities. Use non-verbal support (e.g., gentle check-ins, small supportive gestures).
- Encourage Healthy Coping Strategies; guide them towards stress-relief activities (exercise, art, journaling). Promote peer support—connecting them with others who may relate. Teach time management and realistic goal-setting.
- Know When to Seek Professional Help; if stress or anxiety becomes severe (e.g., panic attacks, self-harm talk, extreme withdrawal), guide them toward a counselor or psychologist. Offer to help them find support but avoid forcing solutions.

Source:

American Psychological Association (APA) – Research on stress, anxiety, and behavioral signs in young people.

World Health Organization (WHO) – Guidelines on youth mental health and stress indicators.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) Principles – Used in identifying and managing stress-related behaviors.

Youth Work & Non-Formal Education Approaches

Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) – Supports hands-on learning for stress management.

Non-Formal Education Methods (Council of Europe & SALTO-YOUTH) – Engaging young people in self-reflection and active learning.

UNICEF & UNESCO Youth Well-being Frameworks – Resources on emotional and social development in young people.

Stress & Anxiety Management Strategies

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) – Mindfulness techniques for youth.

Trauma-Informed Youth Work Principles – Recognizing stress triggers and responding with care.

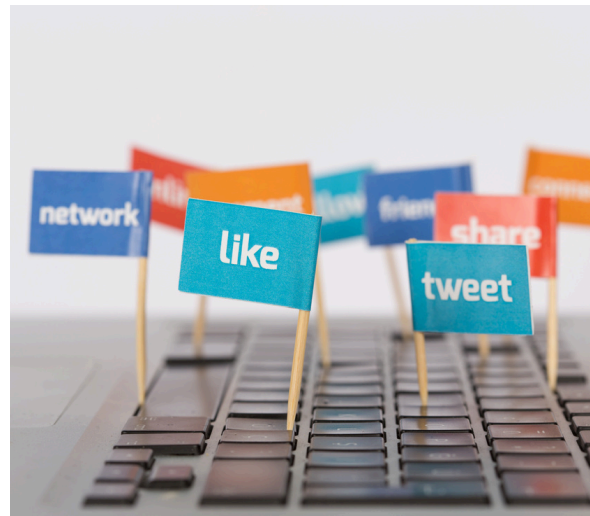
Harvard University Center on the Developing Child – Research on how stress affects adolescent brain development.

Practical Youth Work Guidelines

European Commission's Youth Strategy (2019-2027) – Mental well-being as a priority in youth engagement.

Positive Youth Development (PYD) Framework – Strategies for helping young people build resilience.

Addictive behavior with screens, smartphones, social media: Building Healthy Boundaries with Devices



This chapter is divided into four parts:

1. Introduction to addictive behavior with digital technology – including statistics and reasons behind it.
2. Strategies to reduce the impact of smartphones and screen time during activities with youth, youth exchanges, etc.
3. Ideas for workshops on digital wellness.
4. Example of a ready-to-implement workshop script: "How Screens and Social Media Impact Mental Health and Daily Life."

1.Introduction to Addictive Behavior with Digital Technology

Many people struggle to control their screen time. We often pick up our phones without thinking, get lost in endless scrolling, and suddenly realize hours have passed. But why does this happen?

Here are the main reasons:

- Frustration and boredom from difficult tasks – When something feels too hard or overwhelming, it's easier to escape into scrolling rather than facing the challenge.
- Need for social connection, recognition, and validation – We all want to feel seen, appreciated, and included. Social media provides quick validation through likes, comments, and messages.
- Avoidance of responsibilities and real-life problems – Instead of dealing with work, deadlines, or personal issues, many people turn to screens for distraction.
- Anxiety and stress relief – Unfulfilled desires, existential worries, and long-term decisions create stress, and social media offers a temporary escape.
- FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) – The urge to check messages, updates from friends, or the latest news keeps people constantly connected.

To increase awareness, it's helpful to track screen time statistics. The numbers are striking, especially when looking at monthly and yearly usage. Youth workers can encourage participants to check their average weekly screen time and calculate how many days this amounts to over a month, a year, or even across 3, 5, or 10 years.

Source:

The Anxious Generation – Jonathan Haidt

How to Break Up with Your Phone – Catherine Price

Screen Time and Mental Health: A Review of Current Research" – Journal of Adolescent Health

Global Smartphone and Social Media Usage Averages

Smartphone Usage 📱

- Daily: On average, people spend 4 hours and 37 minutes on their smartphones.
- Weekly: This adds up to around 32 hours and 19 minutes, which is more than an entire day every week.
- Monthly: Over a month, this totals 129 hours and 16 minutes, meaning people spend more than 5 full days on their phones.
- Yearly: This amounts to 65 full days, or over 2 months spent on smartphones.

Social Media Usage 🌐

- Daily: People spend an average of 2 hours and 21 minutes on social media.
- Weekly: That's 16 hours and 27 minutes, almost an entire waking day spent on social platforms.
- Monthly: Social media usage adds up to 65 hours and 48 minutes, nearly 3 full days.
- Yearly: Annually, people spend more than 32 full days (over a month!) just scrolling online.

Key Takeaways:

- Over 3 months per year is spent on smartphones and social media.
- Nearly 50 hours per week is dedicated to screens—similar to a full-time job.
- Reducing screen time by 1 hour per day frees up 15 extra days per year for real-life experiences.

Sources:

- [Statista](#)
- [Exploding Topics](#)

2.Strategies to Reduce the Impact of Smartphones & Screen Time

This applies both generally for individuals and during activities with youth, youth exchanges, etc.

Key Principle: Willpower Alone is Not Enough

We cannot rely on willpower alone to reduce screen time. Technology is designed to keep us engaged—companies use research from psychologists and marketers to make sure we pick up our phones repeatedly and spend as much time as possible on screens.

Instead, effective strategies focus on creating external boundaries to prevent mindless screen use.

Top 3 General Strategies to Set Boundaries

✚ 1. Set App Limits & Use a Screen Time Passcode

- Set daily limits for social media or other addictive apps.
- Use Screen Time passcode (iPhone) or App Lock (Android).
- Give the passcode to a trusted person (friend, partner, parent, or digital wellness buddy) so you cannot override the limit.

✚ 2. Create Physical Distance from Your Phone

- The harder it is to reach your phone, the more time you have to think before using it.
- Strategies include: ☒ Switching off your phone completely. ☒ Leaving it in another room or the basement. ☒ Locking it in a special box and giving the key to someone else. ☒ Leaving it inside a car or another inconvenient location.

✚ 3. Delete Apps Temporarily & Use "Phone-Free" Days

- Delete certain apps (e.g., social media) during specific times—like weekends or evenings.
- Establish "phone-free" days where apps can only be used at set times.

Sources:

Dopamine Nation – Anna Lembke

Dopamine Nation Workbook – Anna Lembke

"The Dark Side of Social Media: Psychological Effects of Overuse" – American Psychological Association

Strategies for Activities with Youth

✦ 1. Reduce Smartphone Dependence During Workshops

- Encourage non-digital methods like pens and paper instead of searching online.
- Limit unnecessary device use by preparing materials (e.g., stickers, printed handouts) in advance.
- Use creative activities (drawing, acting) instead of digital presentations.

✦ 2. Create a "Phones in the Box" Habit

- Introduce a special box where all phones go during workshops or sessions to encourage focus and engagement.

✦ 3. Make It a Challenge

- Create a competition where participants track their screen time usage.
- Reward the person with the lowest screen time at the end of the project with a small prize.

✦ 4. Lead by Example

- Show limited smartphone use yourself by: ☒ Using a separate camera for photos instead of a phone. ☒ Taking notes on paper instead of on a phone. ☒ Keeping phones away during meals and leisure activities.

3. Ideas for Sessions, Workshops, and Interventions on Digital Wellness for Youth Workers

These activities help youth workers guide participants in **building healthier digital habits** and **becoming more mindful of their screen time**.

• Creating a Habit of Putting Phones Away During Activities

Encourage participants to fully disconnect by establishing a phone-free rule during sessions, workshops, or social moments. Provide a designated phone box where everyone deposits their devices at the start of the activity. Over time, this practice helps shift attention toward real-life interactions and engagement.

• Smartphone-Free Mindful Walk

A guided outdoor walk where participants pay attention to their five senses—what they see, hear, smell, feel, and taste (if applicable). The goal is to experience the world without digital distractions, fostering a sense of presence and awareness. Afterward, reflect on how different it felt compared to regular walks with a phone.

- **The Attention Experiment**

Hand out a task that requires deep focus, such as solving a puzzle, memory exercises, or creative writing. As participants work, ask them to observe their own impulses to check their phones. Afterward, reflect on how often the urge arose, what triggered it, and how distractions affect focus in daily life.

- **Alternative Connection: Strengthening Offline Relationships**

Challenge participants to fully disconnect from phones during meals and evening activities. Encourage conversations, storytelling, or group games to rebuild face-to-face communication skills. Reflect on how conversations feel different without digital distractions and how social media affects real-life interactions.

- **"My Digital Habits" Self-Reflection Workshop**

A session focused on personal screen time awareness. Participants check their weekly screen time stats, identify their most-used apps, and calculate how much time they spend on screens monthly and yearly. Facilitate a discussion: Does this align with what they want? What could they do with that time instead? Encourage them to set small, realistic goals for reducing unnecessary screen use.

4. Workshop: How Screens and Social Media Impact Mental Health and Daily Life

The workshop lasts **1.5 to 2 hours**, depending on the pace of the moderator and how much time is given for reflections and group discussions.

Materials

- Pens and paper for each participant.

After the introduction of each main topic, participants are expected to reflect on their own experiences and share them in pairs. It is **crucial** that participants write down their points, as this activates different parts of the brain, making the workshop more **memorable and impactful**.

The Issue

It's well known that people now have **addictive behaviors** with smartphones, social media, pornography, or video games, often going far beyond what's healthy. On average, people spend **6 hours** on screens every day, including **3 hours of social media consumption**, often without realizing the extent of their usage.

The problem isn't just about time—it's about the quality of interactions, the impact on mental well-being, and the displacement of real-life experiences. Excessive screen use changes how we socialize, process emotions, and stay motivated for real-life achievements.

Now, we will go through five main ways in which screens and social media impact us. After each section, you will reflect on the point and discuss it with a partner.

Initial Activity: Awareness of Screen Time

Before we begin, check your phone statistics and write down:

- Your average screen time over the past week.
- The number of times you pick up your phone daily.
- Your top three apps that consume the most screen time.

This activity will help you become more aware of your current habits before diving into the discussion.

After writing down the short statistics, we gather all the phones into one box. Please make sure that it is turned off or on silent. You will get the phone straight after the workshop!

1.Social Isolation and Loneliness (5-10 min)

We are all social animals—we need real human connection to feel fulfilled. One of the biggest reasons social media harms our well-being is that it creates an illusion of connection. We might feel like we are surrounded by friends and engaged with a large community, but in reality, digital interactions are often superficial and do not provide the emotional nourishment that real-life interactions do.

Think about how different it feels to wish someone a happy birthday in an Instagram story reply versus calling them or meeting them in person with a small gift. A digital "like" or comment does not replace the warmth of real human connection, and yet, many of us now settle for these virtual gestures instead of nurturing deep relationships.

Before, we might have called someone or planned a meet-up. Now, we just grab our phones and scroll through acquaintances' lives instead of building real friendships. This shift contributes to feelings of loneliness and social disconnection, even though we appear to be more connected than ever.

Activity (5-10 min): Write down and discuss in pairs five people you'd like to deepen your relationship with and one practical way you can do it instead of social media.

2. Emotional Instability and Subconscious Irritability (5-10 min)

Social media exposes us to an overwhelming amount of emotional stimuli in a very short time. Think about a typical Instagram session:

1. You see a funny cat video → You smile.
2. Then, you see your friends at a party → You feel FOMO.
3. Next, someone just got a promotion → You feel insecure.
4. Then, a sad reel about global warming → You feel worried.

In just three minutes, you went through five different emotional reactions. Would this happen in real life? Of course not. In real life, our emotions transition gradually, giving our minds time to process them. On social media, we are constantly bombarded with contrasting emotional content, causing rapid mood shifts that can make us feel emotionally unstable or overwhelmed.

Our emotional system isn't built for such rapid shifts. After scrolling, we often feel numb or overwhelmed, leading to emotional fragility and irritability in real life. This can make us more reactive to everyday situations, reducing our emotional resilience and increasing anxiety levels.

Activity (5-10 min): Think of a recent social media session where you experienced different emotions. Write down the emotions and how you felt afterward—drained? Irritable? Overwhelmed?

3. Losing Motivation for Real-Life Experiences and Long-Term Goals (5-10 min)

Social media **tricks us** into feeling we've already achieved something. We watch **gym routines, travel vlogs, and healthy meal preps**—and our brains process them as if we've done them ourselves. Seeing someone else's success can create a false sense of accomplishment, making us less motivated to take action in our own lives.

Also, we start **forgetting what really matters** to us. Do I really want to travel this weekend, or do I just see others doing it? Do I really want that designer bag, or was I just triggered by someone posting it? The constant exposure to curated content shapes our desires in ways we don't even realize, pushing us toward trends rather than our own intrinsic goals.

Young people, who haven't fully figured out their values yet, are especially vulnerable to this. Without a strong personal compass, social pressure from online content can lead to dissatisfaction, impulsive decisions, and a lack of direction in life.

Activity (5-10 min): Write down three things you truly value in life and three long-term goals connected to these values.

4. Attention Fragmentation and Losing Focus (5-10 min)

Scrolling through **fast-changing content** trains our brains to **switch focus constantly**. This makes it harder to concentrate on tasks that require effort, like studying, reading, or working on long-term projects. Over time, this weakens our ability to focus deeply, leading to reduced productivity and difficulty with complex thinking.

The good news? **Attention is trainable**. Practicing deep work for **1-2 hours without distractions**, plus mindfulness or meditation, can improve focus. Just like physical exercise strengthens muscles, training our attention helps build mental endurance.

Activity (5-10 min): What strategies can help you **stay focused** on longer tasks? What daily activities would you like to do **without distractions**?

5. Opportunity Costs of Social Media (5-10 min)

Every time we spend **20 minutes on social media**, we miss out on something else—chatting with a friend, making a phone call, exercising, or simply relaxing. The cumulative effect of these lost moments is significant. Over a week, it could mean hours of lost opportunities for meaningful experiences and self-improvement.

It's not just **20 minutes lost**—it's **20 minutes of real experiences lost**. This time could be invested in personal growth, hobbies, self-care, or relationships—things that bring real fulfillment rather than temporary distractions.

Activity (5-10 min): Check your phone's **screen time statistics** for social media. Predict your partner's average screen time. Then, write down **three activities** you'd love to do instead and how to fit them into your daily life.

Sources:

Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked – Adam Alter

The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains – Nicholas Carr

"The Dark Side of Social Media: Psychological Effects of Overuse" – American Psychological Association



Mental Health Literacy

Thank You