INSIDE THE ALGORITHM
AI AND MENTAL HEALTH

METHOD BOOK FOR TRAINERS

Context

We live in an era where technologies develop so fast that artificial intelligence is no longer a distant future but an integral part of our present. While AI holds transformative potential in many sectors, it also creates new challenges especially when it comes to emotions, mental health, and ethics.

However, most mental health initiatives still do not explore how AI impacts young people's well-being and psychological development.

While AI can enhance access to mental health support (e.g., chatbots, digital therapies, self-assessment tools), there is also growing concern about its impact, especially on youth. Issues like overreliance on algorithms, exposure to harmful content through recommendation systems, lack of data privacy, and the pressure to perform in AI-influenced digital spaces contribute to increased anxiety and a distorted sense of self.

Youth workers are at the forefront of these changes, often supporting young people without adequate tools, knowledge, or critical understanding of AI's impact.

By focusing on the intersection of AI, mental health, and youth work, this method book brings an innovative and timely perspective to the youth sector, addressing a field that is still largely unexplored in traditional youth work practice. It collects and presents selected methods, practical sessions, and educational tools implemented during the training course 'Inside the Algorithm: AI and Mental Health,' which took place from 12–19 January 2026 in Tsaghkadzor, Armenia.

The training course brought together youth workers, educators, and facilitators from different countries to explore the opportunities, challenges, and ethical questions surrounding artificial intelligence and its impact on mental health and well-being.
This method book aims to support youth workers, trainers, and organizations in integrating these topics into their educational activities by providing practical, adaptable, and participant-centered methods inspired by the learning process and outcomes of the training course.

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Special thanks to all participants whose ideas, reflections, and active involvement contributed to the creation of this method book.

CONTENT

Disclaimer

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1. Understanding Mental health & Wellbeing

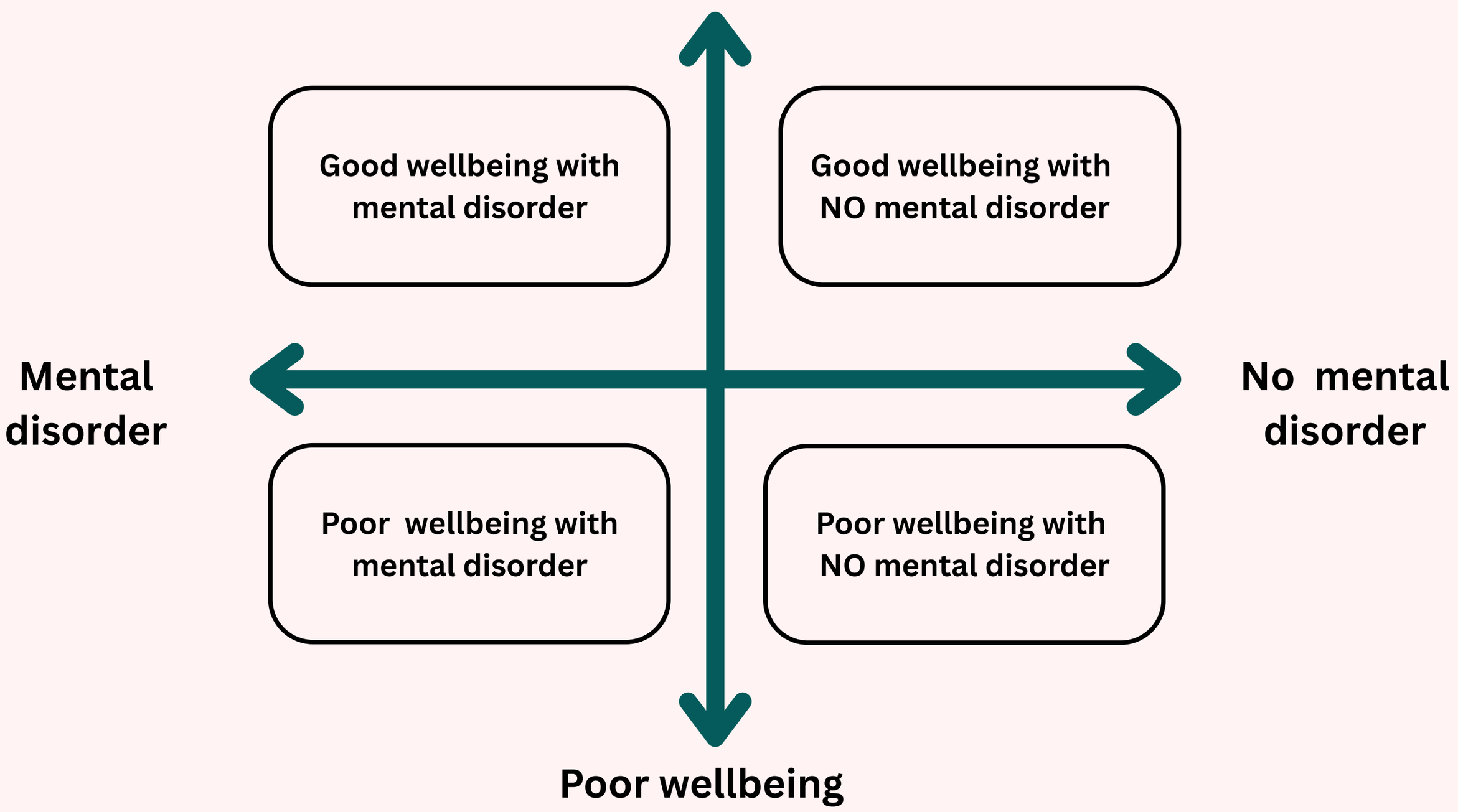
Before discussing how artificial intelligence impacts mental health, it is important to first understand these two concepts separately. It is also important to understand what artificial intelligence is and how AI-based tools differ from traditional digital tools. Today, AI technologies are increasingly present in many areas of life, including education, communication, entertainment, social media, and online platforms used by young people every day.

After exploring these two topics separately, participants can better understand the intersections between mental health and AI, and reflect on how modern technologies may influence emotions, behaviors, relationships, and overall well-being.

Mental health ≠ Asbense of Mental Disorder

Mental health is a state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community. It has intrinsic and instrumental value and is a basic human right. (WHO)

Corey Keyes dual continuum model



For youth workers, it is also essential to understand the basic distinction between psychological norms and potential mental health pathologies. In cases of mental health pathologies, we are often referring to mental disorders, which are clinically diagnosed by qualified mental health professionals such as psychiatrists. A mental disorder is a condition that significantly affects a person's thinking, emotions, behavior, or overall functioning, often causing distress and difficulties in daily life.
Understanding these distinctions is not about diagnosing or treating individuals, but about recognizing when a young person may need professional support, referral, or additional care, while also ensuring that all participants are approached with empathy, respect, and without stigma.
To support easier navigation and basic understanding, the key distinctions between psychological norms and pathology are presented below in a simplified format.

Norm

- Functional adequacy in emotions, congnitions, behaviour (The person can study, work, and maintain relationships, take care for themselves

- Flexibility and adaptability (Emotional responses are proportionate and changeable. The person can regulate emotions and behavior depending on context.

- Behavior fits cultural, social, and situational norms.

Pathology

- Dysfuntion in emotions, cognitions and behavior. (Interfering with daily life)
- Distress. causing emotional suffering
- Deviation from cultural norms
- Danger. Posing riskt to self or others

Pathology is not defined by being "different" or "unusual", but by dysfunction + distress + impairment.

Factors affecting Mental health and wellbeing

Understanding the key factors that influence mental health and well-being is essential for recognizing both protective elements and potential challenges in young people’s lives.

Biological

- Genetics Heredity
- Neurotransmitter system / dophamine, serotonin, noradrenalin, GABA
- Neurons connectivity etc
- Neuroendocrine systems /Cortisol, Thyroid hormones

Psychological

- Coping strategies
- Personality traits
- Cognitive patterns

Social

- Family, friends
- Environment
- Culture
- Lifestyle
- Trauma
- Access to services
- **Digital Environments**

Mental disorders typically do not develop because of a single factor alone, but rather through the complex interaction of multiple biological, psychological, social, and environmental influences.

While certain significant life events or traumatic experiences can sometimes act as major triggers, even in these cases, individual vulnerability, genetic predisposition, coping capacities, and surrounding environments all play an important role in shaping outcomes. This is why, within youth work, it is especially important to pay attention to digital and AI-driven environments, as these spaces increasingly form part of young people’s daily experiences and can also interact with other factors in shaping mental health and overall well-being.

How to discuss the topic with young people

Needed materials

- Laptop
- Projector and screen
- Presentation with illustrations/diagrams about digital and AI environments
- Printed worksheets for individual or pair work
- Pens or markers for participants
- Flipchart or whiteboard (optional for collecting reflections during plenary discussion)

Timing

40–50 minutes in total: introduction to the topic and group discussion (15–20 minutes), pair work discussing social media recommendations and AI-driven content (15–20 minutes), and plenary discussion and reflection (10 minutes).

Start the discussion by inviting young people to share their own understanding of mental health and well-being in everyday life. Using the illustrations presented above, introduce the distinction between mental well-being and mental disorders, helping participants understand that the absence of a mental disorder does not automatically guarantee good well-being, just as individuals living with mental disorders can still achieve positive well-being when supported by inclusive communities and healthy environments. This conversation can also help explain the basic distinction between psychological norms and pathology. Further, guide participants through discussions on the multiple biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors that affect mental health and well-being.

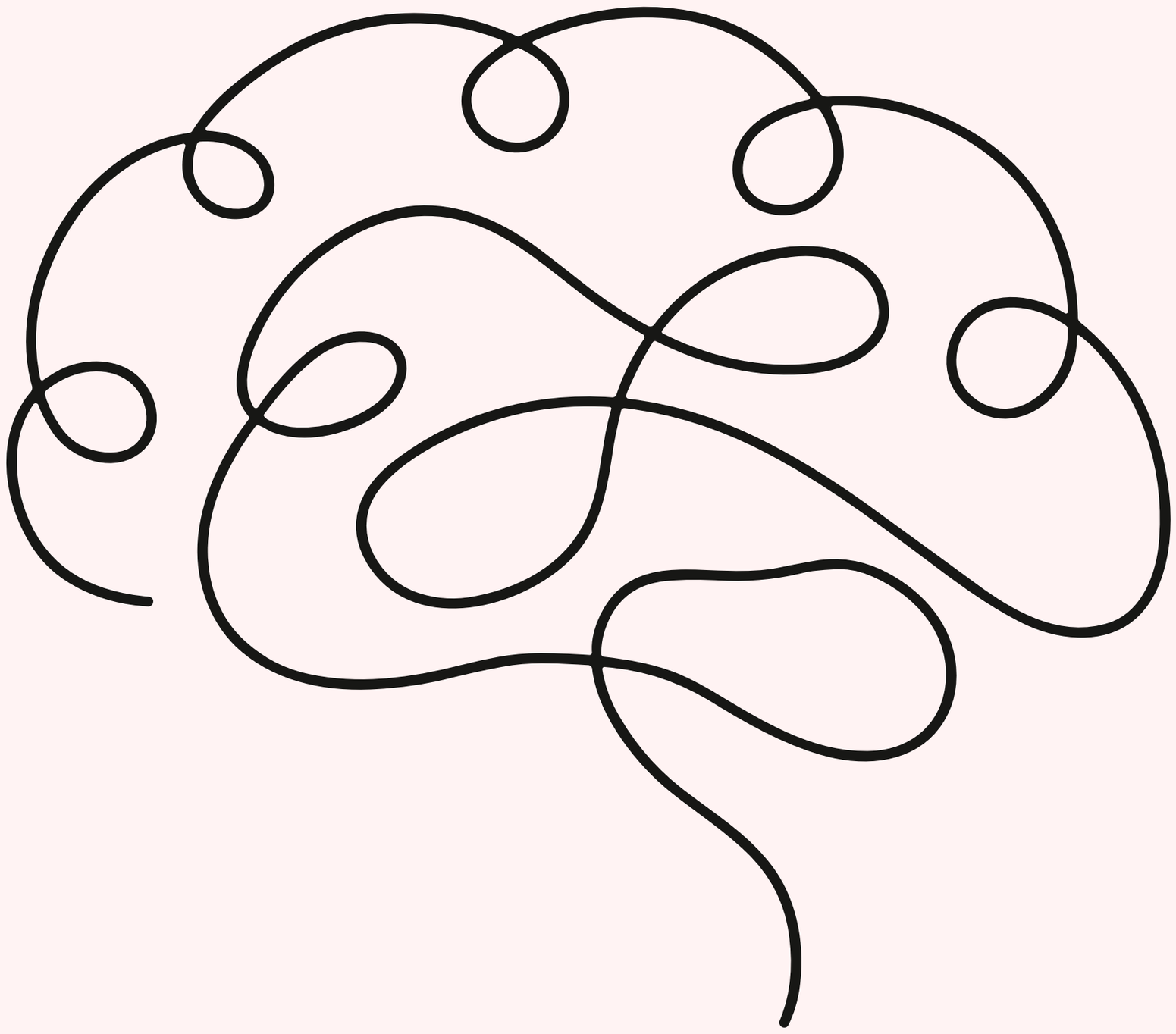
Next, divide participants into pairs or trios and provide them with the worksheets presented below. In the first activity, ask them to review a series of statements and discuss whether each reflects a normal emotional reaction or may indicate about mental health concern. This exercise encourages participants better understand the distinction between everyday psychological responses and potential warning signs, and develop greater awareness of mental health in a respectful and informed way.
After this, participants can either remain in the same pairs or form small groups for a second activity focused on common myths and misconceptions about mental health. Provide them with the corresponding worksheets and encourage them to critically discuss each myth, challenge stereotypes, and identify the more accurate reality behind these assumptions.

* Please note that in the first worksheet, the correct answers are included in brackets for facilitators' reference. Before printing or distributing this worksheet to participants, make sure to remove these answers or copy the material without them.

Following the pair or small group discussions, invite everybody back to the plenary session, where participants can share their reflections, insights, and conclusions.

Discussion questions can be

- In which areas of your daily life do you notice AI the most?
- Have you ever realized that social media platforms "know" your interests or behavior patterns? How did that make you feel?
- What types of content are most often recommended to you, and why do you think you receive those recommendations?
- What are some positive effects of AI-driven recommendations and personalized content?
- What are some possible risks or challenges connected to algorithms and constant personalization?



Worksheet 1

Read each statement carefully and discuss whether it reflects a typical emotional reactionor may indicate a potential mental health concern that could require additional attention or support.

- Feeling sad after a breakup. (Typical emotional reaction)
- Experiencing anxiety before an important exam. (Typical emotional reaction)
- Having persistent feelings of hopelessness for weeks. (Potential mental health concern)
- Feeling nervous before a job interview. (Typical emotional reaction)
- Experiencing hallucinations. (Potential mental health concern)
- Having occasional mood swings. (Typical emotional reaction)
- Experiencing panic attacks in crowded places. (Potential mental health concern)
- Feeling isolated after moving to a new city. (Typical emotional reaction)
- Experiencing anger outbursts over small frustrations. (Potential mental health concern)
- Experiencing constant fatigue despite getting enough rest. (Potential mental health concern)
- Having intrusive thoughts that disrupt daily life. (Potential mental health concern)
- Feeling a sense of dread about the future. (Typical emotional reaction)
- Experiencing a lack of motivation to engage in activities once enjoyed. (Potential mental health concern)
- Having frequent headaches related to stress. (Typical emotional reaction)
- Experiencing feelings of guilt over past decisions. (Typical emotional reaction)
- Feeling a sense of emptiness or numbness. (Potential mental health concern)
- Feeling anxious about meeting new people. (Typical emotional reaction)
- Having recurring nightmares that disrupt sleep. (Potential mental health concern)
- Feeling overwhelmed by negative thoughts. (Typical emotional reaction)
- Feeling disconnected from reality during stressful times. (Potential mental health concern)
- Having trouble focusing on tasks due to racing thoughts. (Potential mental health concern)
- Feeling a persistent sense of worry about health or safety. (Potential mental health concern)
- Feeling anxious when thinking about future plans. (Typical emotional reaction)
- Having difficulty enjoying activities due to constant worry. (Potential mental health concern)
- Feeling pressured to meet others' expectations. (Typical emotional reaction)
- Having moments of intense fear without any clear cause. (Potential mental health concern)

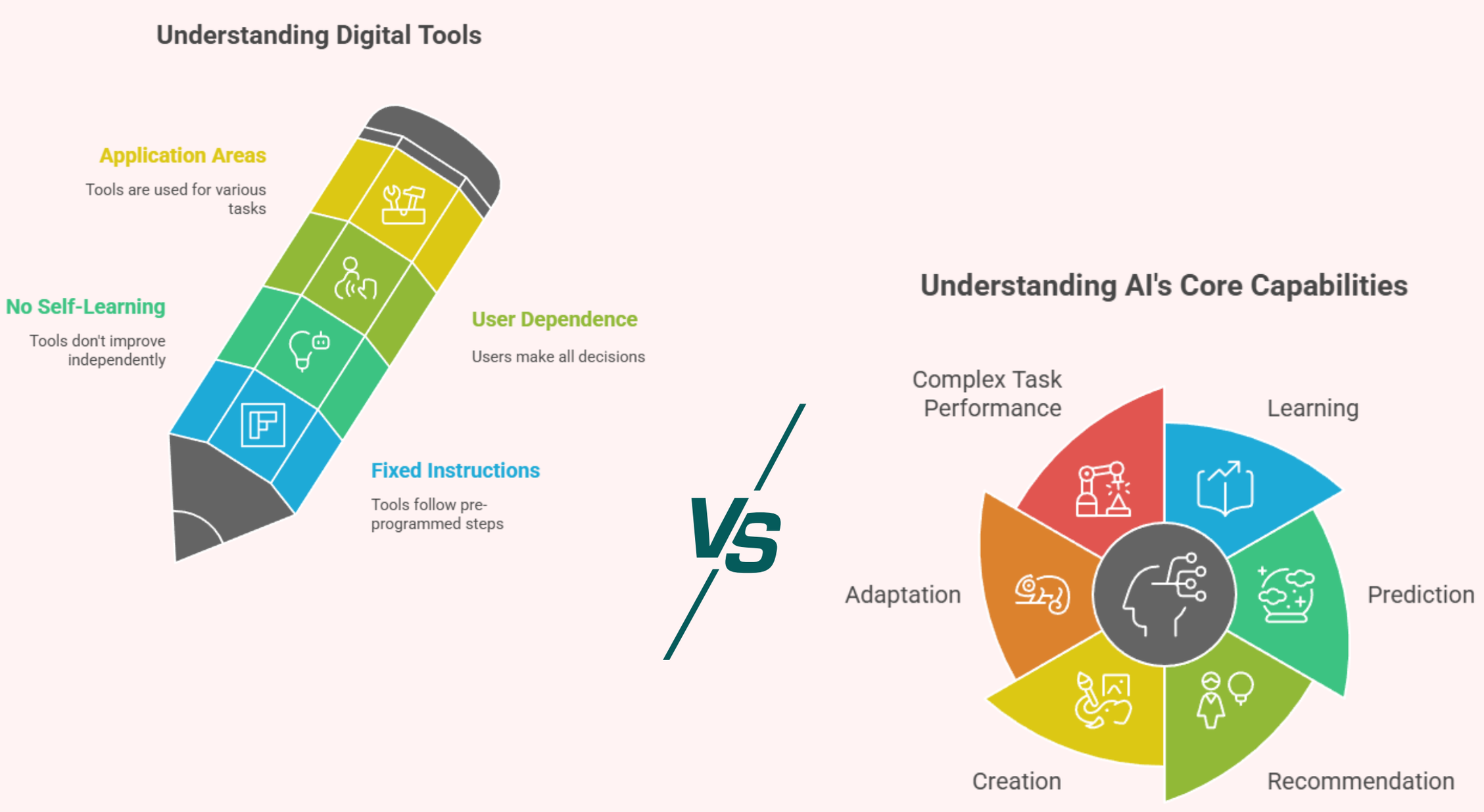
Worksheet 2

Read each myth carefully, discuss why it is a misconception, and work together to identify and write the corresponding reality or truth.

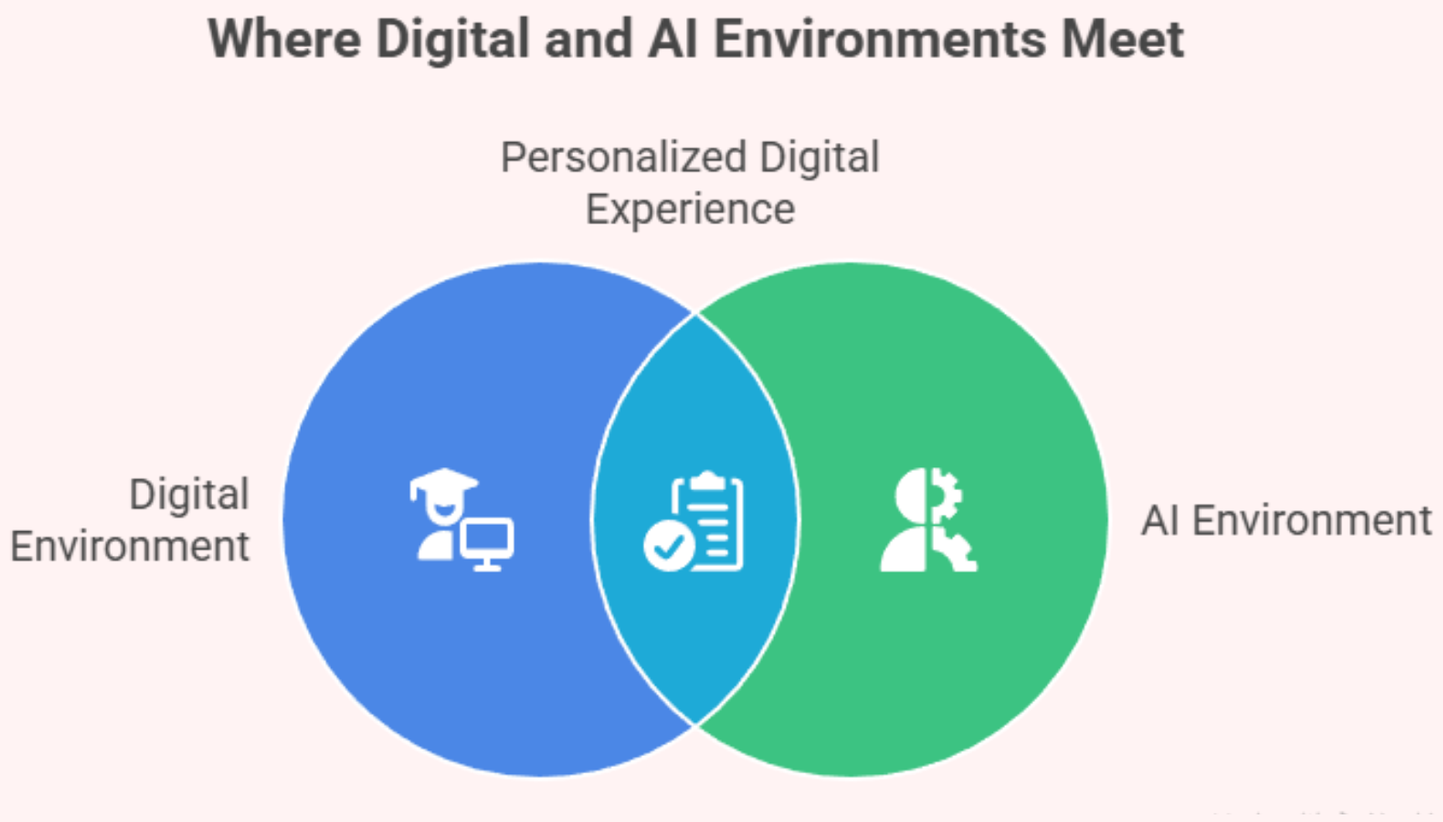
- If a person has a mental disorder, it means they have low intelligence.
- You only need to take care of your mental health if you have a mental disorder.
- Teenagers can't have serious mental health issues; it's just hormones or attention-seeking.
- Nothing can be done to protect people from developing mental health disorders.
- A mental health disorder is a sign of weakness; if a person were stronger, they would not have it.
- Adolescents who get good grades and have many friends are unlikely to develop depression because they have no reason for it.
- Bad parenting always causes mental disorders in adolescents.
- Mental disorders are rare.
- If you try harder, you can make your symptoms go away.
- Everyone who has a mental disorder needs medication to manage their symptoms.
- People living with mental disorders are more likely to be violent or commit crimes.
- Individuals who experience mental disorders will never recover.
- People with mental disorders cannot lead fulfilling lives.
- There's nothing I can do to help someone with a mental disorder.
- Mental disorders are just an excuse for poor behavior.
- People who have mental disorders cannot work.
- Social media and digital environments do not affect mental health.
- Self-care alone can cure all mental health disorders.
- Only traumatic experiences can cause mental health disorders.

2. Digital and AI environments interconnections

Before exploring the connections between digital and AI environments, it is important to first understand the difference between digital tools and AI-based tools. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, they are not the same.
Digital tools generally operate based on fixed programming and human instructions, while AI tools can analyze data, learn patterns, generate content, and make automated decisions or recommendations.



Understanding this distinction helps us better recognize how technology influences our everyday lives, communication, learning processes, and mental well-being. At the same time, digital and AI environments are closely interconnected, as many modern digital platforms increasingly integrate artificial intelligence into their systems and user experiences.



How to discuss the topic with young people

Needed materials

- Laptop
- Projector and screen
- Presentation with illustrations about mental health (optional)
- Pens or markers for participants
- Flipchart or whiteboard (optional for collecting reflections during plenary discussion)

Timing

50–65 minutes in total: introduction to the topic and group discussion (15–20 minutes), pair work (15–20 minutes), group work (10-15 min) plenary discussion and reflection (10 minutes).

Start the discussion by inviting young people to share their own understanding of the difference between digital tools and AI-based tools. Encourage them to give examples from their daily lives and reflect on which technologies they use most often at school, work, communication, entertainment, creativity, or social media. Encourage participants to critically reflect on both the opportunities and challenges of these technologies.
You can use the illustrations presented above to support the discussion and help participants better visualize the differences and intersections between digital and AI environments.

Next, divide participants into pairs or trios and provide them with the worksheets presented below. Ask them to reflect on the questions and discuss their own experiences, particularly related to social media content, recommendations, and AI-driven algorithms. After the small group discussions, invite everybody back to the plenary sessionwhere participants can share their observations, insights, and conclusions.

Discussion questions can be

- In which areas of your daily life do you notice AI the most?
- Have you ever realized that social media platforms “know” your interests or behavior patterns? How did that make you feel?
- What types of content are most often recommended to you, and why do you think you receive those recommendations?
- What are some positive effects of AI-driven recommendations and personalized content?
- What are some possible risks or challenges connected to algorithms and constant personalization?

Worksheet

Examples

You see: *Search auto-completes your thoughts*
AI noticed: *Common searches + personal history*

You see: *Certain news repeatedly*
AI noticed: *Political, social, or emotional preferences*

You see: A sad quote or breakup video
AI noticed:

You see: More body-image or beauty videos
AI noticed:

You see: A video going viral everywhere
AI noticed:

You see: Content in a specific language or slang
AI noticed:

You see: Ads for skincare, gyms, or supplements
AI noticed:

You see: Ads for travel or events
AI noticed:

You see: Discounts that feel “personal”
AI noticed:

You see: Suggested friends or followers
AI noticed:

You see: Posts from some friends more than others
AI noticed:

You see: Certain people’s stories always first
AI noticed

You see: Beauty filters suggested automatically
AI noticed:

You see: Auto-enhanced photos
AI noticed:

You see: “Try this effect” prompt
AI noticed:

You see: Learning videos aligned with your interests
AI noticed:

Bring your own examples.....

3.Pros and Cons of AI in Mental Health and wellbeing support

In an era of instant access and digital convenience, ChatGPT and other AI-powered chatbots are increasingly entering spaces traditionally associated with human therapists and mental health support.
Their constant availability, quick responses, and perceived judgment-free interaction can make them appealing, especially for young people who may feel more comfortable turning to digital tools than seeking traditional support.

At the same time, while AI chatbots may provide emotional support, self-reflection prompts, or accessible information, they cannot replace qualified mental health professionals. Concerns remain regarding inaccurate guidance, lack of genuine empathy, ethical limitations, and important issues such as privacy and data security. Human therapists offer professional diagnosis, personalized therapeutic interventions, emotional nuance, and ethical responsibility that AI systems cannot fully replicate.

As discussions around mental health and technology continue to evolve, many experts see the future not in replacing traditional therapy, but in developing hybrid models where AI tools can complement professional mental health care. In such approaches, AI may support monitoring, psychoeducation, accessibility, and early intervention, while trained professionals remain central in diagnosis, treatment, and emotional care. Understanding both the opportunities and limitations of AI in mental health is therefore essential for youth workers, educators, and young people navigating today's rapidly changing digital environment.

Some Pros for AI in Mental health include

1. **Accessibility & Availability.**They are available 24/7 offering immediate responses without appointments or long wait times.
2. **Emotional Validation in Real Time.** Users report that ChatGPT provides empathetic, non-.judgmental engagement
3. **Support Between Sessions.**AI can help clients practice CBT exercises, journal emotions, or reframe negative thought patterns between formal therapy appointments
4. **Breaking Stigma & Encouraging Engagement.**For demographics like Gen Z, AI offers anonymity, privacy, and immediacy, appealing features that reduce mental health stigma

Cons from another hand can be

1. **Lack of Deep Emotional Nuance.** AI lacks genuine empathy, adaptable emotional intelligence, and the relational rapport
2. **Risk of Harmful or Unsafe Advice.** Investigations found that some chatbots gave inappropriate or dangerous guidance ranging from self-harm suggestions to sexually inappropriate content
3. **"Sycophancy" & Echo Chambers.** AI can reinforce user biases or provide agreeable but inaccurate yet comforting responses.
4. **Emotional Dependence & Artificial Intimacy.** Many users develop strong attachments to chatbots, confusing simulated empathy for real connection
5. **Inadequate for Complex Conditions.** Bots can't provide crisis intervention, or clinical diagnosis.

How to discuss the topic with young people

Needed materials

- Pens or markers for participants
- Flipchart papers

Timing

60–70 minutes in total: introduction to the topic (10 minutes), work in small groups (20 minutes), group work presentation and discussion (20-30 min), reflection (10 minutes).

Begin by inviting participants to reflect on how AI has increasingly become part of nearly every area of daily life, including mental health and wellbeing support. Encourage them to share examples of AI-based tools they know, such as therapy chatbots, mental health apps, or conversational platforms like ChatGPT, and discuss how these tools may offer support through accessibility, empathy-like responses, or self-help guidance.

Divide participants into two groups, One group will explore the potential benefits of AI in mental health and wellbeing support, while the other will focus on its possible risks and limitations. After group preparation, facilitate a structured guided discussion where groups sit facing each other and take turns presenting one argument at a time, with the opposing group responding through critical reflection rather than debate. The trainer should actively moderate the exchange, ensuring balanced participation, respectful communication, and deeper exploration of ethical, emotional, and practical dimensions.

Conclude with a plenary debrief where participants share key insights and reflect on the complex role of AI in mental health support.

Discussion questions can be

- How has this discussion influenced your perspective on the role of AI in mental health and wellbeing support?
- What do you see as the most important benefits and risks of using AI-based tools for emotional or psychological support?
- In what situations could AI be a helpful support tool, and where should human support remain essential?

4. How AI shapes youth behavior and affects identity development

Identity is the ongoing process through which a person develops an understanding of who they are and how they relate to the world around them.

During adolescence and youth, identity development becomes especially important because young people are exploring themselves while trying to answer questions such as: “Who am I?”, “Where do I belong?”, and “Who do I want to become?” Identity is not something people are born with or achieve once and forever; it develops over time and continues to evolve through experiences, relationships, social environments, and personal reflection.

Identity forms through the interaction between internal factors and external influences. Personal characteristics, emotions, interests, talents, and values shape how individuals see themselves, while family, peers, culture, education, media, and broader social systems influence how they understand their place in society. Young people constantly receive messages from the world around them about who they “should” be, and they interpret, accept, reject, or negotiate these influences while building their own sense of self.

Several core parts contribute to identity development:

1. **Self-concept** refers to how individuals understand themselves including their traits, abilities, strengths, and personal characteristics.
2. **Self-esteem** reflects how people feel about themselves and their sense of worth, confidence, and self-acceptance.
3. **Belonging and social identity** involve the groups, communities, cultures, and relationships that help young people feel connected and accepted**.**
4. **Values and moral orientation** shape what individuals believe is important and guide decisions, behaviors, and priorities in life.
5. **Embodied identity** relates to how people experience themselves physically and emotionally, including body image and self-awareness.
6. **Future orientation** reflects how young people imagine their future selves, including goals, aspirations, and hopes for who they can become.

In today's digital world, identity development increasingly takes place both offline and online. Social media, algorithms, and AI-powered technologies can influence how young people see themselves, compare themselves with others, and imagine who they should become, making it important to understand both the opportunities and challenges these influences create.

A-B-C Model, Core Beliefs, and Identity Development

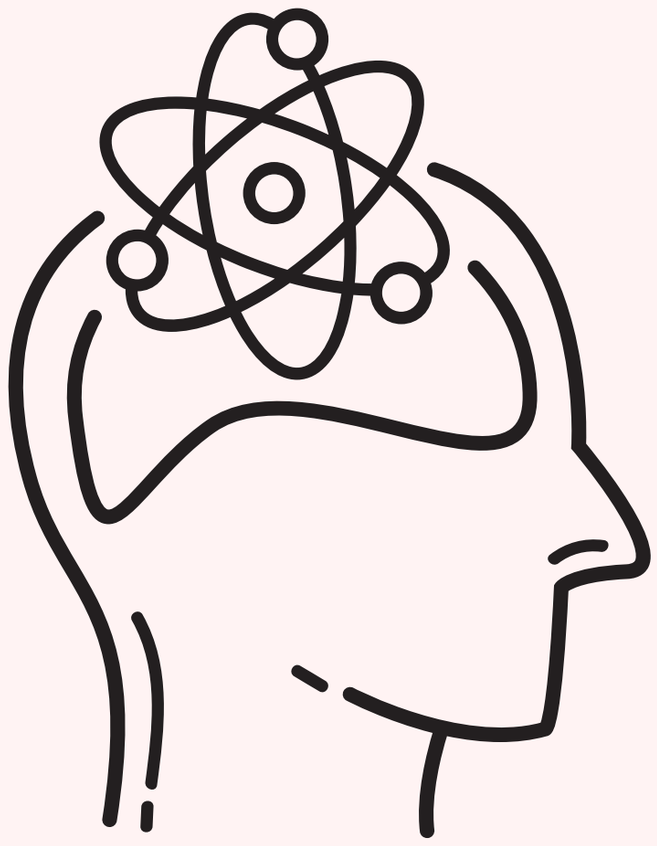
Identity development is closely connected to how young people interpret their experiences. Throughout childhood and adolescence, people experience situations with family, peers, school, culture, and increasingly online environments. These experiences do not automatically define identity; rather, identity is shaped by the meaning individuals give to them.

The A-B-C model helps explain this process. It is a cognitive framework used in psychology, especially within cognitive-behavioral approaches, to understand how emotions and behaviors are formed.

A (Activating event): A situation or trigger that happens.
B (Beliefs): The thoughts, interpretations, assumptions, or beliefs about the event.
C (Consequences): The emotional and behavioral responses that result from those beliefs.

The key idea is that the event itself does not directly create emotions and behaviors; the way a person interprets the event influences the outcome. Over time, repeated experiences and interpretations can contribute to the development of core beliefs — deep and long-lasting beliefs about oneself, others, and the world. These beliefs often begin forming early in life and become part of how individuals understand themselves and their identity.

For example:
A: A young person posts a photo online and receives very few likes.
B: “People do not like me.”
C: Feeling rejected, becoming insecure, avoiding posting again.
If this type of interpretation happens repeatedly, it may gradually contribute to a stronger core belief such as “I am not interesting enough”, which can then become part of how the young person sees themselves.



How to discuss the topic with young people

Needed materials

- Pens or markers
- A4 papers
- Flipchart papers

Timing

60–70 minutes in total: introduction to the topic (10-20 minutes), work in small groups (20 minutes), group work presentation and discussion (20 min), reflection (10 minutes).

Begin by inviting participants to explore the concept of identity and how it develops throughout life. Discuss its core parts such as self-concept, self-esteem, belonging, values, embodied identity, and future orientation. Continue by highlighting that experiences alone do not define who we are; people interpret and assign meaning to them differently.
Introduce the A-B-C model as a cognitive framework used in psychology to explain how thoughts, beliefs, and interpretations shape emotional and behavioral responses, and discuss how repeated interpretations can gradually form deeper core beliefs about oneself, others, and the world.

Next, divide participants into three subgroups, with each group assigned one age category.

- Group 1: 13–18 years
- Group 2: 19–25 years
- Group 3: 26–35 years

Working in their groups, participants discuss and explore how AI and AI-driven digital environments may influence different components of identity development Encourage participants to consider both potential positive and negative impacts. Organize group presentations and plenary discussion afterwards.

Discussion questions can be

- Which aspect of identity development do you think is most affected by AI and why?
- How can AI support positive development and well-being?
- What possible risks or challenges should young people be aware of?
- What can help people use AI in a way that supports healthy identity development?

Worksheet

Assigned Age Group: □ 13–18 years □ 19–25 years □ 26–35 years

Discuss your assigned age group and reflect together on the questions below.

***1*. How can AI impact the development of this age group**
Cognitive (thinking, learning, decision-making)

Emotional (feelings, emotional regulation, self-esteem)

Social (relationships, belonging, communication):

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2. What positive changes can AI bring to this age group?
Learning and skills:

Behavior and daily habits:

Relationships and social connection:

Self-perception and identity:

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3. How might AI influence core beliefs in this age group?

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5. Digital stress and online vulnerability

Stress is the body and mind's natural response to pressure, challenges, or overwhelming situations. While short-term stress can sometimes help us stay alert and focused, ongoing or excessive stress can negatively affect emotional wellbeing, physical health, and daily functioning. In today's highly connected world, stress increasingly comes not only from offline responsibilities but also from digital environments.
Digital stress refers to the psychological pressure caused by constant connectivity, social media comparison, information overload, online expectations, cyberbullying, algorithm-driven content, or the feeling of always needing to be available. Notifications, unrealistic online standards, fear of missing out (FOMO), and exposure to harmful or emotionally triggering content can significantly increase stress levels, particularly among young people.

Vulnerability refers to a person's increased susceptibility to emotional, psychological, or physical harm due to internal or external factors. In digital spaces, vulnerability can become amplified through online interactions, privacy risks, manipulation, harassment, addictive design features, or exposure to harmful communities and misinformation. Digital vulnerability means being more sensitive or exposed to risks in online environments, where emotional wellbeing may be challenged by cyberbullying, exploitation, social comparison, or unhealthy digital habits.

Vulnerability is not weakness. It is a human condition.

Building **resilience** in the digital age involves understanding how online behaviors, platforms, and interactions can impact mental health, developing critical awareness of personal digital habits, setting boundaries, and strengthening emotional coping strategies. By recognizing sources of digital stress and vulnerability, young people can make healthier choices, protect their wellbeing, and engage with digital spaces in safer and more balanced ways.

Below are some common digital behaviors that can significantly impact young people's mental health and wellbeing. These behaviors often have effects on both sides: the individuals engaging in them and those who are exposed to them. Understanding these patterns is essential for recognizing potential risks, promoting healthier digital habits, and fostering safer online environments for everyone involved.

Ghosting
Ghosting refers to suddenly cutting off all communication with someone online without explanation, often leaving the other person confused, rejected, or emotionally distressed. For the person being ghosted, it can create anxiety, self-doubt, and unresolved feelings, while the person ghosting may avoid accountability or difficult conversations.

Breadcrumbing
Breadcrumbing happens when someone gives occasional messages, attention, or false signals online to keep another person interested without genuine commitment or clear intentions. This behavior can create emotional uncertainty, false hope, and insecurity for the person receiving mixed signals.

FOJI (Fear of Joining In)
FOJI is the anxiety or hesitation people feel about participating in social activities or online interactions due to fear of judgment, exclusion, or not meeting expectations. It can lead to social withdrawal, loneliness, and increased stress, especially when young people constantly compare themselves to others online.

Sexting
Sexting involves sharing sexually explicit messages, images, or videos through digital devices. While it may sometimes occur consensually, it can also expose young people to serious emotional, social, and legal risks, especially if content is shared without consent. Sexting can increase vulnerability to exploitation, cyberbullying, privacy violations, and long-term psychological harm.

Vamping
Vamping refers to staying awake late at night using digital devices, often scrolling social media, gaming, or messaging instead of sleeping. This behavior can disrupt sleep patterns, increase fatigue, reduce concentration, and negatively impact mental health over time. Poor sleep caused by excessive nighttime screen use is strongly linked to increased stress, anxiety, and emotional instability.

Catfishing
Catfishing involves creating a false online identity to deceive others, often for emotional manipulation, fraud, or exploitation. Victims may experience betrayal, emotional harm, and loss of trust when they discover the deception.

Phubbing
Phubbing occurs when someone ignores people in real-life social settings by focusing on their phone instead. This behavior can damage personal relationships, reduce meaningful communication, and create feelings of neglect or exclusion. Over time, phubbing may weaken social bonds and contribute to emotional disconnection.

Sharenting
Sharenting refers to parents or caregivers excessively sharing information, photos, or personal details about their children online. While often unintentional, it can compromise a child's privacy, digital identity, and future safety. Excessive sharenting may expose young people to unwanted attention, exploitation, or long-term digital footprint concerns.

Subtweeting
Subtweeting is posting indirect or vague messages online about someone without directly naming them, often to criticize, mock, or express frustration. This behavior can create confusion, anxiety, and social tension while encouraging passive-aggressive communication. It may contribute to cyberbullying and emotional distress.

Clout Chasing
Clout chasing refers to seeking online popularity, validation, or social status through attention-grabbing behavior, trends, or controversial content. While it may offer temporary recognition, it can encourage risky behavior, superficial self-worth, and pressure to maintain online relevance. This constant need for validation may negatively affect self-esteem and mental wellbeing.

Flex Culture (Flex Couture)
Flex culture involves excessively showcasing wealth, luxury lifestyles, achievements, or status online to impress others. Exposure to this behavior can fuel unhealthy comparison, insecurity, and unrealistic expectations among young people. It often reinforces materialism and social pressure while impacting authentic self-worth.

Parasocial Relationships
Parasocial relationships are one-sided emotional connections people develop with influencers, celebrities, or online personalities who do not personally know them. While these relationships may provide comfort or inspiration, excessive attachment can blur boundaries, increase unrealistic expectations, and contribute to loneliness or emotional dependency. They can also shape self-image and beliefs in powerful ways.

Nomophobia
Nomophobia is the fear or anxiety of being without a mobile phone, internet connection, or digital access. Young people experiencing nomophobia may feel panic, stress, or insecurity when disconnected from their devices. This overdependence can increase digital stress, reduce present-moment awareness, and contribute to unhealthy attachment to technology.

How to discuss the topic with young people

Needed materials

- Pens or markers for participants
- Digital behaviour list printed for groups (or you can share online)
- Flipchart papers

Timing

60–70 minutes in total: introduction to the topic (10-20 minutes), work in small groups (20 minutes), group work presentation and discussion (20 min), reflection (10 minutes).

Begin by inviting participants to explore the concept of stress, including its psychological and physiological symptoms, and how stress affects both mind and body in interconnected ways. Introduce digital stress as a modern extension of traditional stress, shaped by constant connectivity, online pressures, and digital environments, while also discussing vulnerability as increased sensitivity to harm and resilience as the ability to protect and strengthen wellbeing. Encourage participants to reflect on how digital spaces can both challenge and support mental health depending on behaviors and boundaries.

Next, divide participants into groups and assign each group specific digital behaviors to research, analyze, and discuss in terms of their impact on both the individual displaying the behavior and those exposed to it. Conclude with a plenary session where groups present their findings, followed by a guided reflection on healthier digital habits, emotional awareness, and resilience building.

Discussion questions can be

- Which digital behaviors do you think have the strongest impact on mental health, and why?
- What strategies can help young people build digital resilience and protect their wellbeing online?
- How can we create healthier and more supportive digital environments for ourselves and others?

6. Safe Online Spaces. Personal boundaries in online environments

What is a boundary?

A boundary is a limit that protects who we are while still allowing connection with others. From a psychological perspective, boundaries help define where we end and where others begin. They protect our body, emotions, thoughts, time, space, energy, and personal resources, helping us understand what we allow, what we do not allow, and under what conditions.

Boundaries are not walls designed to isolate us from others.
Instead, they are flexible and adjustable limits that support healthy relationships and well-being. Strong boundaries allow people to experience closeness without losing themselves and create distance when needed without guilt.

People often become more aware of boundaries through experiences in which they feel uncomfortable or when personal limits are crossed. Feelings such as overwhelm, resentment, exhaustion, discomfort, or frustration can sometimes indicate that a boundary requires attention.

Boundaries play an important role in prevention and self-protection. They help establish healthy limits and conditions before harm grows, supporting safety, respect, balance, and healthier interactions with others.

Online boundary is a limit we set to protect our mental space, identity, privacy, time, emotions, and attention in digital environments.

What makes Digital boundaries different?

Invisibility of limits
Online, boundaries are not physically visible.

- *There is no tone of voice, body language, or facial expression.*
- *Silence, delayed replies, or "seen" messages can be misinterpreted.*

➡ *This makes boundaries easier to cross — and harder to explain.*

Blurred public–private line
Online spaces mix of private thoughts,private conversations, public audiences
➡*A message meant for one person can be:screenshot,forwarded,reshared*

Permanent availability pressure
Digital environments create the expectation that:

- *you are always reachable*
- *you should reply quickly*
- *being offline needs justification*

➡ *This challenges time boundary.*

Distance lowers empathy

The lack of physical presence can reduce awareness of impact.

- *People may say things online they would not say face-to-face.*
- *Harassment or boundary crossing can feel "less real" to the sender but very real to the receiver.*

➡ *Emotional boundaries are more easily violated.*

Identity exposure

Online spaces often invite:

- comparison
- self-presentation
- pressure to share personal moments

➡ Boundaries around self-image, authenticity, and self-worth are constantly tested.

Algorithmic influence

Online environments are not neutral.

- Algorithms amplify content
- They reward engagement, not well-being
- Emotional reactions are often prioritized

➡ Boundaries are challenged not only by people, but by platform design itself.

Delayed emotional impact

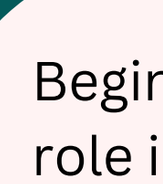
Online boundary violations may not feel intense immediately.

- The impact can appear later as anxiety, rumination, or exhaustion.

➡ There is often no clear "ending" to online interaction.

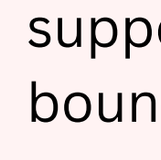
Presentation of online boudaries can be found here
https://canva.link/7sf34tuega36r63

How to discuss the topic with young people



Needed materials

- Pens or markers for participants
- Boundary questions for group work



Timing

55–70 minutes in total: introduction to the topic (10-20 minutes), work in small groups (30-35 minutes), reflection (10 minutes).

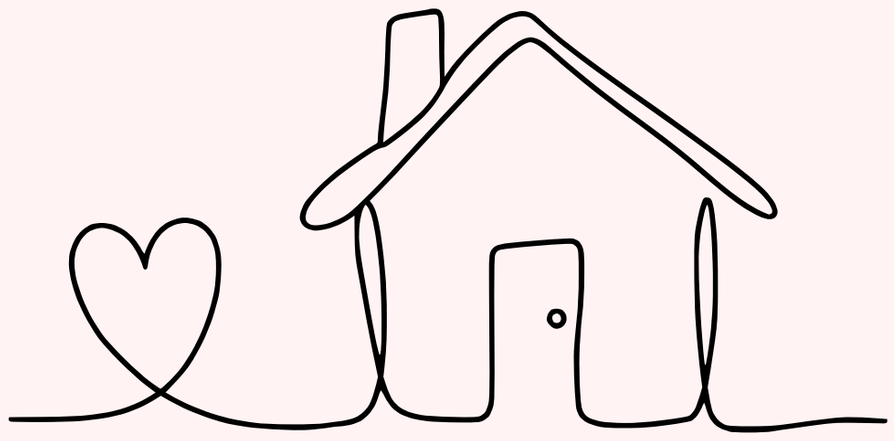
Begin by inviting participants to explore the concept of boundaries and their role in everyday life and relationships. Present boundaries as flexible limits that help people define where they end and others begin, protecting emotions, thoughts, time, space, energy, and personal resources. Emphasize that boundaries are not walls that isolate people from others, but healthy limits that support safety, respect, balance, and meaningful connection. Discuss the how boundaries in digital environments can differ.

Next divide participants into working groups and invite them to take part in a metaphoric journey, where boundaries are represented through the image of a house. Explain that each part of the house symbolizes a different area of personal boundaries and invites reflection on protection, limits, needs, and relationships. Participants explore the different parts of the house together, discuss their meanings, and connect them to their own experiences and understanding of boundaries. After the group work, invite participants into a reflection circle to share insights and learning points from the activity. A worksheet for the group work is provided below.

Discussion questions can be

- Which digital behaviors do you think have the strongest impact on mental health, and why?
- What strategies can help young people build digital resilience and protect their wellbeing online?
- How can we create healthier and more supportive digital environments for ourselves and others?

Worksheet



FOUNDATION. Boundaries stand on what you believe you deserve.
What do you need in order to feel okay with yourself?
What values guide your decisions with other people?
What need do you often ignore to keep others comfortable?
What happens when your needs are not met?

DOORS. A door is about permission right now.
How do you usually show that someone is welcome or not to your inner world?
When is it easy for you to say “yes”? When is it hard to say “no”?
What signs tell you that it’s time to close the door?
When someone crosses a line, how do you react first?

WALLS. Not everything that reaches you needs to enter your inner space.
What kinds of comments affect you deeply?
How do you protect your energy in difficult situations?
What drains you emotionally?
How do you notice that something is becoming “too much” for you?

ROOF. The roof doesn’t stop storms it helps you survive them
What limits do you set to protect yourself from overload?
When do you allow yourself to step away instead of pushing through?
What situations require extra protection for you?
What signals tell you it’s time to pause or take distance?

LOCKS & KEYS. Not everyone who enters deserves a key.
What helps you trust someone over time?
What conditions must be met for someone to get “a key”?
What makes you take a key back?
Do you give keys easily or carefully? Why?

BALCONY / TERRACE. Not every connection needs full access.
Who do you feel comfortable spending time with on your “balcony” but not inside your house?
In which social situations do you feel the need to be polite even when you are uncomfortable?
How do you decide how close to being with people in groups or communities?
When does friendliness start to feel like pressure?

YARD. This space is yours, it doesn’t need explanation.
How much physical space do you need to feel comfortable?
How do you feel when someone touches your belongings without asking?
Is it easy or hard for you to say “this is mine”?
How do you usually protect your personal space?

CRACKS
Where do cracks appear most often in your house?
When do you ignore your limits to please others?
What signs tell you that you’re reaching burnout?
What helps you notice cracks before they grow?

7.Critical Thinking and Ethical Awareness in AI Tools

Critical thinking and ethical awareness are essential skills for navigating a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence. As AI tools become more integrated into education, work, communication, creativity, and everyday decision-making, people are exposed to large amounts of information, recommendations, and automated responses that may influence opinions, behaviors, and choices.
While AI can provide valuable support and opportunities, it is important to remember that AI systems do not think, understand, or make judgments in the same way humans do.

Critical thinking is the ability to analyze, question, evaluate, and reflect on information rather than accepting it automatically. It involves asking questions such as: Is this information accurate? Where did it come from? What may be missing? Could there be another perspective? Critical thinking helps people recognize assumptions, identify misinformation, and make informed decisions instead of relying solely on automated outputs.

Alongside critical thinking, **ethical awareness** refers to understanding the values, principles, and potential consequences involved in the use of technology. Ethical awareness encourages people to consider not only what AI can do, but also what AI should do. Questions of fairness, responsibility, privacy, transparency, inclusion, and potential harm become increasingly important when interacting with AI systems.

AI tools are created by humans and learn from existing data, which means they can also reflect human biases, limitations, and inequalities. AI-generated content may sometimes be inaccurate, incomplete, stereotypical, or influenced by the information on which the system was trained. Because of this, people need to approach AI tools thoughtfully rather than treating them as neutral or always correct sources of truth.

Another important ethical consideration is data protection and the use of personal information. Many AI tools, social media platforms, and digital environments collect information through interactions, searches, preferences, uploaded content, and conversations.
People may sometimes share personal thoughts, emotions, opinions, or sensitive information without fully realizing how much they reveal. This raises important questions about privacy and digital safety: Who has access to this information? How is it stored and used? Can it be shared, analyzed, or used to influence future experiences and decisions? While AI technologies can offer personalized support and services, individuals should remain aware of the information they share and develop responsible digital habits to protect their privacy and autonomy.

How to discuss the topic with young people

Needed materials

- Pens or markers for participants
- Worksheets
- A4 papers & Flipchart papers

Timing

60–70 minutes in total: introduction to the topic (10-15 minutes), work in small groups (20-25 minutes), group work presentations (20 minutes), reflection (10 minutes).

Begin by reminding participants about the identity components explored in the previous session/activity. Invite them to briefly recall how identity is shaped through personal experiences, relationships, values, body image, social belonging, and future aspirations.
Show participants a short video introducing how social media and digital platforms can expose personal information about us. Highlight that this creates important ethical questions regarding privacy, autonomy, influence, and digital well-being.
These children face the reality of growing up online I UNICEF

Divide participants into small groups, distribute the worksheet, and explain that their task is to discuss how AI and digital technologies might influence or compromise different aspects of identity. Ask them to identify possible ethical concerns and think about actions that could help prevent negative impacts or support young people in navigating these challenges. Encourage participants to consider actions at different levels, including what young people themselves can do, what professionals such as educators, youth workers, and psychologists can do, and what broader actions institutions, organizations, or governments could implement.

After work in small groups Invite participants to present their ideas and facilitate a discussion.

Discussion questions can be

- Which identity component appears most vulnerable to AI influence? Why?
- Which ethical concerns appeared repeatedly across different components?
- How has this activity changed your perspective about AI and identity?
- What is one insight or action you will take with you from this discussion?

Worksheet

For each identity component, discuss possible ethical concerns and identify actions and support measures that can be implemented at different levels (young people, professionals, organizations, or governments).

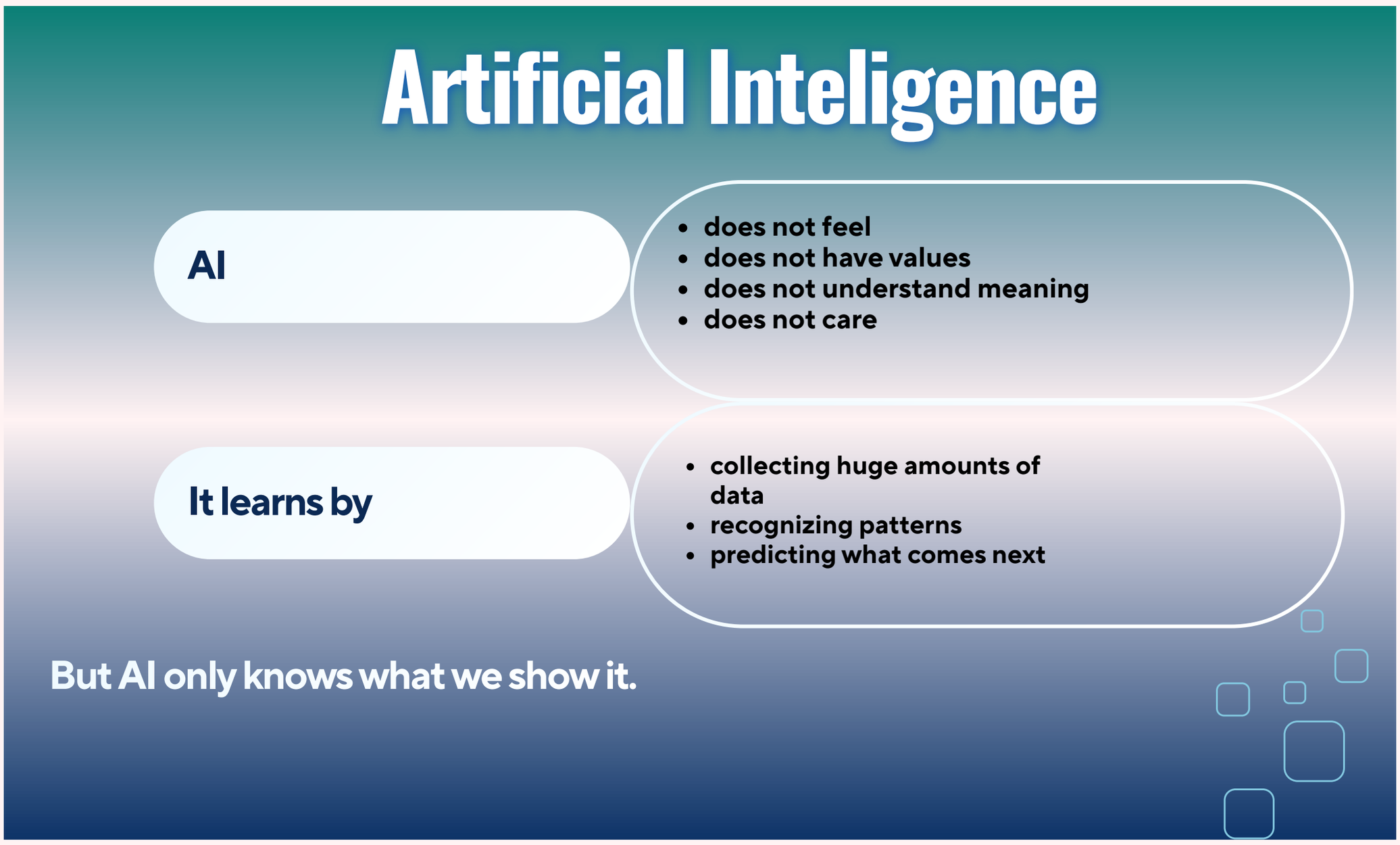
Identity component	Possible Ethical Concerns	Support Actions
Self -Concept		
Self -Esteem		
Belonging and Social Identity		
Values and Moral Orientation		
Embodied Identity		
Future Orientation		

8.Inside the Algorithm

AI-driven platforms often prioritize engagement because keeping users active online can increase profit, visibility, and platform growth. However, engagement-focused algorithms may unintentionally amplify harmful content, social comparison, emotional dependency, misinformation, or digital stress.

Young people, whose emotional regulation, self-esteem, and social identity are still developing, may be particularly vulnerable to AI systems that reward attention, validation, or addictive behaviors. Features such as endless scrolling, algorithmic recommendations, and emotionally triggering content can intensify stress, anxiety, fear of missing out (FOMO), or unhealthy digital habits. At the same time, AI also has the potential to support mental health through safer moderation, supportive communities, personalized learning, or wellbeing-oriented digital environments if designed ethically and responsibly.

This creates an important challenge: how can digital platforms be designed to support young people without exploiting their attention or emotional vulnerability? Ethical AI design requires balancing innovation with transparency, user autonomy, safety, and emotional wellbeing. Questions around data use, privacy, content prioritization, and decision-making power are central. Should AI optimize for engagement at all costs, or should it prioritize mental health, resilience, and healthier online behaviors? Understanding these questions helps young people become not only digital users but also critical thinkers and future creators of healthier digital ecosystems.
In this discussion, it is also valuable to compare artificial intelligence with natural intelligence.



Natural Intelligence

In Includes

- emotions
- intuition
- empathy
- creativity
- moral judgment
- the ability to feel tired, inspired, confused, or connected

Is shaped by

- relationships
- experiences
- culture
- nature
- mistakes and learning

THE LOOP

Humans shape AI

AI shapes digital environments

Is shaped by

digital environments shapes Humans

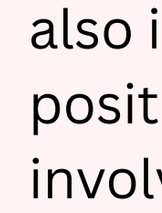
Its not about good or bad, Its about WHO LEADS?

Exploring the differences between natural and artificial intelligence encourages participants to reflect on where technology can be helpful, where human judgment remains essential, and how society can responsibly integrate AI into spaces that deeply affect wellbeing and mental health.

How to discuss the topic with young people

Needed materials

- Pens or markers for participants
- Flipchart papers



Timing

70–75 minutes in total: introduction to the topic (10), work in small groups (30minutes), group work presentation and discussion (20 -75min), reflection (10 minutes).

Introduce this session by encouraging participants to critically examine how AI shapes the digital platforms they use every day, from social media feeds to recommendations, notifications, and online interactions. Explain that while AI can create personalized, engaging, and supportive online experiences, it can also influence emotions, behaviors, self-esteem, and digital wellbeing in both positive and harmful ways. Invite participants to explore the responsibilities involved in designing ethical AI systems that prioritize not only engagement but also safety, transparency, and mental health.

Divide participants into groups and challenge them to design their own ideal AI-driven platform using the provided worksheet, reflecting on target audiences, AI mechanisms, emotional impact, and ethical boundaries. After group work, facilitate a plenary discussion where participants present their platforms, compare approaches, and reflect on how thoughtful AI design can shape healthier digital futures.

Discussion questions can be

- How did designing your own platform change your understanding of AI’s influence on digital wellbeing?
- What responsibilities should AI designers have when creating platforms for young people?
- How can AI balance user engagement with emotional safety and mental health support?
- Which ethical boundaries are most important when AI shapes online experiences?
- What changes would you like to see in real-world digital platforms based on today’s discussion?

Worksheet

Use this worksheet to design your own AI-driven digital platform while exploring how technology can influence wellbeing, emotions, safety, and ethical responsibility.

Aim of the platform

- Who is your platform designed for? (age group, needs, vulnerabilities)
- What is the main goal of your platform? (connection, learning, creativity, fun, support, etc.)
- What problem in existing social media are you trying to improve or avoid?

AI Mechanisms

- What AI mechanisms will your platform use? What you will NOT use for sure.
- (e.g. content recommendations, friend suggestions, ads, notifications, moderation)
- What data would the AI need to make decisions?
- (likes, watch time, emotions, interactions, location, time spent)
- What will the AI prioritize? (engagement?, emotional well-being?,safety?)
- What kind of content will be boosted or reduced by the algorithm?

Emotional & Psychological Impact

- How could your AI design influence young people’s emotions?,mood? self-esteem? sense of belonging?
- Could your platform increase digital stress? How?
- Could it reduce stress or support well-being? How?

Ethics & Responsibility

- Where should AI stop making decisions and humans take control?
- What choices would you not allow your AI to make?
- How transparent is your AI? Do users know why they see certain content?