

Incorporating and Prioritizing Youth Mental Health in Sexual and Reproductive Health Programming

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More than one in three youth experience persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (CDC, 2021), and one in five youth meet the criteria for a mental health disorder that severely impacts their lives and impairs daily activities (Kessler et al., 2005). Mental health affects the way a person thinks, feels, and behaves, and is an integral component to youth successfully navigating the complexities of life, adapting to change, developing skills, fostering relationships, and realizing their potential. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted all aspects of life for today's youth, and created additional stress, isolation, grief, uncertainty, and trauma. In 2021, 44% of youth reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless, 20% had seriously considered attempting suicide and 9% had attempted suicide (Jones, 2022). In particular, the pandemic further exacerbated disparities in mental health outcomes and access to services for youth of color, LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex and asexual or agender) youth, and other marginalized groups (Benton et al., 2022).

Youth with mental health concerns are more likely to engage in risk-oriented behavior and sexual risk behaviors (Brown et al., 2010). In turn, engaging in negative risky behaviors can contribute to mental health concerns. By incorporating mental health and wellbeing promotion into your sexual and reproductive health programming, you can support youth to develop healthy decision-making, learn strategies to navigate interpersonal interactions, and identify healthy coping skills.



FOUR KEY PROGRAMMATIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRIORITIZING YOUTH MENTAL WELLBEING

Cultivate caring, consistent, and responsive relationships.

Destigmatize mental health concerns.

Intentionally cultivate a culture of joy and wellness.

Support staff wellness and capacity to support youth.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Knowing the signs to watch for can help you identify when youth in your programs may be experiencing challenges or need some extra support. Mental health challenges are not just a “phase” that youth grow out of, but rather present critical needs that all adults should recognize and prioritize when working with young people. These signs may look different for each person because youth have a variety of experiences that shape their behavior, emotions, and reactions to stressors. The table below includes some key signs (NIMH, 2019) to watch for. Although adolescents go through many changes that are natural, trusted adults, programs, and systems need to notice changes like those listed below. The warning signs may reflect an inability to cope or unhealthy coping behaviors in response to stress, grief, trauma, or other mental health concerns (Dariotis & Chen, 2022; NASP, 2015).

SIGN	WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?
Basic needs not met (Huang et al., 2021; Yoshikawa et al., 2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hunger • Lacking clean or weather-appropriate clothing • Fearful of individuals or neighborhood • Falling asleep at unusual times (i.e., during the school day)
Changes in personal care (NIMH, 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in grooming, hygiene, hair care, clothing, and other personal care • Dieting or exercising excessively, or fear of gaining weight • Sleeping too much or too little
Physical symptoms (MHTTC, 2021; NIMH, 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anger, mood swings, and irritability • Competing for attention • Opposing authority • Hyperactivity or inability to control impulses
Acting in (inward expressions) (MHTTC, 2021; NIMH, 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming withdrawn or avoiding social activities • Expressing feelings of sadness, anxiety, worthlessness, or hopelessness • Not doing things they previously enjoyed • Inability to focus
Increased risk-taking (Dariotis & Chen, 2022; NIMH, 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underage drinking • Drug use • Problematic sexualized behavior (e.g., preoccupation with nudity or sex, distributing sexual images, touching others without consent, coercive or aggressive sexual comments or behavior)
Self-harm (NIMH, 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging in self-harm, like cutting or burning skin • Expressing having thoughts of suicide

All grantees and staff working directly with youth are mandated reporters. It is your responsibility to follow state and federal laws on reporting cases of child abuse, neglect, or harm. This includes when a young person poses imminent danger to themselves or others. For more detailed information and support, read [Mandatory Reporting and Keeping Youth Safe](#).

FOUR KEY PROGRAMMATIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRIORITIZING YOUTH MENTAL WELLBEING

On a day-to-day basis, program staff can support youth mental health by providing connections, consistency, and a safe environment while supporting youth in developing social-emotional skills. Programs can also center youth mental health through organizational practices, policies, training, and support for staff wellness. This section will cover four key considerations for supporting youth mental health in a programmatic setting.

Cultivate caring, consistent, and responsive relationships.

- Express that you care and establish a personal connection with youth (Roehlkepartain, et al., 2017).
- Encourage a sense of agency and share power by giving youth opportunities for decision-making and leadership (Roehlkepartain, et al., 2017). This can be done through creating a youth or family advisory board, collecting brief surveys, or conducting listening sessions.
- Validate emotions and listen first. It's okay to not have an answer.
- Prepare youth to handle uncertain times related to loss and tragic events at home or in society (Ginsburg, 2020). Remind them that solutions are not always apparent, but encourage youth to build community with others, seek information from reliable sources, and be open and ready to adapt to new situations (Project for Mental Health and Optimal Development, 2020).
- Involve youth and families in decision-making for your SRAE programming and communicate to them how their feedback was implemented, which can also increase program engagement (Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, n.d., 2015; Roehlkepartain, et al., 2017).

Destigmatize mental health concerns.

- Emphasize that mental health is a part of a person's physical health (American Psychiatric Association, 2020).
- Affirm youth that they are not alone in their emotions or experiences of mental health challenges.
- Encourage seeking help and asking questions.
- Be mindful of language and not using words like "freak" or "crazy" (American Psychiatric Association, 2020).
- Develop partnerships with organizations that can provide prevention, treatment, and support services for both youth and staff in your SRAE program.
- Host training opportunities for staff to learn about prevention strategies, identifying concerns, and broaching the subject of mental health with youth and families (American Psychiatric Association, 2020; Committee on the Science of Changing Behavioral Health Social Norms et al., 2016).
- Make information about hotlines (crisis lines) and warmlines (peer-run listening lines to call for connection and support) visible and accessible to staff and youth. Be sure to include current information for local resources in your area.



ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

- » [The Exchange: Classroom Management](#)
- » [Classroom Management: Approaches to Support School Connectedness](#)
- » [How Well Are You Seeing?](#)
- » [Question Bank: Student Check-Ins](#)
- » [Eight Successful Youth Engagement Approaches](#)
- » [Relationships First: Creating Connections that Help Young People Thrive](#)



ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

- » [Worried About Your Friend?](#)
- » [Tips for Asking a Friend About Their Mental Health](#)
- » [6 Tips for Active Listening](#)
- » [Tools for Youth and Teens](#)
- » [Grief, An Epidemic within the Pandemic: Empowering Children, Youth, & Families in Urban Communities to Work Through Their Grief & Trauma \(Webinar\)](#)
- » [Closing the Loop: Developing Effective Referral Networks for Youth \(Webinar\)](#)

Intentionally cultivate a culture of joy and wellness.

- Promote a sense of belonging by creating group traditions or celebrating significant life moments (Asby et al., 2020).
- Establish routines to promote security, stability, and consistency (Asby et al., 2020).
- Integrate coping, resiliency, and self-regulation into your SRAE program's activities and lessons so youth can practice skills (Asby et al., 2020).
- Acknowledge that life can be challenging but that moments of joy can coexist with those challenges.
- Connect youth with inspirational people, places, and things (Roehlkepartain, et al., 2017).

Support staff wellness and capacity to support youth.

- Encourage staff to stay tuned into their own capacity and identify their own trauma cues (Guarino, K. & Chagon, E., 2018).
- Support staff in maintaining a healthy workload (CDC, 2018; Guarino, K. & Chagon, E., 2018).
- Acknowledge and provide resources for secondary trauma that may occur while working with youth who have experienced trauma (Office of Victims Crimes, 2017).
- Make accommodations for staff to engage in self-care and wellness activities (CDC, 2018).



ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

- » [How to Nurture Empathic Joy in Your Classroom](#)
- » [Stressed Out? \(Lesson\)](#)
- » [Nurturing My Mental & Emotional Health \(Lesson Plan\)](#)
- » [Pure Brain Breaks Curriculum](#)
- » [Practical Strategies for Creating Welcoming & Supportive Environments for All Youth \(Webinar\)](#)



ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

- » [Mental Health in the Workplace](#)
- » [Your Healthiest Self: Wellness Toolkits](#)
- » [Emotional Wellness Toolkit](#)
- » [5 Tips for Maintaining Resiliency](#)



RESOURCES AND HOTLINES

Need support now? If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available.

National Institute of Mental Health, 1-866-615-6464, www.nimh.nih.gov

This is an automated voice information system with information on eating disorders, depression, anxiety, and panic disorders. The call is free.

National Mental Health Association, 1-800-969-6642, www.nmha.org

From anxiety disorders to depression, attention deficit, suicide, and substance abuse, this group (which has with over 300 affiliates nationwide) can give a boost to anyone who feels like they might need it.

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, 988 (call or text), 988lifeline.org

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is a national network of local crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in the United States.

Teen Link, 1-866-TEENLINK (833-6546) www.teenlink.org

A help line for teens, by teens that provides information and resources to youth and their families on preventing youth suicide and can also connect callers to adult crisis counselors.

Information on Mental Health for Youth

[We Think Twice: Mental Health](#)

[YouthEngaged4Change: Mental Health and Wellbeing](#)

[GirlsHealth.gov: Your Feelings](#)

[MentalHealth.gov: For Young People Looking for Help](#)

[How Right Now: Finding What Helps](#)

Information on Youth Mental Health for Adults

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – [What is Mental Health?](#)

National Alliance on Mental Illness – [Warning Signs and Symptoms](#)

National Institute of Mental Health – [Children and Mental Health: IS This Just a Stage?](#)

World Health Organization – [Adolescent Mental Health](#)

American Psychological Association – [Education & Covid-19 | Special Report: Safeguarding Student Mental Health](#)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – [Rates of Mental and Behavioral Health Service Providers by County, 2015](#)

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry – [Stress Management and Teens](#)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – [COVID-19 Parental Resources Kit: Ensuring Children and Young People's Social, Emotional, and Mental Wellbeing](#)



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