

SUPPORTING
YOUNG
PEOPLE WITH
ANXIETY

**A Guide
for Youth
Workers**



FOREWORD

Recent national and international research consistently highlights anxiety as one of the most significant challenges facing young people, and those who support them. Anecdotal evidence over the past 5 years within the youth work sector also reinforces this narrative. However, a key challenge in this, is engaging young people in meaningful conversations taking into consideration the influence today's society.

In an increasingly complex world, young people are navigating constant change. Rapid advances in technology, the pervasive influence of social media, the pressures of a rising cost of living, and ongoing global conflicts all contribute to an environment that can feel overwhelming. For those without strong protective supports, these challenges can have a profound impact on their mental health and overall wellbeing.

To support those who are experiencing anxiety, we must first be able to help the young people recognise, understand, and express their emotions. However, in a world where it is becoming increasingly challenging to question ideas and differing viewpoints, it can feel more difficult to engage young people in open, constructive conversations about their feelings, often out of fear of saying the wrong thing or unintentionally shutting those conversations down.

A core strength of youth work lies in its ability to create safe, supportive environments where young people

can express themselves freely and feel accepted, included, and seen. Youth work plays a vital role in enabling young people to explore their identity and develop a deeper understanding of themselves, key foundations for positive mental wellbeing.

This resource aims to continue to build that capacity of youth workers with a lens to better understand anxiety and how it may present in young people. It also offers practical approaches and tools to support meaningful conversations, helping young people to recognise, explore, and articulate their emotions.

As part of a wider suite of mental health promotion supports provided by the National Youth Health Programme, this resource offers a timely and valuable starting point for those seeking to support the mental wellbeing of young people, now and into the future



Rachael Treanor
National Youth Health Programme Manager

The National Youth Council of Ireland

The National Youth Council of Ireland is the representative body for voluntary youth organisations in Ireland. We use our collective experience to act on issues that impact on young people.

www.youth.ie

The National Youth Health Programme

The National Youth Health Programme (NYHP) is a partnership between the National Youth Council of Ireland, the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Department of Education and Youth.

www.youth.ie/health

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National Youth Council of Ireland National Youth Health Programme
3 Montague Street, Dublin 2, D02V327

www.youth.ie

T: 01 478 4122

E: info@nyci.ie

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SECTION 1

Introduction



SECTION 1

Introduction

1.1 Purpose and rationale of the resource

The National Youth Health Programme provides training and resources to youth workers and other professionals on a myriad of issues relating to young people's health and well-being, including their mental health..

In recent years our those working in the Youth Work Sector have repeatedly raised concerns about young people's and anxiety and the increasing impact it is having on Young People. Youth Workers have indicated that they and the young people they work with need support around the topic.

In addition, Youth Workers commonly cite lack of information, guidance and resources to aid them in addressing the issue. In response to this need, the National Youth Health Programme, held a consultation with workers at the World Mental Health Day conference in October 2024, it was clear from that consultation that a resource was needed.

This resource aims to provide workers and volunteers in the Youth Work sector, with additional information and signposting to better enable them to address the issue of anxiety with Young People in their service.

This resource is part of a wider response to the mental health promotion of Young

People in Ireland. There are many more resources and training designed to promote Young People's mental health; further information is available in section 8 of this resource and on youthhealth.ie

1.2 Who is the resource designed for?

This resource is designed for anyone that is in a caring or supporting role for young people. The resource will be useful for a range of professionals and volunteers working with young people across the youth and community sector. The resource is designed to provide information and advice for those supporting young people, it is important to note that it is not written for young people.

1.3 How to use the resource

This resource is both a guide and a workbook for youth workers and those supporting young people with anxiety. You can use it on your own, with your team, or during training sessions.

1. **Use it your way** – Read it from start to finish or dip into sections that feel most relevant to the young people/person you are supporting.

2. **Learn and reflect** – Each section includes a short self-reflection and relevant activity at the end of each section to help you apply ideas to your work.
3. **Work together** – Use the activities for group discussions, team meeting and workshops, or supervision.
4. **Put it into practice** – Try one new approach at a time. Adapt the tools to fit your setting and the needs of your young people.
5. **Take care of yourself** – the National Youth Health Programme has a range of resources to help workers and volunteers to manage their own self-care. more information can be found at youthhealth.ie

1.4 Worker Reflection/Activity



Self-reflection

Use the space provided at the back of the resource to reflect on the following questions:

- 1 What are your hopes or goals in using this resource?
- 2 What challenges do you face when supporting young people experiencing anxiety?

SECTION 2

Understanding Anxiety



SECTION 2

Understanding Anxiety

Everyone experiences anxiety—it's a completely normal emotion that plays a crucial role in helping us stay safe and motivated. Anxiety is our body's normal reaction to what we feel is a fearful or stressful situation. For example, you might feel anxious before you are about to do or experience something, for example:

- a job interview
- before an exam
- before you must make a difficult decision
- have a difficult conversation
- public speaking

Within these situations, our anxiety focuses our attention, motivates us, helps us react and keeps us safe. After we complete the activity, the feelings will disappear. However, for some people, this feeling of anxiety, is not temporary and can be ever present or recurrent for them in a range of situations and become overwhelming, impacting their day-to-day lives.

2.1 What is anxiety

Anxiety can manifest itself differently in each of us.

It can be feelings of tension, worry, and include physical changes like increased heart rate and elevated blood pressure.

When faced with stress or danger, our body activates what's known as the fight, flight, or

freeze response. This instinctive reaction is designed to protect us from harm:

Fight: When confronted by a threat, your body may prepare to defend itself. This can result in automatic verbal or physical reactions.

Flight: You may feel an overwhelming urge to escape the situation. Your heart rate and breathing increase, preparing your body to move quickly.

Freeze: Sometimes, the safest option is to remain still. In this response, the body becomes immobile, potentially to avoid detection or further harm—like freezing in place when encountering a predator.

Fawn: In some situations, you may try to appease or please the threat to stay safe. This response involves seeking approval, compliance, or cooperation to de-escalate danger—such as quickly agreeing or being overly accommodating to avoid conflict.

This survival response is natural and protective. However, for individuals who experience anxiety more intensely or frequently, these reactions can be triggered even in non-life-threatening situations, such as public speaking, taking a test, or social interactions¹.

Recognising these responses in ourselves can help us better understand our experiences and take steps toward managing anxiety more effectively.

¹ St. Patricks Mental Health Services- Available at <https://www.stpatricks.ie/mental-health/anxiety>

2.2 What anxiety is NOT

Anxiety is not the same as stress.

There's a fine line between stress and anxiety. Both are emotional responses, but stress is typically caused by an external trigger. The trigger can be short-term, such as an exam or a fight with a loved one or long-term, such as being unable to work, discrimination, or chronic illness. People under stress experience mental and physical symptoms, such as irritability, anger, fatigue, muscle pain, digestive troubles, and difficulty sleeping.

Anxiety is also not:

A weakness: Feeling anxious is not a character flaw or something to be ashamed of. It's a hardwired response in the brain.

Always irrational: Some anxiety can be completely rational in dangerous or uncertain situations. It's only a problem when it becomes excessive or unfounded.

Only mental: Anxiety isn't just a mental or emotional issue. It can involve physical symptoms like headaches, stomach problems, fatigue, or muscle tension².

2.3 Common anxiety disorders for Young People

There are different types of anxiety disorders with varying symptoms and triggers. Some of the most common anxiety disorders are outlined below.

Note: This section has been developed using information from St Patricks Mental Health Services.

1. Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

Generalised Anxiety Disorder, or GAD, is one of the most common anxiety conditions, and it can affect young people just as much as adults. It's more than just feeling worried from time to time—GAD involves ongoing, excessive worry that can feel constant and difficult to control.

A young person living with GAD might:

- Worry about a wide range of everyday things, like school, family, friendships, health, or the future
- Feel like they can't "switch off" their thoughts, even when things seem to be going okay
- Expect the worst to happen, even in situations where others might not see a problem
- Avoid situations because they're too overwhelming
- Experience physical symptoms like restlessness, headaches, stomach aches, or difficulty sleeping

This kind of ongoing anxiety can affect every part of a young person's life—school performance, friendships, home life, and their ability to enjoy day-to-day activities.

2. Panic Disorder

Panic disorder is when you have sudden episodes of severe anxiety or panic linked with a fear of death or collapse. The key feature of panic disorder is the sudden onset of panic attacks with no clear reason or trigger; the young person may often feel constant concern about having future attacks or about the consequences of an attack. **(***Panic attacks and their signs and symptoms will be outlined in more detail later in this resource***)**

² American Psychological Association- Available at: <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/anxiety-difference#:~:text=People%20under%20stress%20experience%20mental,the%20absence%20of%20a%20stressor>

³ St. Patricks Mental Health Services- <https://www.stpatricks.ie/care-treatment/our-services/anxiety-disorders-programme>

3. Social Anxiety

Social anxiety is when a person experiences intense fear or discomfort in social situations. This fear often stems from worrying about being judged negatively, saying something foolish, or being embarrassed in front of others.

While it's normal for everyone to feel shy or uncomfortable in certain social situations, social anxiety is more extreme. It's not something that typically goes away on its own, or without support, it can lead a person to avoid social interactions altogether. For some, it can even stop them from participating in activities like public speaking or going for a job interview. Social anxiety often starts in the teenage years, but it can develop at any age.

Many symptoms of social anxiety are physical. These might include blushing, sweating, a racing heartbeat, or a shaky voice.

A young person with social anxiety might:

- Blow small mistakes out of proportion, thinking they've made a bigger error than they have
- Feel like all eyes are on them, making it difficult to relax
- Find everyday activities, like reading in front of others or making a phone call, particularly difficult
- They may fear situations like public speaking, dating, meeting new people, or talking to authority figures
- Feel deeply embarrassed by physical symptoms, like blushing
- Dread social events such as parties, meals at restaurants

When social anxiety is left unaddressed, it can impact a young person's daily life and relationships. They may avoid social situations or force themselves through them with intense distress, making it harder to connect with others and participate fully in life.

4. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a mental health condition where a person experiences repeated and distressing intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and engages in specific behaviours or rituals (compulsions) in an attempt to manage or reduce the anxiety caused by these thoughts. The person may also feel a heightened sense of responsibility for preventing harm and an intense awareness of potential risks and dangers. OCD often begins during the teenage years or early adulthood.

There are two key features of OCD:

- **Obsessions:** These are unwanted, distressing thoughts, images, or urges that come up automatically and regularly. They are hard to control and can lead to significant anxiety.
- **Compulsions:** These are repetitive actions or rituals that the person feels compelled to perform, either to respond to an obsession or to follow certain rules or routines.

Common Obsessions include:

- Worries about contracting a disease
- Fear of dirt, germs, or contamination
- Thoughts about acting violently or having aggressive urges
- Fears of harming others, especially people they care about
- Needing to perform tasks in a specific order or arrangement
- Fears that things in the environment, such as household appliances, may be unsafe

Common Compulsions include:

- Excessive washing or cleaning (e.g., frequent handwashing)
- Constantly checking things (e.g., whether an appliance is turned off, or an item is in the right place)
- Repetitive actions like touching objects or counting
- Arranging and ordering items in a particular way
- Hoarding or saving things unnecessarily

While compulsions are often a response to obsessions, in some cases, a person

may have compulsions without obsessing over thoughts. However, obsessions and compulsions typically go hand in hand.

Performing these compulsions may provide short-term relief from anxiety, but this relief is often brief, leading the person to feel the need to repeat the compulsion again. Over time, this cycle can become more intense and harder to manage.

OCD is a complex disorder that can have a serious impact on a young person's life and routines, as well as on their family and social relationships. It can disrupt their day-to-day activities, affect their schoolwork, and change how they interact with others.

5. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can develop after someone experiences a traumatic, frightening, or overwhelming event. The symptoms of PTSD can make it very difficult for a young person to feel safe or comfortable in their day-to-day life.

A young person living with PTSD might experience:

- **Distressing memories or flashbacks** of the traumatic event, where they may feel like they are reliving it
- **Avoidance** of reminders or situations that bring the trauma to mind
- **Withdrawal** from others or becoming emotionally distant
- **Hypervigilance**, being constantly alert or on edge, as if they are always anticipating danger
- **Disturbed sleep**, including trouble falling asleep, nightmares, or waking up frequently during the night

Traumatic events that can lead to PTSD include:

- Natural disasters, such as extreme weather events (e.g., floods, hurricanes)
- Serious accidents, like car crashes or other personal injuries
- Exposure to military combat or conflict
- Violent personal assaults, such as robbery or sexual assault

It's important to recognise that while everyone may experience distress after a traumatic event, PTSD is different. Normal reactions to trauma might include shock, sadness, or anger, but these feelings tend to lessen over time. PTSD, on the other hand, involves more intense and long-lasting symptoms that can disrupt daily life.

6. Specific Phobias

A specific phobia is when a person experiences an intense, irrational fear of a particular object, animal, or situation that poses little or no real danger. Phobias are often present from childhood, and they trigger automatic fear responses.

For young people, phobias may involve fear of common things like rodents, spiders, heights, or enclosed spaces. In some cases, phobias might also involve more unusual fears, such as the fear of vomiting or thunderstorms.

When a young person has a phobia, they usually experience a strong urge to avoid the trigger at all costs. This avoidance behaviour, along with the intense feelings of fear, can cause significant distress and interfere with everyday activities, school, social life, and relationships.

Some of the most common specific phobias include:

- **Fear of closed spaces** (claustrophobia)
- **Fear of water** (aquaphobia)
- **Fear of animals** like dogs, bats, or rats
- **Fear of reptiles or crawling creatures** (herpetophobia), such as spiders
- **Fear of heights** (acrophobia)
- **Fear of blood or injury**
- **Fear of becoming sick with or dying from a specific illness**, like a heart attack or cancer

For a young person with a phobia, these fears can make normal situations—such as going on a trip, attending a party, or visiting a doctor—very challenging. Phobias can impact their ability to fully participate in life and cause them to withdraw or avoid certain experiences.

2.4 Signs and Symptoms of Anxiety

Anxiety symptoms can manifest in multiple ways for young people: physically, psychologically and behaviourally. If you think someone may be anxious, consider if their actions and/or demeanour match the following symptoms:

Physical	Psychological	Behavioural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heart Pounding • Flushing • Shortness of Breath • Dizziness • Sweating • Headache • Dry Mouth • Stomach Pain • Nausea • Diarrhoea • Muscle Aches/Pains • Restlessness • Inability to Relax 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessive Worry • Irritability • Impatience • Feeling on Edge • Fatigue • Vivid Dreams • Mind Racing • Mind Going Blank • Indecisiveness • Difficulty Concentrating • Decreased Memory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obsessive or Compulsive Behaviour • Phobic Behaviour • Avoidance of Situations • Distress in Social Situations

Please note this is a general list of the signs and symptoms a person may experience when experiencing anxiety. Each person’s experience is individual and presents differently, so don’t dismiss the possibility of anxiety if a person presents with something different to what is on the list⁴.

2.5 Panic Attacks

A panic attack is a sudden rush of intense fear or anxiety — as though your body’s “fight, flight, freeze (or fawn)” system has flipped on, even without a clear danger. It can feel terrifying in the moment, but it is not dangerous despite how it feels.

1. What Happens During a Panic Attack?

The body of a young person experiencing a panic attack responds with powerful physical and emotional signals:

Physical symptoms (things you might notice):

- Heart pounding, racing, or skipping beats
- Sweating

- Trembling or shaking
- Hot flushes or chills
- Pins and needles, numbness
- Shortness of breath, feeling like you can’t catch your breath
- A choking sensation or tightness in the throat
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Nausea, stomach cramps, “butterflies” feeling
- Dizziness, light-headedness, feeling faint
- Feeling detached from yourself or your surroundings (unreal, “not here”)

Emotional / cognitive experiences:

- Feeling out of control
- Thoughts like “I’m losing it,” “I’m going to pass out,” “I’m dying”
- Intense fear or doom

⁴ Mental Health First Aid- Available at : <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2018/12/how-to-help-someone-with-anxiety/>

Panic attacks often build up quickly – peaking around 10 minutes – and then gradually ease. Even though they're distressing, they don't cause physical harm.

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2. Do Panic Attacks Affect People Differently?

Yes, panic attacks can affect each young person in different ways, both in how they feel and what triggers them.

- People may experience different fears during a panic attack. Some might worry they are going to faint, while others may believe they are having a heart attack or losing control.
- The situation or environment can influence how panic occurs. Being far from home, in crowded places, or in confined spaces can increase anxiety. Stressful experiences or past memories may also act as triggers.
- Some panic attacks happen suddenly without a clear cause, while others are linked to specific situations.
- Although physical symptoms such as a racing heart or shortness of breath are common, the main fear or meaning attached to the experience can vary from person to person.

3. What It Might Feel Like (Example)

It is useful to use a simple example to illustrate how a young person may experience a panic attack:

- ↓ Getting on a train, feeling a bit uneasy
- ↓ Noticing tension in their body, sweating slightly
- ↓ The train stops between stations – they start to feel trapped
- ↓ Breathing speeds up, heart races, they feel dizzy
- ↓ Intense fear that they might faint or suffocate
- ↓ They manage to leave the train to try to calm down

This is just one possible experience – it is important to note that when supporting young people, everyone's experience can be a bit different.

4. When Are Panic Attacks a Sign of Something More?

Panic attacks may happen on their own or alongside other mental health concerns. They don't always mean there's a "disorder," but they often relate to:

- Depression (low mood can make anxiety worse)
- Other anxiety disorders (social anxiety, OCD, phobias, PTSD)
- Substance use or misuse
- Ongoing stress or trauma

If panic attacks become frequent, or if there's constant worry about having another one, the best way to support the young person may be to signpost them to a mental health professional to explore cause or if there is the possibility of a panic disorder.⁸

5. How Can You Support a Young Person During a Panic Attack?

As a trusted adult in the young person's life, there is a high likelihood that you may be someone they look to in crisis. Here are steps you can take:

1. Stay calm and grounded. Your composure helps bring safety.
2. Stay with them (unless that adds to their distress). Let them know you're there.
3. Encourage slow, steady breathing.
 - Breathing from the diaphragm, counting in and out
 - Breathing slowly can help counter the overreaction of the body
4. Reassure them. Remind them: this will pass, and they are not dying.

⁵ <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/panic-disorder/?utm>

⁶ <https://www.camdenandislingtontalkingtherapies.nhs.uk/camden-islington/problems-we-help-with/334-2/panic-attacks/>

⁷ <https://spunout.ie/mental-health/anxiety-stress/panic-attacks/>

⁸ <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/panic-disorder-when-fear-overwhelms>

5. Use grounding or relaxation techniques (also referred to as circuit breakers for anxious spiralling). For example:
 - Ask them to name 5 things they can see, 4 they can hear, etc.
 - Focus on a calming image or memory
 - Progressive muscle relaxation (tensing then releasing)
6. Stay positive but realistic. You don't need to "fix" it; your presence and reassurance that it will ease matters.
7. Afterward, talk through it. Help them find what strategies worked, what was hardest, and what supports they might want.

Also, help them to access professional support if panic attacks are frequent, severe or interfering with life (GP, counsellor,). Youth workers in Ireland often help young people connect to local services..^{9 10}

2.6 Common Myths and Misunderstandings

When supporting young people, it's important to be aware and to understand that anxiety is often misunderstood. Misinformation can make it harder for young people to open up about how they are feeling or to seek support. Below are some common myths, and the realities behind them. The purpose of this is to help guide sensitive and informed conversations with young people.

Myth: "Anxiety is just worrying too much."

Reality: Everyone worries sometimes, but anxiety is more than everyday worry or stress. It involves strong physical and emotional reactions that can feel overwhelming or out of proportion to the situation. It's not something a young person can simply "snap out of."

Myth: "If you avoid what makes you anxious, it will go away."

Reality: Avoiding anxiety triggers can bring short-term relief, but it often reinforces fear in the long term. Gradual, supported exposure, when the young person feels safe and ready for this step, will help build confidence and coping skills over time.

Myth: "Anxiety only affects people who are weak or sensitive."

Reality: Anxiety can affect anyone, regardless of personality, background, or their reservoirs of resilience. It's a common and real mental health experience, not a sign of weakness. In fact, many young people living with anxiety are displaying enormous courage, resilience and strength every day.

Myth: "Talking about anxiety will make it worse."

Reality: Open, calm conversations about anxiety can reduce its power. When young people feel heard and understood, they're less likely to bottle things up, which often makes anxiety harder to manage. Making it easier for young people to open up on the topic as early as possible will result in better outcomes for them.

Myth: "Anxiety will always be part of their life."

Reality: With the right support, including coping tools and strategies that are suited to them, therapy, and lifestyle strategies, anxiety can become much more manageable. Many young people recover fully or learn to live confidently with occasional anxiety. Early intervention makes a big difference.

⁹ <https://jigsaw.ie/youth-workers-role-in-promoting-youth-mental-health/?utm>

¹⁰ <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/birth-family-relationships/services-and-supports-for-children/mental-health-services-children-young-people/?utm>

Myth: “It’s just a phase.”

Reality: While some anxiety is part of normal development, persistent or intense anxiety deserves attention. It’s important not to dismiss or minimise a young person’s experience, what feels small to an adult can feel enormous to them. If we diminish their experience, they are less likely to ask for help again around the topic.

Creating an environment where young people feel safe to talk about anxiety, without judgment or pressure, is one of the most powerful supports you can offer. This support can include brief check-ins, validation, and reassurance that “you’re not alone, and this can get better”, all of these can make a real and meaningful impact for the young person.^{11 12 13}

2.7 Worker Reflection/Activity



Self-reflection

Think about a time you or someone you know experienced anxiety. What signs were visible, and how were they responded to?

Activity

Group brainstorm: Create a list of common behaviours in your youth group that might signal underlying anxiety.

Discuss which of these are often missed or misunderstood.



¹¹ <https://spunout.ie/mental-health/anxiety-stress/anxiety/>

¹² <https://jigsaw.ie/anxiety-and-young-people/>

¹³ <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/anxiety-tips-and-self-help/>

SECTION 3

Recognising and Responding to Anxiety in a Youth Work Setting



SECTION 3

Recognising and Responding to Anxiety in a Youth Work Setting

This section will outline how a person with anxiety may present in a youth work setting as well as exploring how we as workers can use the relationship we have to support the young person with anxiety. The aim here is to help you to recognise some of the behaviours that may be because of anxiety.

***Note: Section 3 was compiled using information from the HSE¹⁴ and Mental Health First Aid¹⁵. The material has been adapted to reflect the experiences of youth workers who have supported young people with anxiety, based on insights gathered through training and consultation events.

3.1 Spotting the signs in a Youth Work Setting

We have already outlined an extensive list of what the signs and symptoms of anxiety are in section 2 of this resource, here we will look at how they may present in a youth work setting.

Youth workers are often the first adults outside the family to notice changes in a young person's behaviour, because of the trusting relationship and the sense of safety and belonging that the young people feel in the youth work setting. Anxiety can show up differently depending on age, personality, culture, and life experience. Here we will give some common emotional, physical, behavioural and social signs that young people experiencing anxiety may exhibit.

Emotional Signs

- **Persistent worry or fear (particularly in relation to the future) that seems out of proportion-** this may be the young person asking constant "what if?" questions and the young person constantly focusing on "what might/will go wrong".
- **Irritability, frustration or becoming easily overwhelmed-** anxiety can make the young person's tolerance to everyday occurrences much lower than usual- this can result in reacting sharply to setbacks or snapping at peers and others.
- **Tearfulness or sudden emotional shutdown-** the young person may be struggling to process their emotions, and these are two common responses to feeling overwhelmed or being unable to process what is going on for them.

¹⁴ <https://www2.hse.ie/mental-health/issues/anxiety-young-people/>

¹⁵ How to Help Someone With Anxiety

Physical Signs

- **Complaints of headaches stomach aches and nausea**—anxiety can trigger these physical symptoms as a response to certain events/activities or social situations. If young people are regularly experiencing these, it may signal the bodies ongoing response to anxiety rather than being due to illness.
- **Rapid breathing, sweating or shaking**— these can appear suddenly and regularly for young people with anxiety. If there is a pattern of these reactions to events or social situations it may indicate the young person is overwhelmed because of anxiety
- **Tiredness or difficulty settling or relaxing**— persistent anxiety can leave a young person feeling constantly drained or “on edge”. This may present as them seeming like they are always fatigued or struggling to switch off and engage in activities that others may experience as calming or grounding.

Behavioural Signs

- **Avoiding activities, groups or peers they previously enjoyed engaging with**— a young person experiencing ongoing anxiety may regularly step back from things they used to like doing, this can be a safety mechanism to avoid situations that may trigger worry or discomfort.
- **Difficulty concentrating or staying engaged**— the young person may frequently appear distracted, or struggle to follow conversations or instructions because anxiety makes it difficult to focus or take in new information.
- **Asking for constant reassurance**— if a young person is constantly seeking affirmation, guidance or comfort in relation to recurring or similar worries, it can be a sign of anxiety, as they may be struggling to feel safe or confident on their own.

- **Restlessness, pacing, fidgeting or needing to leave the space frequently**— if a young person displays regular physical agitation or feel the constant need to leave the room this may be a sign that they are overwhelmed due to the feelings caused by anxiety.

Social Signs

- **Withdrawal from peers**— if a young person withdraws from peers this can indicate an issue with anxiety, it can indicate sense of being overwhelmed or an inability to function in social situations (even with their closest friends).
- **Sudden clinginess to you or other staff**— young people feeling worried or unsafe because of the anxiety they are experiencing, may navigate to a trusted adult to seek the affirmation and reassurance as outlined in the section above.
- **More conflict with others than usual**— anxiety can cause increased irritability or tension for the young person, this can in turn lead to frequent misunderstanding or arguments with their peers and with youth workers.
- **A noticeable drop in participation or attendance**— persistent anxiety may result in the young person showing up less often to the youth service or stopping altogether. When they do show up, they may not be as involved as they were previously and may seem distant or distracted.

It is important to note that anxiety may not always be obvious in the young people that you are working with, as some of them will mask their worry and the other signs outlined above. However, youth workers, through the relationship and knowing the young person, are well placed to recognise these signs by consistently observing and noticing any changes in their behaviour.

3.2 Utilising the Relationships with the Young People

Youth work is based on voluntary participation, meaning the young people come to your service because they want to be there. One of the key things that attracts young people to attend a youth service is having a relationship with a trusted adult. This relationship between the youth worker and the young person is a powerful foundation for supporting young people with anxiety. You can utilise this relationship to:

- Create a safe, welcoming and predictable space where young people know what to expect, i.e. a supportive and consistent environment where they can be supported if experiencing anxiety.
- Check in regularly with the young person you think may be having issues with anxiety, particularly if you have noticed any changes in mood or behaviour (as detailed in the previous piece).
- Model calmness and grounding techniques. By staying calm and using simple grounding strategies yourself, you show young people how to regulate in moments of anxiety.
- Working with young people around emotional literacy. Naming emotions and talking about them in everyday language helps normalise these skills and encourages young people to do the same.
- Validate their feelings without minimising their experiences or expressing judgement. This can be done by letting the young person know that their emotions make sense and that you hear them. This validation can help reduce any feelings of stigma or shame that the young person may be experiencing.
- Remind the young person of their strengths and past coping successes they have had, this may help empower them to take more control. Reminding them of how they've handled challenges in the past will build confidence that anxiety is something they can control rather than something that controls them.

Nobody is expecting a youth worker to be a mental health expert to a young person with anxiety, rather the role is to maintain the supportive relationship and to use this to focus on the young person's well-being and participation.

3.3 How to talk about Anxiety

Talking to young people about anxiety can be a daunting prospect, but a simple open approach works best when addressing the topic. Using clear language and a calm tone helps young people to feel safe and supported, making it easier for them to share what is going on for them. Some simple guidelines to help with this process are outlined below.

- **Start Gently and Calmly**
Beginning with open, non-intrusive questions will help the young person to feel safe and in control of the situation. These open questions show care and support without creating pressure, this makes it easier for the young person to share at their own pace. Some examples of open questions include:
 - o "I've noticed you seem a little distracted lately. How have things been for you?"
 - o "You don't seem like yourself today, is there anything you would like to talk about?"
 - o "Feeling anxious is a perfectly normal thing, is there anything specific causing you to feel like this?"
- **Use clear, non-clinical language**
Simple everyday language helps the young person gain a better understanding of what they are experiencing without feeling overwhelmed, labelled or judged. It makes the conversations with young people about anxiety more relatable and less intimidating. Some examples include:
 - o "Sometimes when we are anxious, that can cause a reaction in our body, it can make you feel jumpy or tense"
 - o "When something is weighing on us, it is a natural response for our minds to get really busy, it can make it more difficult to settle".

- **Listen Actively**

Displaying to the young person that you are really listening helps the young person to feel understood and it demonstrates to them that it is safe to open up about what they are feeling. Small actions can make a significant difference in helping the young person to feel heard and valued. Simple examples include:

- Give them adequate time
- Use open and welcoming body language
- Reflect back what you hear, “It sounds like you have been carrying a lot”

- **Normalise, don’t minimise**

Letting young people know that their feelings make sense will help to reduce and feelings of shame that they make be experiencing, while helping to enhance the trust in the relationship. It is important to acknowledge their experience with anxiety rather than brushing it off. Some tips include:

- “It makes sense you’d feel anxious after that.”
- Avoid: “It’s not a big deal” or “Don’t worry about it.”

- **Encourage healthy coping strategies**

Supporting young people to try simple, practical strategies helps them feel more in control. These tools can make challenging moments more manageable and build their confidence over time. Examples that have been proven to be effective include:

- Breathing exercises
- Mindfulness
- Grounding
- Taking rest breaks
- Connecting with supportive Peers
- Creative activities
- Physical activity

3.4 Boundaries and knowing your role

Youth workers play a crucial role in early recognition, support, and signposting—but you are not expected to act as a mental health professional.

Your responsibilities include:

- Providing a supportive, non-judgemental relationship
- Helping young people identify coping strategies that suit the youth work environment
- Recording and communicating concerns as per organisational policy
- Signposting or referring to appropriate services (GP, CAMHS, Jigsaw, school supports, etc.) when needed
- Maintaining professional boundaries, even if the young person forms a strong attachment to you

Remember:

- You can walk alongside a young person.
- You cannot carry the issue alone, make sure that you are availing of supports and practising self-care
- Consult your team or supervisor if you are struggling to support a young person with anxiety

3.5 Dos and Don’ts when supporting a Young Person with Anxiety

In summarising the information provided in section 3 it is useful to look at a simple list of Do’s and Don’ts to guide you when supporting a young person with anxiety.

DO

- ✓ Stay calm and grounded yourself, your calmness and consistency support’s their regulation.
- ✓ Acknowledge their feelings (“I hear that this is tough for you”).
- ✓ Offer the young person choices to help them regain a sense of control over the anxiety they are experiencing.
- ✓ Create a quiet or low-stimulus space if required by the young person.
- ✓ Emphasise connection, not isolation, encourage the young person to maintain important relationships.
- ✓ Follow safeguarding procedures if the anxiety is linked to risk or harm.

DON'T

- ✗ Force the young person to talk before they are ready.
- ✗ Minimise or dismiss their worry.
- ✗ Provide clinical advice or diagnose.
- ✗ Push them back into the group if they are overwhelmed.
- ✗ Take on problems outside your role (e.g., therapy, complex family issues).
- ✗ Make promises you cannot keep ("Everything will be fine").

3.6 Worker Reflection/Activity



Reflection/Activity

Use this individually or with your team

1. Recall a time you supported a young person who seemed anxious.

What signs did you notice? What worked well?
What was challenging?

2. How comfortable do you feel talking openly about anxiety?

What supports, or training would help you feel more confident?

3. Think about your boundaries.

Where is the line between youth work support and mental health intervention?

How do you know when it's time to escalate a concern?

4. Reflect on your space or programme.

Are there times, activities, or environments that might be anxiety-triggering for young people?

What adjustments could help?

SECTION 4

Practical Tools and Strategies for Supporting the Emotional Regulation of Young People with Anxiety



4

SECTION 4

Practical Tools and Strategies for supporting the Emotional Regulation of Young People with Anxiety

This section focuses on practical skills and approaches youth workers can use to help young people recognise, understand, and regulate their emotional responses to anxiety.

The aim is to strengthen emotional literacy, teach grounding and coping tools, and promote creative, mindful, and physical outlets for managing distress. It also encourages youth workers to engage in reflective practice to maintain their own emotional wellbeing and capacity to support others.

Grounding and emotional regulation techniques are key to creating safe, empowering environments where young people feel capable of managing their anxiety. By integrating these approaches into everyday youth work practice, workers can help young people build lasting resilience.^{16 17}

4.1 Emotional Literacy

Emotional literacy refers to the ability to recognise, understand, express, and manage emotions in oneself and others.

For young people who experience anxiety, building emotional literacy is a key first step in understanding and managing their feelings, when they can name and describe what they feel, those emotions become more manageable and less overwhelming. It helps build self-awareness, empathy, and problem-solving abilities, which are essential protective factors for mental health and enabling them to flourish.²

In youth work settings, supporting emotional literacy also strengthens trust and communication between the worker and the young person. When workers model appropriate emotional expression and provide safe spaces for emotional exploration, young people learn that anxiety is not something to hide or fear, instead, it's something that can be recognised, explored, and managed. Research indicates that youth programmes integrating emotional awareness training improve resilience and reduce internalising low

¹⁶ Dooley, B. A., O'Connor, C., Fitzgerald, A. & O'Reilly, A. (2019). My World Survey 2: The National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland. UCD School of Psychology & Jigsaw.

¹⁷ World Health Organization (WHO). (2020). Social and Emotional Learning for Mental Health Promotion in Schools.

mood and the symptoms associated with anxiety.¹⁸

Practice Ideas for Youth Workers to use with Young People around Emotional Literacy:

- **Feelings Check-in:** Begin one-to-one meetings or group sessions with light but consistent emotional check-ins. Options include: “What colour represents how you feel today?” or “If your mood were weather, what would it be?” Over time, these small but consistent rituals and habits help to build emotional awareness and vocabulary.¹⁹

*****NOTE-** There is a selection of sample questions included in the appendix section of this resource

- **Expanding Emotional Vocabulary:** Many young people use limited language like “grand,” “fine,” or “stressed.” Use tools such as the *emotion wheel*, feeling flashcards, or collaborative word walls to help participants identify subtler feelings such as “uneasy,” “apprehensive,” or “embarrassed.” As well as encouraging young people to use this language, there is an onus on youth workers and those supporting young people around their mental health to model this and to make it the “norm” in youth work settings.⁵

*****NOTE-** An emotions wheel is a useful tool to help young people learn emotional vocabulary, there are two examples (one appropriate for younger children and one appropriate for adolescent young people) in the appendix section of this resource

- **Modelling Emotional Expression:** Youth workers can normalise emotional expression by speaking openly about their own emotional states when appropriate. For instance: “I felt a bit nervous leading this new activity, but I took a deep breath first.” This demonstrates that even adults experience anxiety and can manage it effectively.⁵
- **Body Mapping Emotions:** Invite young people to outline a body shape on paper and mark where they feel emotions (e.g., anxiety in the stomach, tension in the shoulders). This helps connect physical sensations with emotions, an important grounding skill. This exercise helps young people to recognise how different emotions affect them and their body and just as importantly that they are not unique or abnormal in experiencing emotions like this.²⁰

Cultural Considerations:

In Ireland, emotional language can sometimes be understated, with humour or phrases like “Ah, I’m grand” used to avoid vulnerability. Youth workers can gently challenge this by validating emotions and encouraging honest reflection without judgment, helping young people experience that anxiety and other emotions can be spoken about safely.

Key points in relation to Emotional Literacy:

- Encourage emotional expression through multiple forms – language, art, music, or movement.
- Normalise a wide range of emotions by modelling openness and acceptance.

¹⁸ Zenner, C., Herrnleben-Kurz, S. & Walach, H. (2014). Mindfulness-based interventions in schools: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5(603)

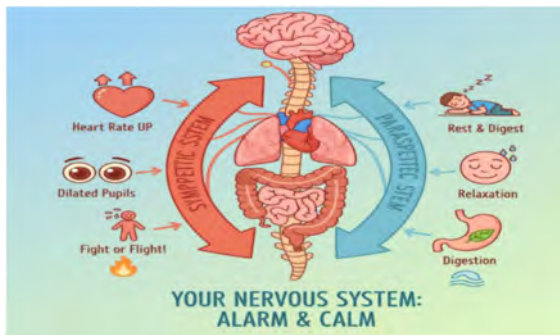
¹⁹ Jigsaw. (2021). Youth Mental Health Tools and Resources. Retrieved from <https://jigsaw.ie/resources>

²⁰ CASEL. (2023). Core SEL Competencies Framework. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Retrieved from <https://casel.org>

- Use repetition and routine; emotional literacy develops over time, not through a single conversation.
- Integrate emotional reflection into various programme activities – not just wellbeing sessions – so that emotional awareness becomes part of daily youth work practice.

4.2 Grounding and Breathing Techniques

Grounding and controlled breathing techniques are practical tools that support young people in managing the physical and emotional responses associated with anxiety. When anxiety is triggered, the body's stress response system (as covered in section 2 of this resource) activates, i.e., heart rate increases, breathing becomes shallow, and concentration may decrease. Grounding and conscious breathing help interrupt this cycle, activate the parasympathetic nervous system, and promote a sense of calm and focus. The parasympathetic nervous system is the body's natural calming system, responsible for slowing the heart rate, relaxing muscles, and restoring a sense of balance after stress.²¹



These techniques are simple, adaptable, and effective in both one-to-one and group contexts. They can be used as a quick regulation tool after a stimulating activity, before a transition, or when a young person

shows visible signs of distress. Regular practice strengthens self-regulation and emotional awareness for both young people and youth workers.^{22 23 24}

Practical Grounding Tools for Youth Work Practice

- **5–4–3–2–1 Sensory Grounding:** Guide a young person to notice five things they can see, four they can touch, three they can hear, two they can smell, and one they can taste. This technique anchors attention in the present moment, helping quiet anxious thoughts⁸.
- **Box Breathing (4x4):** Teach participants to inhale for four counts, hold for four, exhale for four, and pause for four before repeating. This controlled pattern lowers stress hormones and helps regulate breathing pace.⁷



- **Grounding with Texture or Touch:** Encourage the use of small objects such as a smooth stone or fabric swatch. Focusing on the object's texture, temperature, and weight can

²¹ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/relaxation-techniques-breath-control-helps-quiet-errant-stress-response>

²² Dooley, B. A., O'Connor, C., Fitzgerald, A., & O'Reilly, A. (2019). My World Survey 2: *The National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland*. UCD School of Psychology

²³ Mehren, A., et al. (2020). Effects of a Mindfulness Based Intervention on Emotion Regulation and Anxiety in Adolescents. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 55(6), 678–687.

²⁴ Weare, K., & Nind, M. (2011). Mental Health Promotion and Problem Prevention in Schools: What Does the Evidence Say? *Health Promotion International*, 26(S1), i29–i69.

settle sensory overload or distress for the young person. Fidget spinners and stress balls can be useful tools for this technique and may be something that young people are already familiar and comfortable with.²⁵

- **Nature-Based Grounding:**
Lead an exercise that involves observing natural surroundings, this involves noticing smells, textures, and sounds. Contact with nature has been shown to improve physiological regulation and mood.²⁶
- **Movement-Based Grounding:**
Simple repetitive movements such as walking slowly, stretching, or gentle swaying can ground individuals who find stillness difficult. Some young people will prefer movement to being stationary or still, so this type of grounding exercise will be more suitable to them.²⁷

Practice Considerations:

Grounding and breathing can easily be integrated into daily youth work practice as informal mental wellbeing tools for both young people and workers. These techniques can be introduced as brief session openers or closers, used during moments of high emotion, or introduced to young people proactively so that they can apply them independently when needed.

These approaches also align with trauma informed practice principles, helping to establish safety, predictability, and a sense of control. Encouraging workers and young people to learn these techniques together can reduce stigma and model that self-regulation is a normal part of everyday life.

Key Points in relation to Grounding and Breathing Techniques

- Demonstrate techniques calmly before asking young people to engage.
- Encourage natural, unforced breathing rather than deep breathing that might cause lightheadedness.
- Highlight that grounding and breathing work best with consistent practice, not only during moments of crisis.
- Offer choice as some may prefer movement based grounding while others may connect with sensory or breathing exercises.
- Combine grounding work with emotional literacy discussions to help young people link physical sensations to emotions

4.3 Problem Solving and Coping Strategies

Young people who experience anxiety often feel a loss of control when faced with challenges or uncertainty. Facilitating the young people to engage with structured problem-solving and coping strategies restores a sense of agency, helping them move from avoidance or over-thinking toward constructive action.

Problem-solving skills encourage emotional regulation by allowing young people to break down problems into smaller, manageable steps and identify actions within their control.²⁸ Cognitive-behavioural research has shown that developing these abilities can significantly reduce anxiety and stress in adolescents.

Facilitating problem-solving exercises in a youth work setting promotes the development of resilience, self-efficacy and self confidence in the young people, all of which are identified as key outcomes for young people who are engaged with youth work.²⁹

²⁵ CASEL (2023). *Core SEL Competencies Framework*. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Retrieved from <https://casel.org/>

²⁶ Hartig, T., Mitchell, R., de Vries, S., & Frumkin, H. (2014). Nature and Health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 35, 207–228

²⁷ Weare, K., & Nind, M. (2011). *Mental Health Promotion and Problem Prevention in Schools: What Does the Evidence Say?* *Health Promotion International*, 26(S1), i29–i69.

²⁸ Beck, A. T., & Emery, G. (1985). *Anxiety Disorders and Phobias: A Cognitive Perspective*. New York: Basic Books.

²⁹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/campaigns/young-ireland/>

Core Problem Solving Frameworks to use in practice with Young People

- **The STOPP Technique**

A simple cognitive-behavioural tool that helps young people pause before reacting, Talk the young people through each of the 5 steps and what the purpose is for each:

S – Stop what you are doing.

T – Take a slow, deep breath.

O – Observe: what am I thinking, feeling, and noticing in my body?

P – Pull back: what would a friend or mentor say about this situation?

P – Practice what works: choose a helpful next step (young people may need help with future planning what these next steps are for them).

This technique guides reflection and choice, replacing automatic anxious or avoidant responses with intentional behaviour that will be more beneficial for the young person in that moment and for their overall mental well-being.¹⁴

- **What’s in MY control exercise**

The purpose of this exercise is for young people to become familiar with things they can and cannot control, enabling them to come up with realistic plans that will help keep them safe and feeling supported.

Ask the young person to divide a page into two circles – an inner circle labelled Things I Can Control and an outer circle labelled Things I Can’t Control. Together, discuss which aspects of a problem belong in each area. This visually clarifies boundaries, reduces feelings of helplessness, and redirects their focus to actionable steps that will help them in the short and medium term.³⁰

*****NOTE-** There is a template for this exercise in the appendix of this resource as **Appendix 4**

- **Coping Ladder Planning**³¹

Help the young person break a problem into graded steps, starting with the easiest task and moving gradually toward more difficult ones. For example, if social anxiety prevents attending a group, the ladder might progress through graduated steps like those outlined below.

- “Text a friend,”
- “Visit the centre,”
- “Join a short session.”

This method promotes mastery and confidence through small successes

*****NOTE-** There is a template for this exercise in the appendix of this resource as **Appendix 5**

- **Paired or Group Brainstorming**

Problem-solving can also be facilitated collectively with groups in a youth work setting, this is particularly useful if those in the group also socialise outside of the youth work setting. Group-based brainstorming encourages young people to listen to their peers’ perspectives, and it normalises help seeking behaviour in social and peer groups. This exercise is useful as it provides opportunities for peer learning and strengthens youth voice and participation in formulating their own solutions.

Coping Strategies for young people experiencing anxiety

While problem-solving addresses external situations the young people may be faced with, coping strategies target internal responses that they experience. Effective coping helps young people manage their anxiety more effectively, view situations more realistically, and develop emotional resilience.³²

³⁰ CASEL (2023). *Core SEL Competencies Framework*. Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning. Retrieved from <https://casel.org/>

³¹ Fennell, M. (2016). *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Anxiety Disorders*. Routledge.

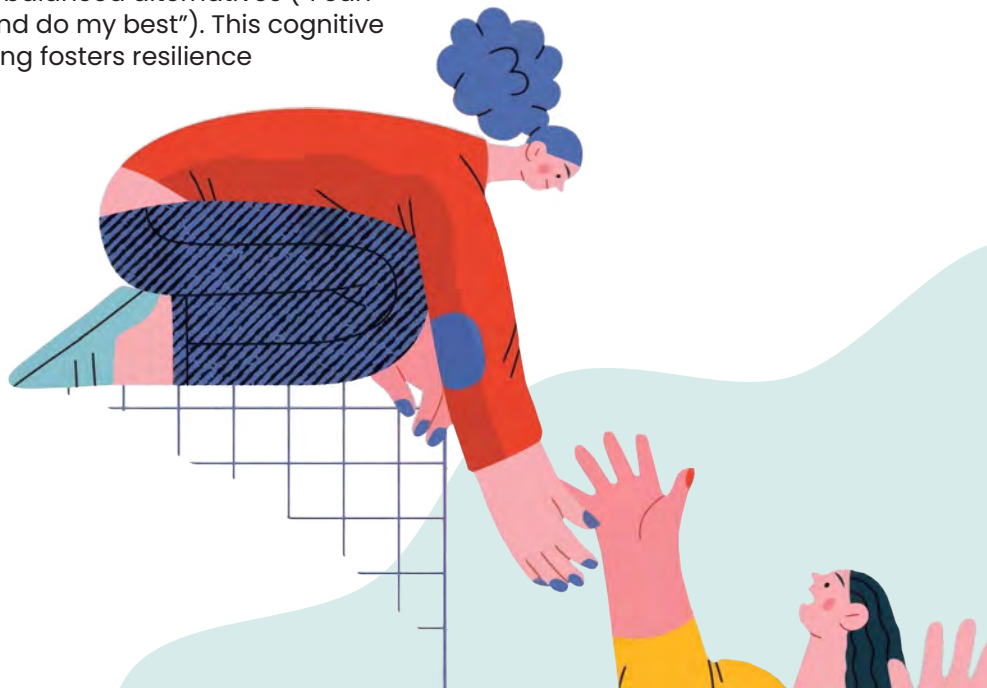
³² Mehren, A., et al. (2020). Effects of a Mindfulness Based Intervention on Emotion Regulation and Anxiety in Adolescents. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 55(6), 678–687.

Practical Coping Strategies:

- **Grounding or Breathing:** Use short techniques (as outlined earlier) to calm the body before making decisions.
- **Positive SelfTalk:** Encourage realistic, supportive inner dialogue such as “I can handle this” or “I’ve managed other challenges before.”
- **Distraction and Re-Engaging with interests/hobbies:** Activities like drawing, music, reading, or gentle exercise can redirect attention from over-thinking or catastrophising and create mental space for self-reflection and addressing what is going on for them.
- **Seeking Support:** Encourage communication with trusted peers, family members, or professionals. The earlier that young people realise that interdependence with trusted people in their lives is a key protective factor for minding their mental health, the better outcomes they will experience.
- **Reframing Negative Thoughts:** Guide young people to identify unhelpful thoughts (“I’ll fail for sure”) and replace them with balanced alternatives (“I can prepare and do my best”). This cognitive restructuring fosters resilience

Practice Considerations for Youth Workers regarding Problem Solving and Coping Strategies

- Encourage young people to pause before reacting, anxiety often pushes quick avoidance responses and behaviours.
- Use visuals and metaphors (e.g. ladders, circles, roads) to make abstract problem-solving more accessible and comprehensible for the young people.
- Emphasise that there is no one perfect solution; flexibility and experimentation are part of learning to cope for us all.
- Reinforce effort and reflection rather than outcomes for the young people, building their own resilience to deal with anxiety matters more than “getting it right.”
- Integrate strategies gradually into everyday conversation, activities, or group reflections rather than formal sessions, helping these skills feel natural and accessible will increase the chances of young people of engaging with them.



³² Mehren, A., et al. (2020). Effects of a Mindfulness Based Intervention on Emotion Regulation and Anxiety in Adolescents. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 55(6), 678–687.

These approaches align with strength-based and developmental youth work principles by focusing on what young people can do, rather than on their perceived deficits or limitations.

4.4 Mindfulness and Relaxation Exercises

Mindfulness and relaxation techniques help young people respond to anxiety by focusing attention on the present moment rather than on worries about the past or future. These approaches cultivate awareness, acceptance, and physical calm, reducing over-thinking and catastrophising as well as physiological stress responses.^{33 34}

In youth work settings, mindfulness and relaxation can be introduced as short, everyday practices to support emotional regulation, they will also complement many of the other techniques and strategies throughout this section of the resource. These techniques and activities align well with holistic and developmental youth work principles that emphasise self-awareness, resilience, and reflective practice.

When practiced regularly, mindfulness builds emotional stability, improves concentration, and supports a general sense of wellbeing among young people and youth workers alike.³⁵

Practical Mindfulness and Relaxation Exercises

- **Mindful Breathing (2–3 minutes):** Invite young people to sit comfortably, notice their breath, and focus on its natural rhythm. When distraction occurs, gently guide their attention back to their breathing. This awareness calms the mind and activates the body's natural relaxation response to any stressors the young people have experienced.

- **Body Scan:** Ask participants to move their attention slowly from head to toe while talking them through the process in a relaxed and calm tone, noticing areas of tension and releasing them with each exhale. This encourages self-awareness of physical sensations they are experiencing and helps release stored tension from the body.
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Guide young people to gently tense and then relax different muscle groups; for example, clenching fists and then letting them go. This contrast teaches recognition of physical stress and the experience of letting go.
- **Sensory Mindfulness:** Encourage noticing small details in the environment, sounds, light, or colours, without judging or labelling them. Remind participants that mindfulness is about noticing what *is*, not changing it.
- **Visualisation:** Lead a short, guided description (there are various scripts available, find one that best suits your group), such as imagining a calm, safe place. Visualisation helps the mind and body settle and can be particularly useful before stressful events such as presentations or exams. For somebody suffering an anxiety response, this technique may help with visualising a space they wish to return to.
- **Mindful Movement:** Slow, repetitive movements such as stretching, balanced postures, or gentle walking help integrate mindfulness through motion. Movement can benefit young people who struggle with stillness due to anxiety or restlessness.

³³ Harvard Health Publishing. (2021). *Relaxation Techniques: Breath Control Helps Quell Errant Stress Response*.

³⁴ Kuyken, W., et al. (2021). Mindfulness for adolescents: A meta analysis of school based trials. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 37, 1–7.

³⁵ Zenner, C., Herrnleben Kurz, S., & Walach, H. (2014). Mindfulness based interventions in schools: A systematic review and meta analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5(603).

Practice Considerations for Youth Workers when using Mindfulness and Relaxation Exercises

- Start with short, accessible exercises and build up duration gradually, even beginning with 30 seconds of mindful breathing can be effective.
- Use plain, non-clinical language and emphasise that mindfulness is a way of *noticing* what is going on for the young people, not “emptying their mind.”
- Provide choices: some young people may prefer visualisation or movement over silent sitting.
- Hold a nonjudgmental space which allows fidgeting, restlessness, or laughter; it is important not to take these as failures but instead see them as part of the overall process.
- Model your own participation; seeing a calm adult practising mindfulness may increase the young people’s acceptance and engagement.
- Use mindfulness as a transition tool between lively and reflective activities, or before debriefing challenging topics either on a one to one or group basis.

4.5 Creative and Physical Outlets for Young People Experiencing Anxiety

Creative and physical outlets allow young people to express and manage anxiety through action and expression rather than simply words alone. These activities help discharge physical tension, increase helpful endorphins, and support emotional regulation. For many young people, creativity and movement provide a means of self-expression, and can help to increase self-confidence, and social connection with those around them.^{36 37}

Artistic and physical activities can shift focus away from anxious thoughts and instead enabling the young person to focus attention on the body and their senses. This provides opportunities for the young people to make sense of their own situation, leading empowerment, and self-soothing.

Research consistently shows that young people engaging with creative arts and physical activity show significant reductions in anxiety and depressive symptoms, helps create and strengthen social bonds, and promote a sense of accomplishment.^{38 39}

Creative Outlets for Expression for Young People

- **Art and Visual Expression:** Provide open access to creative materials such as paper, paints, clay, or collage materials, and let young people experiment without pressure or expectation. Focus on the creative process rather than the final piece itself, playing with colour, texture, or shape can help young people to release tension and express emotions in a relaxed way. It may be useful to use prompts like “show what worry feels like” or “create a place that feels safe and calm” to spark reflection and discussion.²⁴
- **Creative Writing and Journaling:** Writing can help young people make sense of their thoughts and emotions. Encourage them to write freely, using short reflections, letters, lyrics, or poems. Prompts may again be useful for the young people to get started; “*something that was on my mind today...*” or “*if my anxiety had a voice, it would say...*” Emphasise that there’s no right or wrong way to write about their own experience, it is a personal thing. It’s about expressing, not editing.⁴⁰
- **Music and Sound:** Music can be a great outlet for emotion and energy, whether that is listening to music or

³⁶ Hennigan, K. M., Rutter, M., & Kinsella, E. A. (2020). Creative Engagement and Mental Health in Adolescents: Integrating Artistic and Movement Practices. *Youth Studies Review*, 5(1), 45–58.

³⁷ Hartig, T., Mitchell, R., de Vries, S., & Frumkin, H. (2014). Nature and Health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 35, 207–228

³⁸ Stuckey, H. L., & Noble, J. (2010). The Connection Between Art, Healing and Public Health: A Review of Current Literature. *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(2), 254–263.

³⁹ Lubans, D. R., et al. (2016). Physical Activity for Cognitive and Mental Health in Youth: A Systematic Review. *Preventive Medicine*, 92, 139–149.

⁴⁰ <https://www.walkinmyshoes.ie/library/blogs-and-articles/2022/july/benefits-of-journaling#:~:text=It%20makes%20us%20more%20self,or%20any%20other%20art%20medium>

generating their own music by learning to play an instrument or learn how to use music development programmes. Encourage young people to create playlists that match different moods, explore drumming or rhythm games, or simply listen and talk about how certain songs change their feelings. Sound and rhythm can be grounding and help young people tune into how they're feeling at a given moment.⁴¹

- **Drama and RolePlay:** Using drama or movement can help young people explore experiences of anxiety in a supportive and light-hearted way. Activities such as improvisation, storytelling, or roleplay encourage young people to consider other perspectives and to develop their confidence while allowing feelings to be expressed indirectly through characters or scenarios.⁴²
- **Craft and Mindful Making:** Arts and crafts, such as knitting, collage making, beading, or jewellery making can help promote calm and focus for the young people. Repetitive creative activities can be soothing and promote a sense of achievement, especially for young people who find verbal expression difficult. It can also give space for quiet chats between youth workers and the young people while hands are busy, this may lead them to open up more because the focus is not on what they are saying.⁴³

Physical Outlets for Managing Anxiety

Movement supports self-regulation and improves mood. Physical activity doesn't need to be intense, in fact for young people that are not used to physical activity it is advisable to start slowly and build up. Even gentle movement can help young people manage anxious energy and reconnect with the present moment.^{44 45}

- **Everyday Movement:** This doesn't have to be complicated for the young people, simple movement such as walking, dancing, stretching, or kicking a ball will have mental health benefits. Everyday activities can release excess energy and help clear the mind.
- **Active Games and Sport:** Incorporate accessible games, group activities, or recreational sport that emphasise fun, inclusion, and teamwork rather than competition. Physical connection and laughter help lower anxiety and strengthen social confidence. Encouraging young people to engage in team sports will increase their socialisation opportunities and increase their chances of making meaningful connections.
- **Outdoor Time:** Nature-based activities such as going on walks, gardening, or outdoor group activities (e.g., scavenger hunts, hiking and water sports) can help young people feel grounded and refreshed. Being outside encourages relaxation, a chance to refresh, and connection with others.

⁴¹ <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/blogs/the-magic-of-music-on-childrens-emotional-wellbeing#:~:text=Whether%20it%20is%20strumming%20some,not%20have%20been%20aware%20of.>

⁴² <https://blog.trinitycollege.co.uk/drama-and-wellbeing#:~:text=Self%2Dexpression%20%E2%80%93%20allows%20young%20people,foster%20skills%20in%20problem%20solving.>

⁴³ <https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/stories/4-reasons-craft-good-your-mental-health#:~:text=Research%20published%20by%20University%20College,prescribing%20activities%20may%20give%20benefits.>

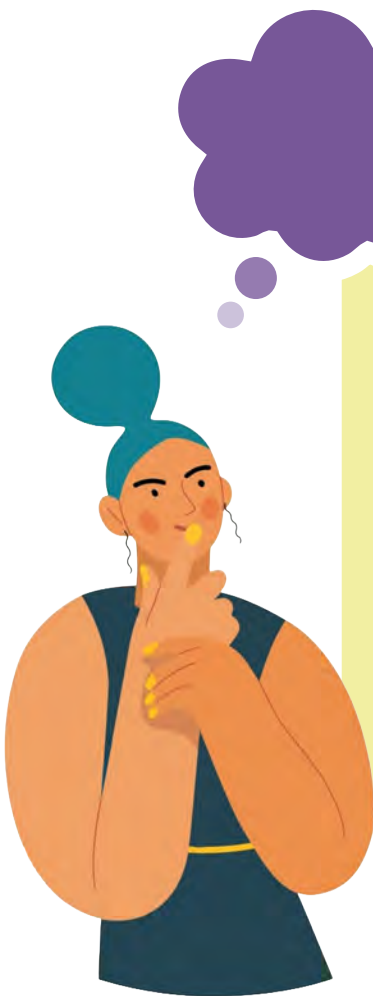
⁴⁴ <https://www2.hse.ie/mental-health/self-help/activities/physical-activity/#:~:text=improve%20your%20mood,and%20reduce%20feelings%20of%20depression.>

⁴⁵ <https://www.dcu.ie/snpch/news/2021/jun/how-physical-activity-teens-leads-better-mental-health#:~:text=Physical%20activity%20guidelines%20were%20mainly,6th%20Year%20were%20sufficiently%20active.>

Key Points in relation to Creativity, Physical Activity and Young People

- Offer choice, some will connect better with movement, others through creativity. It is important that the young person tries a range of activities so that they can figure out what they like and what works for them, that will look different for everyone.
- Emphasise participation, enjoyment, and self-care rather than performance or output, young people are unlikely to excel at all of these activities from the beginning, it takes practice, so it is important they do not see this as failure.
- Create emotionally safe spaces; creative or physical activities can sometimes cause deeper feelings to surface, be prepared to help the young person to process these.
- Model participation and normalise using movement or creativity to manage stress.
- Integrate these methods throughout programmes rather than limiting them to “wellbeing sessions.”

4.6 Worker Reflection/Activity



Self-reflection

Take a few minutes to think about which of the approaches in this section, emotional literacy, grounding, problem-solving, mindfulness, or creative and physical activities – you use most in your work.

Which feel natural to you, and which could you grow more comfortable with?

How does your own regulation and mindset shape the environment you create for young people?

(Tip: Choose one simple action to try this week that supports emotional balance in your work – e.g., beginning a session with a short grounding pause or using emotional check ins more intentionally.)

SECTION 5

Referral and Collaboration



SECTION 5

Referral and Collaboration

As established in previous sections, youth workers often play an important role in noticing when a young person may be struggling with anxiety or other emotional challenges. While youth work provides valuable informal support, there may be times when a young person requires additional or more specialised help. Recognising when to seek additional support and understanding how to navigate referral pathways is an important part of responsible youth work practice.

This section outlines how youth workers can identify situations where referral may be appropriate, how to approach these conversations with young people and their families, and how to maintain appropriate confidentiality and documentation throughout the process. It also highlights the importance of ongoing collaboration with other services so that young people experience consistent and supportive care.

Making a referral does not mean that the youth worker steps away from the young person's life. Instead, it forms part of a collaborative approach in which the youth worker continues to offer encouragement, connection, and stability while additional supports are accessed.

5.1 Recognising When to Refer to Specialist Help

Youth workers are not expected to act as mental health professionals, but they are often well placed to notice changes in a young person's behaviour, mood, or wellbeing. Young people may feel

comfortable sharing concerns in youth work settings because of the trusting and informal relationships that develop over time.

In many cases, anxiety can be supported through youth work activities, emotional support, and the coping strategies outlined in earlier sections of this resource. However, there may be situations where additional or specialist help is required.

Signs that a referral may be appropriate can include:

- Anxiety that significantly interferes with daily activities such as school attendance, social engagement, or sleep.
- Persistent or worsening distress over a prolonged period of time.
- Panic attacks or intense physical symptoms linked to anxiety.
- Expressions of hopelessness or significant emotional distress.
- A young person disclosing experiences that suggest they may require professional support.

Youth workers should also consider referral when they feel that the level of support needed goes beyond the scope of their role or when they are unsure how best to support the young person. Seeking guidance from supervisors or managers is an important step in these situations.

Recognising when to refer is not a sign of failure. Instead, it reflects good practice and a commitment to ensuring that young people receive the most appropriate support available.

5.2 Referral Pathways

Understanding local referral pathways helps youth workers feel more confident when supporting young people who may require additional help. While pathways can vary between communities, youth workers should be familiar with the key services and supports available in their local area.

In Ireland, young people and families may access additional support through a range of community and primary care services. Youth organisations often maintain informal or formal connections with these services to help guide young people towards appropriate supports.

Relevant supports may include:

- General practitioners (GPs), who can assess mental health concerns and provide referrals to appropriate health services.
- School guidance counsellors or student support teams, who may already be supporting the young person within the education system.
- Community and family support services, which can provide practical and emotional support for young people and their families.
- Youth mental health and wellbeing organisations.
- Family support services provided through organisations such as Tusla – Child and Family Agency.

When making a referral, it is important that youth workers follow their organisation's internal procedures and seek guidance from a supervisor or manager where appropriate. In most cases, referrals are made collaboratively with the young person and, where appropriate, their parent or guardian.

Providing clear information about available supports can help reduce anxiety and make it easier for young people and families to take the next step.

5.3 How to Have Difficult Conversations with Young People and Parents

Discussing the need for additional support can sometimes feel challenging. Young people may worry about being judged or misunderstood, while parents or guardians may feel anxious, defensive, or uncertain about what the conversation means.

Approaching these conversations with empathy, openness, and clarity can help reduce anxiety and build trust.

When speaking with a young person:

- Begin by acknowledging their experiences and validating their feelings.
- Explain that seeking additional support can be a positive step towards feeling better.
- Emphasise that they will continue to be supported within the youth service.
- Invite their thoughts and questions about the referral process.

When speaking with parents or guardians:

- Approach the conversation in a supportive and non-judgmental way.
- Focus on the wellbeing of the young person rather than presenting the situation as a problem.
- Share observations rather than assumptions (for example, "We've noticed that they seem quite worried lately").
- Provide clear information about available supports and how they might help.

It is also helpful to remember that families may have different levels of understanding about mental health. Taking time to listen and answer questions can help build confidence and encourage families to engage with the recommended supports.

5.4 Maintaining Confidentiality and Documentation

Confidentiality is a core principle of youth work and plays a key role in building trust between young people and youth workers. Young people are more likely to speak openly when they feel confident that their information will be treated respectfully and responsibly.

At the same time, youth workers must balance confidentiality with safeguarding responsibilities and organisational procedures. It is important that young people understand the limits of confidentiality, particularly when there may be concerns about their safety or the safety of others.

Good practice includes:

- Explaining confidentiality and its limits clearly to young people at the beginning of the relationship or programme.
- Sharing information only with appropriate staff members or services when necessary.
- Following organisational safeguarding and reporting procedures.
- Keeping accurate and secure records of relevant concerns, conversations, and referrals.

Documentation should focus on factual observations and actions taken, rather than personal opinions or assumptions. Clear records help ensure continuity of support and protect both the young person and the youth worker.

5.5 Follow-Up and Continuing Support

Referring a young person to additional support does not end the role of the youth worker. In many cases, the youth worker continues to be an important and consistent source of encouragement, stability, and connection for the young person.

Young people may feel nervous about engaging with new services or unsure about what to expect. Maintaining supportive contact within the youth work setting can help reduce this anxiety and reassure them that they are not facing challenges alone.

Follow-up support may include:

- Checking in with the young person about how they are feeling.
- Encouraging continued participation in youth activities and programmes.
- Reinforcing coping strategies and emotional regulation skills.
- Supporting the young person in maintaining positive relationships and routines.

Where appropriate and with consent, youth workers may also communicate with other services involved to help maintain a coordinated approach to supporting the young person.

5.6 Worker Reflection / Activity

Navigating referral processes can sometimes feel uncertain or emotionally challenging. Reflective practice helps youth workers build confidence, recognise learning opportunities, and ensure that they are responding appropriately to the needs of young people.



Reflection

Reflective questions for youth workers:

1. How comfortable do I feel recognising when a young person may need additional support?
2. What services exist in my local area that I could refer a young person to?
3. How confident do I feel discussing mental health concerns with parents or guardians?
4. What supports are available within my organisation if I am unsure how to respond to a situation?

Activity

Suggested staff activity:

As a team, create a local support map of services available to young people in your community. This could include schools, youth services, family supports, and wellbeing organisations.

Discuss questions such as:

1. Which services are most commonly used by young people in our area?
2. How easy is it for young people to access these supports?
3. Are there gaps in the support network that young people experience?

This activity helps youth workers build awareness of local resources while strengthening collaboration between organisations that support young people's wellbeing.



SECTION 6

Whole Organisation Approaches to Supporting Young People with Anxiety



SECTION 6

Whole Organisation Approaches to Supporting Young People with Anxiety

While all individual youth workers play a vital role in supporting young people experiencing anxiety, sustainable and meaningful support also depends on the wider organisational environment. Youth services that embed mental health awareness into their culture, policies, partnerships, and learning practices are better equipped to respond to the needs of young people in a safe, consistent, and effective way.

The aim of this section is to outline how youth services can strengthen their capacity to support young people experiencing anxiety through organisational leadership, clear procedures, ongoing staff development, and collaboration with relevant services. When mental health support is embedded at an organisational level, it provides confidence to every worker in their roles, young people experience greater consistency of approach, and services are better able to respond appropriately to complex situations.

Developing a coordinated organisational approach also helps ensure that youth workers are not carrying responsibility for young people's wellbeing in isolation. Instead, support for young people becomes a shared responsibility across the organisation and its wider network of partners. This also incorporates supporting the mental health and well-being of staff and volunteers.

The information in this section has been collated from the National Youth Health [Programmes Promoting Health in the Youth Sector](#).

6.1 Developing a Mental Health-Aware Culture

Creating a mental health-aware culture within a youth organisation means that emotional wellbeing is recognised as an integral part of youth work practice rather than an additional or separate concern. In such environments, conversations about mental health are normalised, staff feel supported in discussing difficult issues, and young people know that their feelings will be taken seriously.

A supportive organisational culture encourages openness, empathy, and psychological safety for both staff and young people. This does not mean that youth workers are expected to act as mental health professionals. Instead, it ensures that they feel confident in recognising signs of anxiety, responding with care and understanding, and knowing when and how to seek additional support.

Management play an important role in shaping this culture by modelling positive attitudes towards mental health, encouraging reflective practice, and promoting

wellbeing across the organisation.⁴⁶ When organisations prioritise staff wellbeing alongside the wellbeing of young people, workers are better equipped to provide compassionate and effective support.

Ways organisations can promote a mental health-aware culture include:

- Encouraging open conversations about mental health during team meetings and supervision.
- Integrating wellbeing themes into youth programmes and activities.
- Promoting language that is supportive, non-judgmental, and stigma-free.
- Providing spaces where young people feel safe discussing emotions and concerns.
- Recognising the emotional demands placed on youth workers and supporting staff wellbeing.

Over time, a strong organisational culture around mental health helps reduce stigma and creates an environment where young people feel more comfortable seeking help⁴⁷.

6.2 Policies and Procedures Around Mental Health Support

Clear policies and procedures provide youth workers with guidance and reassurance when responding to situations where a young person may be experiencing anxiety or other mental health challenges. Without clear structures, workers may feel uncertain about their responsibilities or concerned about responding incorrectly.

Organisational policies should outline how youth workers can respond appropriately while remaining within their professional boundaries. They should also clarify how concerns are documented, when safeguarding procedures apply, and how referrals to external services can be made.

Policies do not need to be overly complex, but they should be clear, accessible, and regularly reviewed. It is important that all staff and volunteers understand the

procedures and feel confident implementing them in practice.

Key elements often included in youth organisation mental health procedures include:

- Guidance on responding to mental health concerns: outlining supportive listening approaches and appropriate boundaries.
- Referral pathways: identifying when and how young people may be supported through external services such as school supports or specialist mental health services.
- Confidentiality and safeguarding guidelines: clarifying when information may need to be shared to protect a young person's safety.
- Record keeping: ensuring that concerns and supports provided are documented appropriately and securely.
- Crisis response procedures: outlining steps to take if a young person is in immediate distress or at risk.

When workers are familiar with these procedures, they can respond more confidently and consistently, ensuring that young people receive appropriate support while protecting both the worker and the organisation.

6.3 Training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Supporting young people experiencing anxiety requires knowledge, confidence, and ongoing learning. Training and DPD helps youth workers to build the skills necessary to recognise signs of anxiety, respond in a supportive way, and understand the limits of their role. It also provides the opportunity to network with other youth workers supporting young people with anxiety and the chance to learn from their experience and approaches.

Youth workers may encounter a wide range of emotional experiences in their work, from mild anxiety related to school stress to more complex mental health challenges.

⁴⁶ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-at-work>

⁴⁷ <https://thetrainingeffect.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/a-whole-organisation-approach-to-young-peoples-mental-health.pdf>

CPD helps workers remain informed about current best practice, emerging research, and appropriate referral supports.

Training can cover areas such as:

- Understanding anxiety and common mental health challenges among young people.
- Trauma-informed and youth-centred approaches.
- Communication and active listening skills.
- Recognising when additional support or referral may be needed.
- Self-care and professional boundaries.

In addition to formal training, learning can also occur through reflective supervision, peer discussion, and sharing experiences within staff teams. When organisations prioritise learning and development, they are better equipped to support young people while also maintaining their own wellbeing.

6.4 Partnerships with Schools and Community Services

Youth services rarely work in isolation when supporting young people experiencing anxiety. Collaboration with appropriate partners helps ensure that young people receive coordinated and appropriate support. Building strong relationships across services can make it easier for young people to access help when they need it and ensures that youth workers are not trying to respond to complex situations alone.

Partnerships allow youth workers to better understand the wider context of a young person's life and connect them with supports that may already be working with the young person or their family. This collaborative approach reflects the wider youth work ethos, which recognises the importance of community-based supports and interagency cooperation in promoting young people's wellbeing.

Working collaboratively can also reduce duplication of services and help ensure that young people experience a consistent network of care across different environments such as school, youth services, and community programmes.

Partnerships may include:

- **Schools and guidance counsellors**, who may already be supporting the young person with educational or emotional challenges. Regular communication between youth services and schools can help identify emerging needs and support early intervention.
- **Family support and community services**, including organisations working with young people and families who may be experiencing additional challenges. Collaboration with these services can provide practical supports for young people outside of youth work settings.
- **Youth and wellbeing organisations**, including services that focus on youth mental health promotion, mentoring programmes, or peer support initiatives. These partnerships can expand opportunities for young people to build resilience and access supportive networks.
- **Primary care supports**, including general practitioners or community wellbeing services that young people or their families may access when additional support is required.

Youth services often work alongside agencies such as Tusla, family support services and local community organisations that promote young people's wellbeing. Maintaining positive relationships with these services can strengthen referral pathways and make it easier to guide young people toward appropriate supports when necessary.

Partnerships do not always need to be formal. Sometimes they develop through regular communication, local youth networks, or joint initiatives between organisations. What is most important is that youth workers know who the relevant local supports are and feel confident reaching out when a young person may benefit from additional help.

For young people, these partnerships help create a more connected support network. When services work together, it becomes less likely that young people will fall through gaps between systems and more likely that they will receive the support they need at the right time.

6.5 Measuring Impact and Gathering Feedback from Young People

Youth services benefit from regularly reflecting on how effectively their programmes support young people's mental wellbeing. Gathering feedback and evaluating impact helps ensure that services remain relevant, responsive, and meaningful for the young people who participate in them.

Evaluation does not need to be overly technical or burdensome. Often, simple and consistent feedback methods can provide valuable insights into young people's experiences and needs.

Examples of feedback and evaluation approaches include:

- Short wellbeing check-ins before and after programmes.
- Anonymous feedback forms or suggestion boxes.
- Group reflection discussions with participants.
- Youth advisory groups that help shape programme development.

- Staff reflection sessions to review learning and practice.

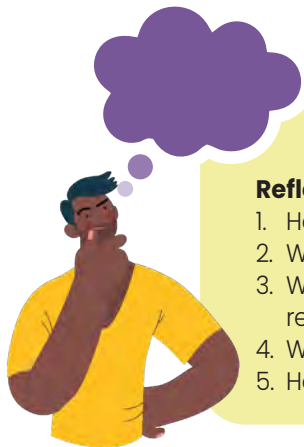
Listening to young people's perspectives is particularly important. Their experiences can highlight what approaches feel helpful, what activities support their wellbeing, and where improvements might be made.

Evaluation also helps organisations demonstrate the value of youth work in supporting mental health, which can strengthen advocacy, funding opportunities, and partnerships with other services.

6.6 Worker Reflection / Activity

Supporting young people experiencing anxiety can be both rewarding and emotionally demanding. Reflective practice helps youth workers remain aware of their own responses, recognise the impact of their work, and continue developing their skills.

Reflection can take place individually, during supervision, or within team discussions. It encourages workers to think about what approaches are effective, where challenges arise, and how they can continue to grow in their practice.



Reflection

Reflective questions for those supporting young people with anxiety:

1. How confident do I feel supporting young people who experience anxiety?
2. What strategies from this resource feel most realistic to incorporate into my work?
3. When have I seen anxiety affect a young person in a youth work setting, and how did I respond?
4. What supports are available within my organisation when I need guidance or advice?
5. How do I look after my own emotional wellbeing when working with challenging situations?

Activity

Activity for staff teams:

In small groups, discuss the question: "What does a mentally healthy youth organisation look like?"

Invite participants to identify practical actions that could strengthen mental health awareness within their service, such as improving referral information, introducing wellbeing check-ins during programmes, or creating spaces for staff reflection.

This activity can help teams move from individual awareness to collective action, ensuring that supporting young people's mental wellbeing becomes an ongoing shared commitment across the organisation.

SECTION 7

Case studies about anxiety



SECTION 7

Case studies about anxiety

These case studies are designed to help you (and your team) to explore how anxiety can appear in everyday youth work settings and to practice applying the ideas, approaches, and insights discussed throughout the previous sections of this resource. Each story reflects situations that are common in the lives of young people in Ireland today, drawing on themes such as social pressures, school stress, panic, and the impact of social media.

These examples are not intended for the purpose of diagnosing or labelling young people. Instead, they offer a space for reflection and an opportunity to think about how anxiety can influence young people's behaviour, how they might experience these challenges internally, and how you can respond in ways that are supportive and empowering for the young person.

By working through the accompanying processing questions, you (and your team) can apply the information from the resource to real-life scenarios, thus building your confidence and skills in supporting young people who may be struggling with anxiety.

7.1 Case Study 1: Social anxiety in a youth club setting

Aoife, aged 15, presents as a quiet young person, recently she joined a youth group in her local youth service. Although she enjoys the creative activities, she rarely speaks during group discussions and often positions herself along the edges of the

room, so she won't draw attention. When invited to join in games or group warm-ups, she becomes visibly uncomfortable and sometimes blushes or looks down at the floor.

On a few evenings she has left early without saying goodbye, later telling a youth worker that she "felt stupid" when everyone was looking at her. Since moving to a new school where she knows only a handful of classmates, she has struggled to find her footing socially.

A past incident where she mispronounced a word in class and was teased still lingers in her mind. Aoife often worries that others are judging her or waiting for her to make a mistake, and this fear colours her experience of the youth space. Despite this, she keeps coming back because she does enjoy certain activities and wants to fit in, though the internal pressure often feels overwhelming.

7.2 Case Study 2: Panic attacks during group activities

Liam, aged 16, has always enjoyed the more physical and energetic activities that are organised through his youth group, i.e. football sessions, table tennis, and team games. Recently, however, he experienced a sudden panic attack during an energetic team building exercise. He became dizzy, felt his chest tighten, and struggled to catch his breath.

Although the episode passed, he was shaken by how out of control he felt. Two weeks later, it happened again during another group activity. Since then, Liam has started avoiding the sessions he once loved. He sits near doors so he can leave quickly and often wants to know the plan for the evening in detail before he decides whether to take part or not. He explains that he is terrified that the sensations will return and worries others in the youth group will notice him panicking.

At school he is under significant pressure as exams approach, leading to some tension at home with his parents wanting him to do well, all of this has left him feeling on edge. The youth service, usually a place of comfort, has become somewhere he approaches with caution, uncertain of when his anxiety might flare up again.

7.3 Case Study 3: School stress and perfectionism

Ella, 17 years of age, is preparing for her Leaving Cert. She attends the youth service's homework support group, but the sessions often leave her more distressed than relaxed. When she feels her work is not up to her own high standards, she becomes upset and sometimes rips up her notes to start again. She regularly stays late, convinced she has not achieved enough.

Ella reports constant tension headaches and difficulty sleeping, and she admits she rarely switches off from thinking about school. Her family places a strong emphasis on academic success, and while she wants to make them proud, she fears

disappointing them. She compares herself to other high-achieving students and feels she must always excel.

Any uncertainty, any imperfection, feels like failure. Outside of schoolwork, she has little time for herself, and her identity is tied closely to her grades. Although she values the support from youth workers, she struggles to accept reassurance and tends to push herself harder instead.

7.4 Case Study 4: Anxiety and social media use

Dara is fourteen and spends a significant portion of his day on social media. He checks his posts constantly, hoping for likes and comments, and becomes upset when engagement is slow. In the youth café, he appears tired and distracted, often glancing at his phone or worrying about missing out on group chat conversations.

A previous incident of mild cyberbullying has left him sensitive to online interactions, and he now feels pressure to maintain a certain image. He compares his appearance and lifestyle to influencers and older teens, often feeling like he is not able to match up to everyone else.

His sleep has become disrupted from late-night scrolling, and he occasionally avoids in-person activities because he feels he won't be liked as much in real life as he is online. Although he enjoys aspects of the youth space, his anxiety about what is happening on his phone often pulls him away from the present moment.

7.5 Worker Reflection/Activity



Reflection/Activity

In relation to all four case studies, consider the questions below. This can be completed as an individual reflection or used as a team to develop a consistent approach to how your organisation supports young people with anxiety'

1. What signs of anxiety are visible in this young person's behaviour, and what might be going on for them beneath the surface?
2. How might the youth worker's approach influence the young person's sense of safety and trust within the youth work space?
3. What environmental or relational factors in the young person's life may be contributing to their anxiety?
4. How could a youth worker respond in a way that is supportive, non-judgemental, and empowering?
5. What boundaries, accommodations, or small adjustments could be made in the youth work space to reduce pressure and promote participation?
6. At what point might it be appropriate for the youth worker to encourage further support, and how could this be done sensitively and collaboratively?

SECTION 8

Resources and Support Organisations



8

SECTION 8

Resources and Support Organisations

This section will highlight the supports for young people, their parents and those working to support them around anxiety and their overall all mental well-being.

8.1 National Youth Health Programme Resources/Training

8.1.1 Youth Mental Health Signposting Tool

The youth mental health signposting tool aims to provide young people, parents, caregivers, and those working with young people, with reliable up-to-date information on where to access supports and services at both a local and national level for a variety of mental health issues.

To use it, simply select the issue affecting your mental health, or the mental health of the young person you are supporting, and the area in which you live. If your organisation is not in the signposting tool and you would wish to be included, please fill in the information form at the bottom of the web page.

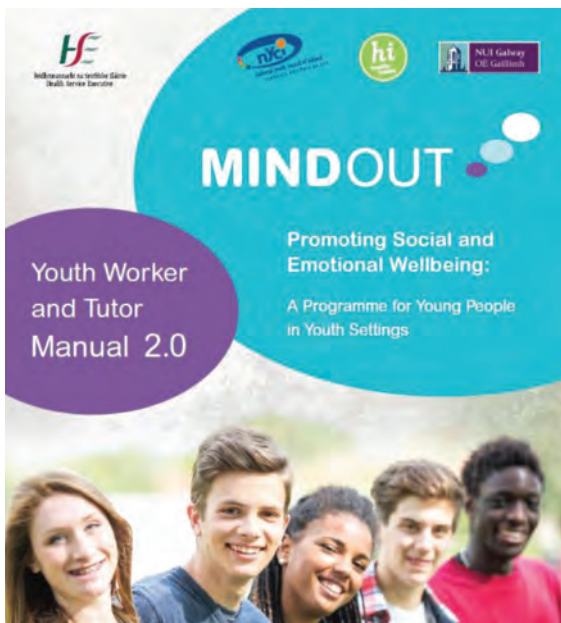
To access the tool visit:
<https://www.youth.ie/programmes/youth-health/youth-mental-health-signposting-tool/>

Youth Mental Health
Signposting Tool



8.1.2 MindOut: Promoting Social and Emotional Wellbeing: A Programme for Young People in Youth Work Settings

This 2-day interactive training is based on the evidence-based MindOut resource developed in 2004 and recently revised by the University of Galway and the HSE Health and Wellbeing Division with support from NYCI. The resource was developed to support the social, emotional and mental well-being of young people.



Social and emotional well-being has been shown to contribute to young people's academic outcomes, their social development, their capacity to contribute to the community, and their ability to secure employment in adulthood. Social and emotional wellbeing is a protective factor against a range of health problems. There is an extensive amount of international evidence demonstrating that social and emotional wellbeing programmes can produce long-term benefits to the health and wellbeing of young people and provide the skills base for the prevention of a wider range of problem behaviours such as substance misuse, emotional distress, disruptive behaviour and risky health and sexual behaviours.

The programme focuses on the development of 5 core competencies for social and emotional learning: self-

awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management and responsible decision-making. All participants will receive a copy of the MindOut 2.0 resource pack.

To book your spot on the next MindOut training visit the training and events page on youth.ie

8.1.3 MindOut 2.0 and Mental Health in Ireland E-Learning

The MindOut 2.0 and Mental Health in Ireland E-Learning is an interactive 2-hour session designed to up skill youth workers, volunteers and other professionals on mental health promotion and how to support young people's social, emotional and mental well-being. It is designed as an accompaniment to the more extensive 2-day training already outlined.

To complete the e-learning visit: <https://learning.youth.ie/courses/mind-out-2-0-and-youth-mental-health-in-ireland/>



8.1.4 Youth Mental Health First Aid



The Youth Mental Health First Aid course from Mental Health First Aid Ireland is designed for adults who live with, work with or support young people aged between 12 and 18 and is delivered by the National Youth Health Programme.

This course teaches participants how to assist a young person who may be experiencing a mental health problem or mental health crisis until appropriate professional help is received or the crisis resolves, using a practical, evidence-based action plan. This evidence-based training programme is particularly suited to parents/guardians, school staff, sports coaches, community group leaders, youth workers, etc.

Youth Mental Health First Aid Mental health topics covered include:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Eating Disorders
- Psychosis
- Substance Use Problems

International studies have shown that Mental Health First Aid training is associated with improved knowledge of mental health problems, their treatments and appropriate first aid strategies. YMHA training is also associated with a reduction in stigmatising attitudes, an increase in helping actions as well as confidence in providing first aid to individuals with mental health problems.

Course delivery includes using case studies, training videos, group activities and discussion throughout to enhance your learning. All course participants will receive a certificate of completion and a Youth Mental Health First Aid manual.

Note: This course is not a therapy/support group and is not suitable for anyone under the age of 18 to attend.

If you are interested in hosting this training for your organisation or have any further questions, contact Kevin in NYHP @ KevinOD@nyci.ie

8.1.5 Wellbeing Hub

If you are a youth worker or work with young people, our wellbeing hub has been developed with your needs in mind.

We've developed evidence based, tailored supports for those who work with young people and now we've brought these together for you to access in one place, as and when you need them. To access all of the resources free of charge, visit: <https://www.youth.ie/programmes/youth-health/your-wellbeing-hub/>



8.1.6 Stay Safe Online: Empowering Young Minds Against Cyberbullying

This resource was developed by the National Youth Health Programme in response to conversations with youth workers across the island of Ireland in relation to cyberbullying and the impact it is having on the young people they work with. It is designed to empower youth workers, parents, guardians, and caregivers with the knowledge to support our young people. By building their confidence and capacity to report, block, and overcome cyberbullying, we can help them reclaim the digital world as a place of connection, not harm. Access

the resource at: <https://www.youth.ie/documents/stay-safe-online-empowering-young-minds-against-cyberbullying/>



8.1.7 Promoting Health in the Youth Sector

This manual aims to introduce those working with young people, in the youth sector, to good practice in health promotion.

The manual is designed to be used by:

- Anyone working with young people in the youth sector with an understanding and appreciation of youth health
- Participants on the Specialist Certificate in Youth Health Promotion
- Organisations undertaking the Health Quality Mark
- Those undertaking specific National Youth Health Programme training

- Those engaged in youth health-related programme delivery
- Those engaged in youth health-related policy development

To access a copy of the manual visit: <https://www.youth.ie/documents/promoting-health-in-the-youth-sector/>



8.2 National Support Agencies/ Websites and Helplines

1. HSE

Provides information on mental health services and resources for children and young people through its website and helplines

Free phone **1800 111 888** or visit: <https://www2.hse.ie/mental-health/services-support/supports-services/>

2. Jigsaw

The national centre for youth mental health. It offers online support and services for young people aged 12–25, with a support line available at **1800 544 729** for young people and their parents. <https://jigsaw.ie/>

3. Text About It: 50808

Text About It' by SpunOut is a free, anonymous, 24/7 messaging service providing everything from a calming chat to immediate support for mental health and wellbeing. For support text **Hello** to **50808**

4. Childline (ISPCC)

Offers a 24-hour listening service for young people up to 18 years of age. Young people can call for free at **1800 66 66 66**, text **50101** or use the live chat at <https://www.childline.ie/>

5. Teenline

A 24 hour, confidential and non-judgemental listening service for young people up to the age of 18. To avail of the service call **1800 833 634**

6. SpunOut

Ireland's youth information website, providing information and resources on

APPENDICES



APPENDIX 1

Feelings Check-In Exercise

Feelings Check-in: Begin one-to-one meetings or group sessions with light but consistent emotional check-ins. Options include: “What colour represents how you feel today?” or “If your mood were weather, what would it be?” Over time, these small but consistent rituals and habits help to build emotional awareness and vocabulary.

Below is an extensive selection of questions that are grouped together under different themes/topics

1. Colours

- What colour matches your mood right now?
- Is it a bright colour, dark colour, or mixed?
- Has your colour changed since this morning?
- What colour was your week overall?
- What colour would help you feel calmer?



2. Weather

- If your mood were weather, what would it be?
- Is your weather changing or staying the same?
- Is there a storm, light rain, clouds, or sunshine?
- What kind of weather do you hope for later today?
- What helps when your weather feels stormy?



3. Energy Levels

- Are you feeling low energy, medium, or high energy?
- Are you more tired in your body or your mind?
- What number from 1–10 is your energy today?
- What would help move your energy up one point?



4. Emotion Naming

- What is one word for how you feel today?
- Can you name a second feeling underneath the first?
- Is your feeling more in your body or your thoughts?
- Is your feeling comfortable, uncomfortable, or mixed?
- Is this a new feeling or one you've had before?



5. Body Check-In

- Where do you feel today's emotions in your body?
- Is your body feeling tense, relaxed, or somewhere between?
- Are your shoulders, jaw, or hands tight?
- What does your breathing feel like right now?
- If your body could talk, what would it say?



6. Daily Load

- Is today feeling light, medium, or heavy?
- What are you carrying that feels heavy?
- Is there anything you can put down for now?
- What would make the load lighter?



7. Thoughts Check-In

- Are your thoughts busy, calm, or somewhere in between?
- Is your mind racing or slow today?
- Are your thoughts helpful or unhelpful right now?
- Is there one thought you keep coming back to?



8. Needs and Support

- What do you need most today: rest, space, help, or connection?
- Do you feel like talking or just being present?
- Would you like encouragement, advice, or just listening?
- What would help you feel safer or more comfortable?



9. Scale Question (Low-Pressure)

- On a scale of 1–5, how are you feeling today?
- What would move you up half a point?
- What helped you get to that number?



10. Growth and Reflection

- What is one small win from today or this week?
- What are you proud of, even if it's small?
- What helped you cope recently?
- What did you learn about yourself this week?



11. Creative/Metaphor Options

- If your mood were a song, what kind would it be?
- If your feeling were an animal, what would it be?
- If your day were a movie genre, what would it be?
- If your mood had a texture (smooth, rough, heavy), what would it be?



12. Time Based Options

- How were you feeling when you woke up?
- How are you feeling compared to yesterday?
- When during the day do you feel best?
- When do you find things most difficult?



13. Group Friendly Options

- One word for today
- Thumbs up / sideways / down
- Emoji that matches your mood
- Stand on a line from "low energy" to "high energy"
- Choose a card that represents how you feel

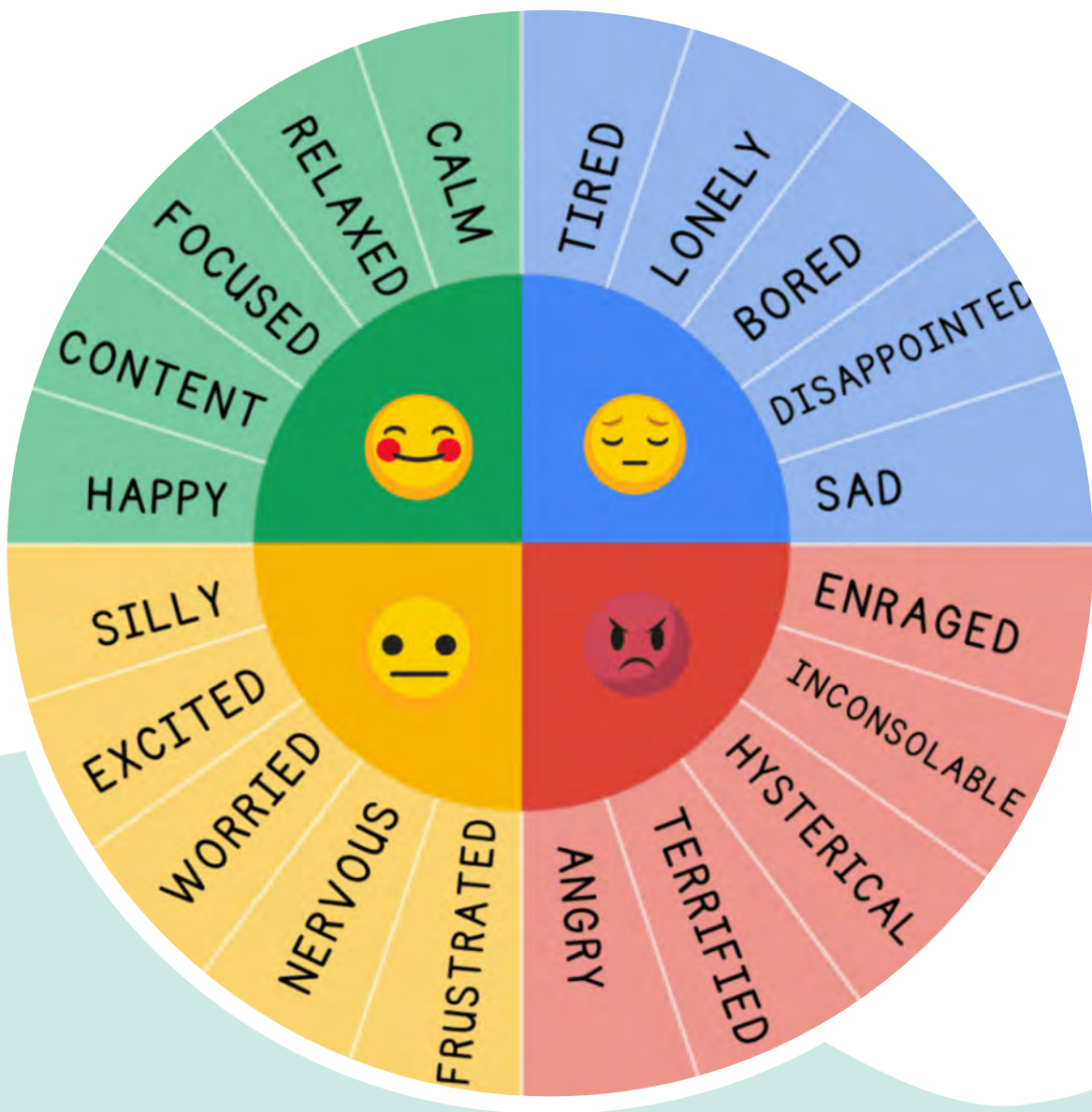


NB TIPS FOR USE

- **Rotate questions to avoid routine fatigue**
- **Offer young people opt-out or pass options**
- **Allow non-verbal responses (cards, colours, numbers)**
- **Model emotional language yourself**
- **Keep tone light and non-clinical**

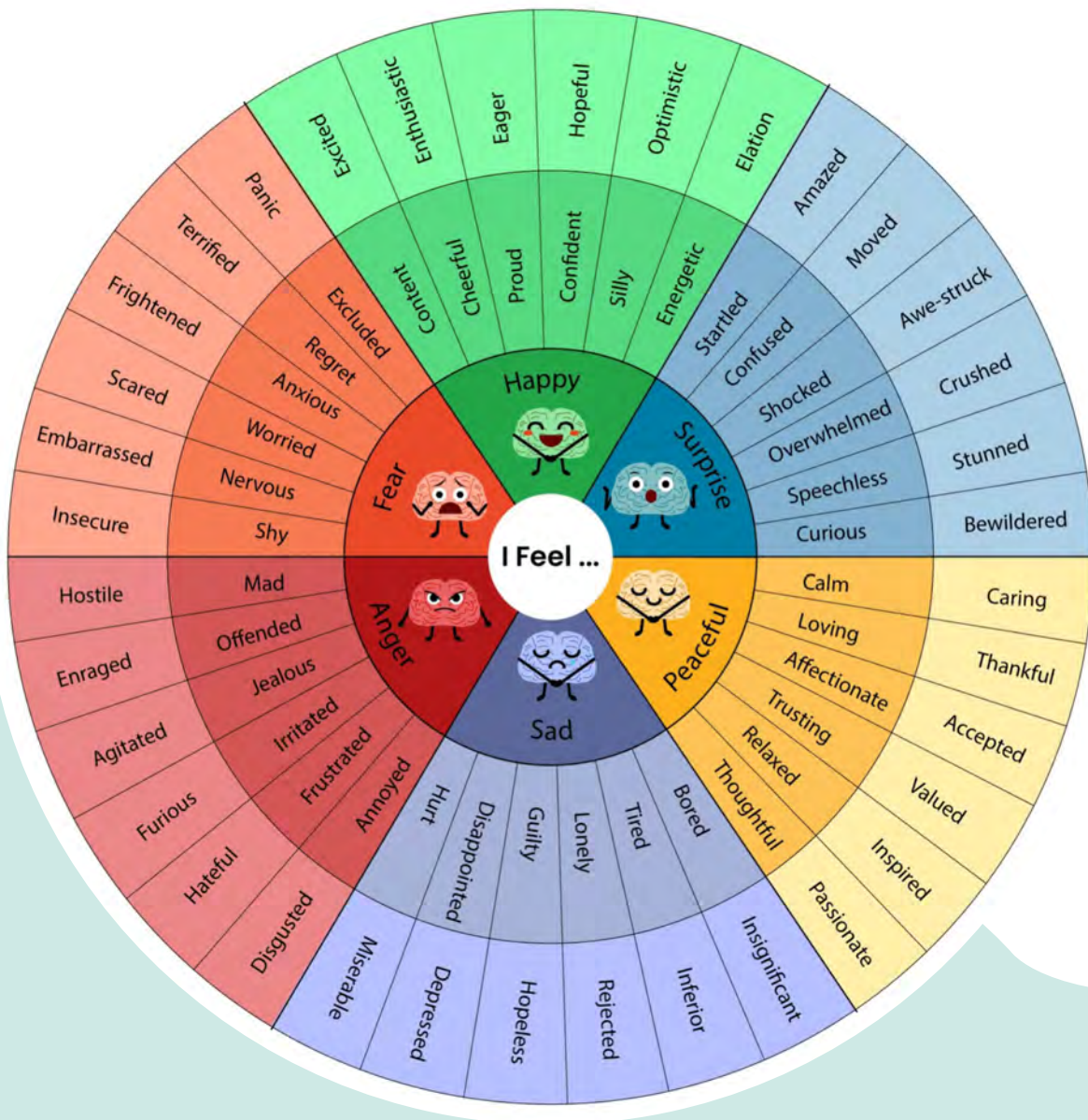
APPENDIX 2

Emotion Wheel



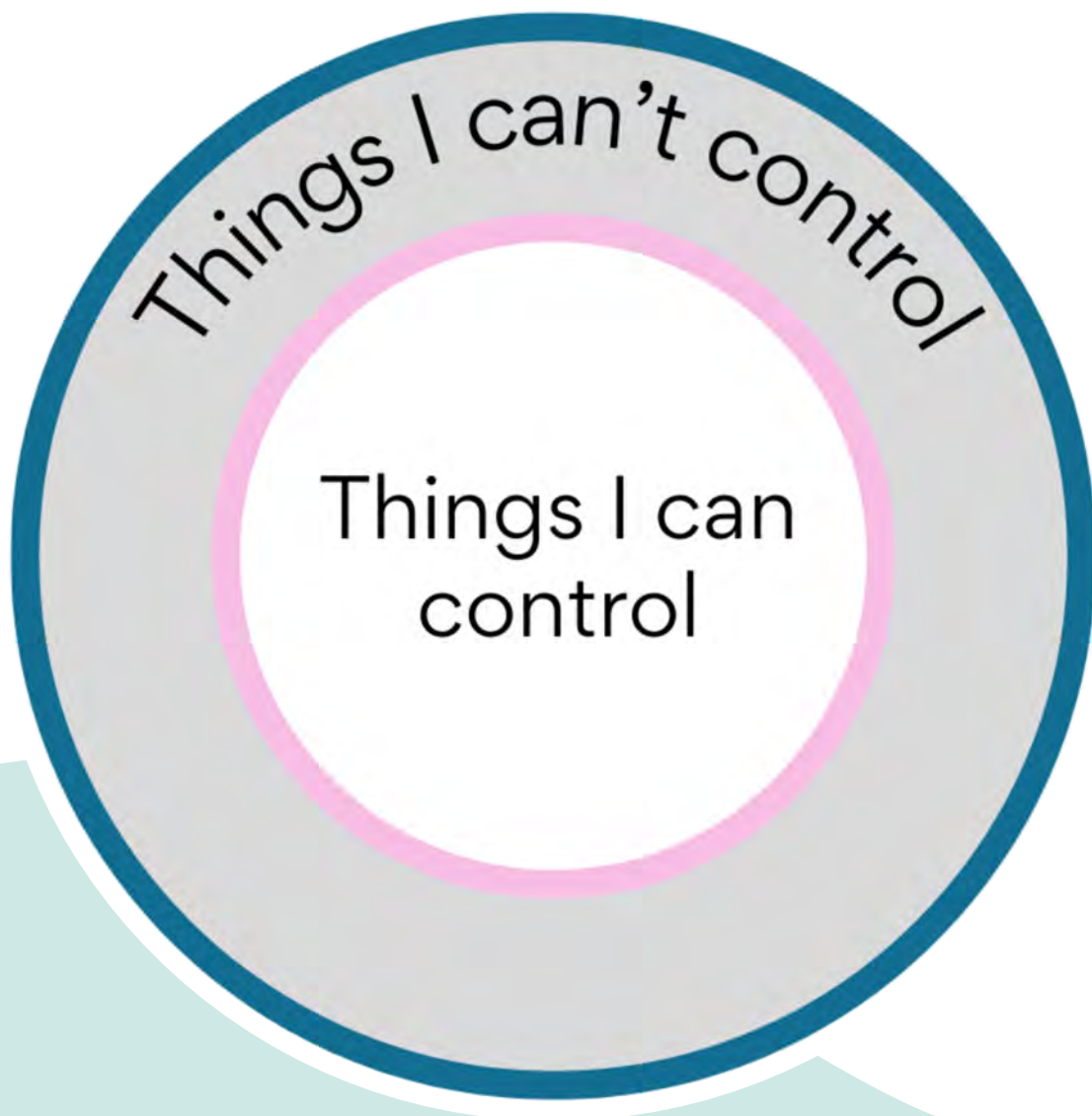
APPENDIX 3

Emotions Wheel- Advanced



APPENDIX 4

My Control Exercise



APPENDIX 5

Coping Ladder Exercise

Final Achievement-

Top of the ladder



Starting Point-

1st rung of the ladder





National Youth Council of Ireland
3 Montague Street, Dublin 2, D02 V327
youth.ie
info@nyci.ie

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