

How to... promote mental wellbeing in youth work practice



**RIGHT  
HERE**

# Introduction

This 'How to' guide is one of a series designed to bring together learning from the five-year Right Here programme initiated by Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF) and the Mental Health Foundation (MHF).

Each guide focuses on a particular theme arising from the programme's work across the UK and aims to provide practical pointers and suggestions to support the development of innovative and effective responses to the mental wellbeing of young people aged 16–25.

This particular guide is aimed at youth organisations working with young people aged 16–25. Its objective is to help to embed mental wellbeing improvement practices within the organisations.

The guide is supported by training involving young people who participated in the Right Here programme. Further information about training is available from [info@mentalhealth.org.uk](mailto:info@mentalhealth.org.uk).

# What do we mean by mental wellbeing?

Mental wellbeing can be described as a combination of how we feel (our emotions and life satisfaction) and how we function (relationships with others, personal control, purpose in life and independence). It is something that affects everyone, old and young, and anyone can experience good or poor mental wellbeing. We know that the following factors can influence our mental wellbeing positively and negatively.

Risk and Protective Factors for Mental Wellbeing <sup>1</sup>

Risk factors	Protective factors
Poverty	Economic security
Discrimination	Empowerment
Violence, abuse or neglect	Feelings of security, mastery and control
Peer rejection and isolation	Positive interactions with others
Stressful life events	Physical activity
Lack of family support	Stable and supportive family environments
Poor physical health/long-term condition	Healthy diet and lifestyle

Over time, experiencing poor mental wellbeing can contribute to the development of mental health problems such as depression or anxiety. Actions which address the risk factors and support the development of the protective factors highlighted above can make mental health problems less likely to occur.<sup>2</sup>

# Why this guide is needed

The years between the ages of 16 and 25 can have a significant impact on the mental wellbeing of individuals throughout the remainder of their adult lives. Evidence indicates that adolescence and early adulthood is the peak age of onset for mental ill health and the period when there is a need for early intervention.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, young people experience a range of barriers to accessing mental health support; for example, adult services are often not designed or delivered in ways that encourage young people to engage, and the stigma associated with mental health problems can dissuade young people from seeking help.<sup>4</sup> These barriers mean that young people's mental health needs often go unsupported.

The Right Here programme developed a range of effective approaches to support the mental wellbeing of young people in the UK aged 16–25. This included working with young people, youth charities and mental health agencies across four sites in Brighton and Hove, Fermanagh, Newham, and Sheffield in a unique combination of youth participation and co-design, prevention, early intervention, resilience-building, and anti-stigma activities.

Interim results from the independent evaluation of Right Here show that these activities have made a number of differences to the lives of young people. Participants have:

- Developed the confidence to consider and/or take up new opportunities.
- Acquired new skills and techniques for identifying and then handling changes in their emotions, especially the onset of feelings of anger and violence.
- Improved or made changes in their relationships with family members and their peers, including leaving violent or damaging relationships.
- Felt able to be themselves in groups and forge relationships with others, sometimes for the first time.
- Come to realise that 'everyone has mental health' and grasped its relevance to themselves, as well as understanding that there is less difference between those who are 'well' and those who are 'unwell' than they first thought.<sup>5</sup>

# Youth work and mental wellbeing go hand in hand

The Right Here programme has found that youth organisations are in a very good position to support the mental wellbeing of young people. Below are just a few reasons why.

Five reasons youth agencies should make mental wellbeing an important part of their work:

1. Youth agencies are often more acceptable and accessible to young people than traditional health services.<sup>6</sup>
2. Youth agencies often reach vulnerable young people at increased risk of developing mental health problems.<sup>7</sup>
3. Early intervention in mental health problems amongst young people results in better outcomes in adult life.<sup>8</sup>
4. All interactions with young people offer the opportunity to promote mental wellbeing.<sup>9</sup>
5. Many of the activities youth agencies undertake are, by their nature, already improving mental wellbeing.<sup>10</sup>

“I’ve avoided being in a swamp of other people with the same problems.”

Young person, Right Here Brighton and Hove

“We need common sense and the human touch, not a person being clinical.”

Young person, Right Here Sheffield

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) highlights five actions that research tells us can improve our mental wellbeing: connect, keep learning, give, take notice and be active.<sup>11</sup> Below are some ways youth organisations can build these approaches into their work.

Five ways to wellbeing	Youth organisations' role
Connect	<p>Youth organisations often provide opportunities for young people to get together, build connections and friendships, and provide peer support among themselves.</p> <p>This can help to build tolerance and empathy amongst young people and can be particularly powerful for groups of young people known to be at higher risk of developing mental health problems.</p> <p>Peer support groups developed through Right Here have included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ A group of young mothers, which aims to promote their own independence and remind them of their aspirations and strengths (Fermanagh)</li> <li>■ Groups of young men (Newham and Fermanagh)</li> <li>■ Groups of young volunteers who have designed and delivered wellbeing improvement activities for their peers (all sites)</li> </ul> <p>"I've learnt how to give respect to people. We've been given activities to help us – what to do if you are stuck in a group and you want to get to know them. Team building skills and activities. When I first joined, it was really useful; there were people locally I could then get to meet. People around me say that I have started talking and talking now." Young person, Right Here</p>

Five ways to wellbeing	Youth organisations' role
Keep Learning	<p>Opportunities for learning can occur through structured educational courses and training, but also through the development of practical knowledge and life skills. All of these offer the opportunity for young people to build their confidence and self-esteem.</p> <p>Examples of Right Here's approach to supporting learning include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Wellbeing Champions – a ten-week accredited training programme which runs for two hours each week encouraging young people to advocate for wellbeing enhancement activities (Newham)</li> <li>■ Dare you Share? – a board game designed by young people to increase understanding about the mental health issues and the associated stigma experienced by young people (Sheffield)</li> </ul>
Give	<p>NEF says that "seeing yourself, and your happiness linked to the wider community can be incredibly rewarding and creates connections with the people around you."<sup>12</sup> Developing opportunities for young people to make a difference to their communities can have considerable value to improving mental wellbeing and social connectedness.</p> <p>The Right Here approach has supported volunteering and community activity in a number of ways, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Youth Bank, a youth-led community grant making programme (Fermanagh)</li> <li>■ Mental Health Ambassadors (Sheffield)</li> <li>■ Youth panels and groups of volunteers, working with staff, to shape and deliver programmes (all sites)</li> </ul> <p>"Starting with the Youth Bank and people helping themselves and their own community... that was something great... It was just fantastic taking part in helping other people know about mental health." Young person, Right Here Fermanagh</p>

Five ways to wellbeing	Youth organisations' role
Take Notice	<p>Taking notice can mean looking at the world around you, but it can also include reflecting on what you are feeling and appreciating what matters to you.</p> <p>Several Right Here courses have focused on recognising and dealing with negative emotions, such as anger:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Cage the Rage (Sheffield)</li> <li>■ Keep Calm and Carry On (Brighton and Hove)</li> </ul> <p><i>"It's taught me how to deal with my anger issues. Sometimes I do forget but when I give myself the time to think about things I just don't get angry. It's just amazing. I never would have known this myself if I didn't come here." Young person, Right Here Brighton and Hove</i></p>
Be Active	<p>Exercise and physical activity can be promoted through specific groups, clubs and activities run by youth groups or in partnership with leisure centres. In addition to physical health benefits, these activities can promote a range of mental wellbeing benefits including boosting mood, promoting social interaction and friendship. It can also help young people to understand the connections between mental health and physical health.</p> <p>Examples of physical activities groups developed in Right Here are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Indoor rock climbing drop-in (Brighton and Hove)</li> <li>■ Non-contact boxing classes (Newham)</li> <li>■ Fishing (Fermanagh)</li> <li>■ Walk and Talk (Sheffield and Brighton and Hove)</li> </ul> <p><i>"Climbing was every fortnight. I was able to see my anxiety lessen. I was teary, had panic attacks but then I had to get to the top. The bit where you have to stand up was my nemesis. It's really visual ... to be able to see my anxiety lessen. You can measure it." Young person, Right Here Brighton and Hove</i></p>

# Integrating wellbeing enhancement approaches can seem daunting

Some of the thoughts below may have crossed your mind...

"I don't have the time or money."

Youth workers have many demands and priorities – mental wellbeing may just seem like another responsibility to add to never-ending list. However, it is worth remembering that by promoting mental wellbeing, you will be working to get the best out of the young people you support, and it may end up making your job easier!

"It's not my job."

A useful starting place can be to reflect on the mental wellbeing improvement aspects of what you already do, using the Five Steps to Wellbeing. Consider what opportunities to support mental wellbeing can be built into all new activities and programmes as they arise.

"I don't want to get it wrong."

Mental wellbeing is sometimes perceived to be the domain of specialist health professionals, but there are some principles of youth work that directly lend themselves to mental wellbeing improvement.

For example, youth participation approaches that encourage young people to have a voice, get involved and have some say in the groups they belong to have been shown to increase confidence and self-esteem.

"It's too scary."

Similarly, activities which encourage 'flow' (where young people get fully immersed in an activity) have also been linked to increased levels of focus, enjoyment and fulfilment (see case example box of Right Here Fermanagh).

"What if I open up Pandora's box?"

It is a common worry that if you talk about mental wellbeing everything will come tumbling out in a long stream when you don't feel you have the time, space or expertise to handle it.

Below are some suggestions about how to manage conversations about mental wellbeing:

- Find out about available mental health and youth counselling services for young people and link with them. Have a list of other services you can directly refer to or signpost to if further support is needed.
  - Know who to contact if support needs are urgent – for example, if you believe the young person might be at risk of immediate harm.
  - Undertake some form of needs assessment of all young people when they start, so that you know what their needs are and can help them access additional support if required.
  - Recognise that there may be times when hearing the experiences of young people will affect you or other staff members emotionally. Supervision should offer staff the opportunity to express their own emotional responses and receive support where needed.
  - Have these conversations in a quiet space and set aside a bit of time for them if possible. Agree on a time to come back to this issue and talk about it some more if this is appropriate.
  - Look for non-verbal signs of emotional distress such as lack of eye contact, poor concentration, closed body posture or unusual energy levels (either very low or very high).
  - Finally, there are numerous training courses available if you feel you need a bit more knowledge. Right Here Newham provided all their staff with Mental Health First Aid training, for example.
- Local mental health and youth counselling services and charities may also be able to help direct you to appropriate training courses or provide training for you yourselves. It may be worth exploring the extent to which developing your skills in this area can be included as part of your Continuing Personal Development plan.

## Right Here Fermanagh – youth workers helping young people to flourish

This project developed a unique, gender-specific approach to young people's wellbeing which encouraged them to look ahead, set and realise their own goals, and be the best they can be.

Working with an educational psychologist, Right Here Fermanagh identified a number of key components in its approach and activities that have helped young men and women to feel better about themselves – indeed, to flourish.

These components included helping young people to: learn to be mentally well by doing things, being with people, and developing skills and attitudes which can help things work out well; engage in activities that they enjoyed and wanted to do for their own sake, and working towards goals, freely chosen, that were challenging but achievable; take the time to notice and appreciate simple things; and connect with each other, trusted adults, and their wider communities.

Right Here Fermanagh's approach is now firmly embedded within Youth Action Northern Ireland, the charity which led the project, and there are plans to share the approach with other youth agencies in Northern Ireland and further afield.

# Right Here's top tips for promoting

# mental wellbeing in youth work

Right Here projects have developed a wide range of resources and tools to support young people's mental health.<sup>13</sup> This is what our collective experience has taught us over the years:

## About staff knowledge and skills

- Learn about mental wellbeing and how to support it. Websites such as [www.wellinformed.org.uk](http://www.wellinformed.org.uk), developed and funded through the Innovation Labs initiative ([www.innovationlabs.org.uk](http://www.innovationlabs.org.uk)), will provide you with much of what you need to know.
- Think about recruiting a counsellor or therapist as part of your team, or talk to other mental health or youth counselling services about hosting a member of staff on a regular basis (see case example box of Right Here Sheffield). Postgraduate student placements may offer another possible route.
- Provide good support and supervision for staff, including clinical supervision, where required, particularly where staff are young or have little direct mental health experience (Right Here Newham has done this). Group supervision and peer support can give younger members of staff the opportunity to learn from more experienced staff members.

- Evaluate what you do, so you know whether you are making a difference.
- Remember that staff have their own mental health and wellbeing too, so try to do something positive for workers as well.

## About programmes and activities

- Provide fun activities that you know will appeal to young people and look for the mental health hook in them. This could include physical and creative activities like climbing, fishing, boxing, comedy, musical workshops or other participative arts activities.
- If you wish to embed mental wellbeing education or learning within your service, consider delivering short 'one-off sessions' to start with, rather than longer courses. This can help to plant a seed and get young people talking about the subject. You can build from there.

## About supportive cultures and environments

- Create a panel that focuses on young people's mental wellbeing to inform your work, or build mental wellbeing into the work and scope of existing panels.
- Think about the language you use. Terms like 'mental illness', even 'mental health' – in fact anything with the word 'mental' in it – can be off-putting. There is certainly a place for challenging the stigma surrounding these terms, but in the meantime you may find that words like 'wellbeing', 'emotions', 'stress' or 'feeling down' are often more acceptable.
- Balance opportunities for group participation with access to direct one-on-one support, enabling the level of support for vulnerable young people to be flexible according to need.
- Support young people with mental health issues to take part in activities by:

- calling or meeting with a young person to talk about what is available;
- keeping in touch flexibly by text, e-mail and telephone before and after activities;
- being flexible about attendance but still keeping in touch if someone does not turn up;
- accompanying a young person to a meeting;
- being present even where other people are running an activity.

## About connections and relationships

- Get to know mental health and youth counselling services in your local area and build relationships with them. This could include statutory CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) and AMHS (Adult Mental Health Services) but also local mental health charities and YIACS (Youth Information, Advice, Counselling and Support, <http://youthaccess.org.uk/find-your-local-service/>). Invite them to run sessions or ask them to provide training for youth workers.

“I like the therapeutic element of the youth work programmes. Both Cage the Rage and Building Bridges have a therapy element as well as awareness-raising work. I think that’s quite unique.”

Staff member, Right Here Sheffield

### Right Here Sheffield’s integration of youth and mental health work

Through the recruitment of therapists alongside more traditional youth worker roles, Right Here Sheffield developed a number of projects and initiatives that were able to incorporate therapeutic techniques within youth group work settings. This enabled a cross-fertilisation of ideas and processes to take place across the two specialisms (mental health and youth work), adding strength and diversity to both. Local commissioners have also indicated that they value the degree of flexibility as well as the cost-effectiveness this approach brings.

There are good indications that this approach will be continued through local commissions.

<http://www.right-here.org.uk/projects/sheffield/>

## How can we know if it’s making a difference? Evaluating the mental health impact of services

Managers and full-time youth workers will need to know what impact their organisation is having on the wellbeing of young people who participate – for funders obviously, but also to help their organisations develop and improve. Evaluation is something that everyone in youth work has a stake in, to ensure that young people are receiving the right response to their individual needs. There are numerous resources available that can help you to evaluate your service;<sup>14</sup> below are a few experiences from the Right Here projects.

### Choosing the right methodology

If you want to gauge change in a young person accessing your service, you may wish to consider doing some ‘pre and post’ measures. This means administering some form of needs or goals assessment at or shortly after a young person embarks on the programme and then re-administering it at multiple intervals in the future. You can then identify if any change has arisen, and where.

There are standardised questionnaires you can use to assess the mental wellbeing needs of young people, such as Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF) or the Resilience

Scale 15 (RS15), both of which were used in Right Here. However, there are a number of limitations to these approaches. Attributing the changes to the service would be just one.

It could be argued that an evaluation of a youth service should embody the principles of that service, in that it is based around youth participation and empowerment. Encouraging young people to define what they want to get out of their time with a service, and the areas of their lives that they would like to see change, may therefore be an alternative way to measure impact. This can be done quantitatively, through the use of goal-based scales.<sup>15</sup>

Services should also consider using qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, or creative approaches, such as photography and diaries, to identify the extent to which goals have been met. Qualitative methods can enable services to obtain more insight into how and why activities have been beneficial and areas where improvements can be made. In this way, the evidence gathered can be built into learning cycles, so that evaluations can influence future service development.

## Right Here Brighton and Hove's rock climbing drop-in

Right Here Brighton and Hove found creative ways to measure the impact of participation in their rock climbing drop-in on young people.

This included the very visible indicators of increased confidence evident through climbing to a higher point or by a more difficult route.

<http://right-here-brightonandhove.org.uk/>

*“Several of the young people have mentioned the way they get to make progress, the goal of doing the next rung. It's quite measurable, visible.”*

Staff member, Right Here Brighton and Hove rock climbing

## About Right Here

Right Here is a £6 million programme that is running from 2009 to 2014 and is jointly managed by Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Mental Health Foundation. It aims to develop effective new approaches to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of young people in the UK aged 16–25. Right Here focuses on intervening early to help young people at risk of developing mental health problems, and on tackling the stigma associated with mental health problems that often prevents young people from seeking help.

Right Here operates across four different projects in Brighton and Hove, Fermanagh, Newham and Sheffield. Each project is led by a youth charity, working with other voluntary and statutory organisations. Young people's participation is fundamental to how all of the projects operate, as is partnership working.

Young people work with youth workers and mental health professionals to design, commission and deliver activities, while Right Here's local delivery organisations work with public sector partners to increase the influence and impact of their work. The projects are intended to bring lasting benefits to the young people they work with, the lead organisations and their partners, and youth mental health provision.

Right Here is also a partner in the Innovation Labs initiative, which is developing a range of new digital tools to support young people's mental health.

Right Here is being independently evaluated by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR). The final evaluation report from IVAR will be published in the autumn of 2014.

PHF and the MHF will use learning from these evaluations to influence practice more widely and make the case for policy changes, where appropriate.



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13. For further information, see [www.right-here.org.uk](http://www.right-here.org.uk) and [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/).
14. For further information, see <http://www.phf.org.uk/page.asp?id=1325>.
15. For a sample template, see <https://www.myhealthlockerlondon.nhs.uk/youngpeople/Downloads/CAMHS-goals-initial-form.pdf>.

For further information about Right Here, including some of the resources developed through the projects, please visit [www.right-here.org.uk](http://www.right-here.org.uk)

For information about the Right Here training available to youth workers, please contact [info@mentalhealth.org.uk](mailto:info@mentalhealth.org.uk)

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