Y4Y Québec

Working with Vulnerable Youth

Y4Y Québec

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Workshop 1
Understanding Youth Mental Health

Vulnerable youth:
Youth who have experienced, or continue to experience, adverse conditions which subjects them to physical, mental and emotional barriers and stress.

More Adversity
=
Higher Risk

**Every person
is different,
and behaviours will vary
on a case by case basis.**
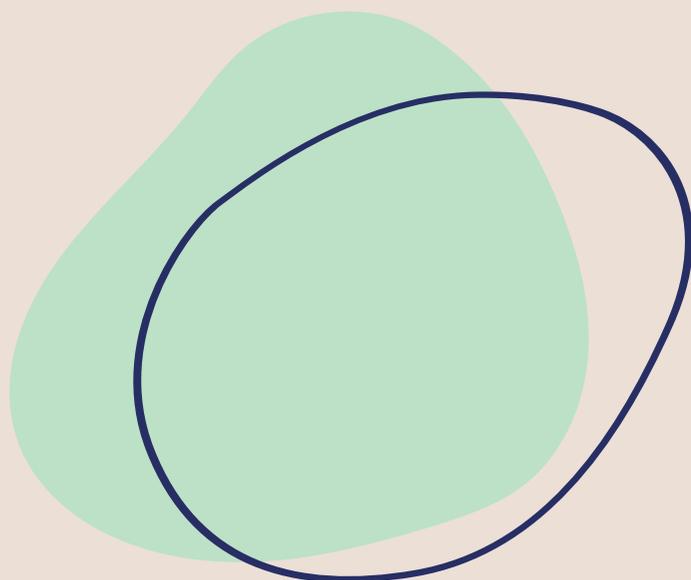
ACTIVITY

Common themes – self–reflection activity:

Write down some behaviours that you think are common among youth:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

COMMON THEMES

Underage substance abuse

• **Coping; familiarity; unknown reasons.**

• **Side effects and risks of addiction:**
    – Interferes with day-to-day functioning;
    – Impairs emotional, social & brain development;
    – Creates potential to develop a tendency to seek out more potent substances for long
      periods of time.

Table 1
Three major categories of substances, examples, and the most common side effects

Type	Examples	Common Side effects
Stimulants	Cocaine; Ecstasy; Amphetamines.	Irritability; Hyperactivity; Jitteriness/Restlessness; Moodiness; Headaches; Anxiety.
Depressants	Alcohol Cannabis GHB Ketamine Opioids	Drowsiness; Reduced reaction time; Anxiety; Hostility; Impulsive behaviour; Lack of coordination; Slow breathing.
Hallucinogens	LSD; Mushrooms; Cannabis.	Lack of coordination; Erratic behaviours; Unpredictability; Paranoia; Sudden mood shifts; Disorganised thoughts; Visual & auditory disturbances.

Impulsivity, resistance to change, & the jeopardising of one's safety

- Dismissing well-being / low impulse-control;

- Comfort with the familiar.

Struggling to identify healthy relationships, especially with adults

- A lack of exposure to healthy relationships;

- Frequent generalisations.

Struggling with authority & difficulty with trust

- Feeling let down by unpleasant past experiences.

Symptoms of mental illness

- Symptoms of anxiety, depression, PTSD & personality disorder traits—though not necessarily the illness itself.

ACTIVITY

The Clenched Fist activity:

• Someone's fist is clenched. They believe that their fist must remain closed, or something bad may happen.

• Another person must try to make them feel comfortable enough to open their fist.

What can you say to this person to help them feel comfortable?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

How can you approach this person?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

NATURE AND NURTURE

Genes & the environment

- Environments can change drastically;

- Two major aspects in the environment that can influence a person:
    – Trauma and relationships.

Effects on perception

Figure 1
The interaction of genetics and the environment in the development of the self.

*Note: The seed represents the **genes**, the landscape represents the **environment**, and the tree represents the **person**. Both factors (genetics & environment) will affect the way the tree (the person) develops.*

ENVIRONMENT IN RELATION TO *NURTURE* – TRAUMA

A serious, actual, or anticipated/perceived threat

Traumatic events may include:

- Abuse (sexual, physical, emotional, & psychological);

- Neglect (emotional or physical);

- Violence;

- Medical trauma;

- Accidents;

- Disasters;

- Traumatic loss.

ENVIRONMENT IN RELATION TO *NURTURE* – ATTACHMENT STYLES

Table 2
Attachment Styles

Styles	Environment (external causes)	Thoughts	Behaviours
Avoidant	Caregivers may have: • been rejecting; • been emotionally unavailable; • displayed annoyance at the child's distress.	• Dismissive of relationships; • Feeling unworthy of love; • child's distress.	• Hostility; • Provokes rejection; • Isolation; • Dismissive of relationships; • Withdrawal; • Anxiety and quiet.
Ambivalent	Caregivers may have: • displayed a lack of consistent availability; • displayed insensitivity towards the child's responses; • had unrealistic expectations for the child; • Caregivers, or other people's behaviour, may have caused heightened anxiety.	• Feelings of inadequacy ; • Needing to please others; • Feelings of distress.	• Attention seeking; • Becoming easily frustrated; • Impulsivity; • Passivity; • Helplessness; • Insecurity.
Disorganised	The caregivers may have: • been unpredictable; • caused fear in the child.	• Feeling unsafe; • Feeling anxious; • Lack of trust.	• Difficulty regulating emotions; • Oppositional attitude; • Aggressivity; • Low self-esteem; • Needing control; • Unpredictability; • Intense emotions; • Fear of rejection; • Difficulty trusting; • Desire for closeness.

| Secure | The caregiver may have been:
• loving;
• consistently available;
• sensitive, affectionate and accepting;
• quick to provide comfort. | • Feeling worthy of love & affection;
• Finding value in relationships;
• Understanding the impact of their actions. | • Resiliency;
• Self-assurance;
• Cooperativity;
• Resourcefulness;
• Contentment;
• Engaged attitude;
• 'On-task' attitude. |

ACTIVITY

Attachment Style activity:

Identify which attachment style corresponds to each of the following scenarios.
Consider how you may adjust your demeanour in approaching the youth in each scenario.

Scenario 1:

A youth texts their friend, and does not receive a reply for a full day. When their friend finally answers, they do not respond. They feel as though their friend no longer cares about their relationship, and decides to self-isolate.

Attachment style: _____

Your approach:

_____

_____

Scenario 2:

A youth begins to boast about their ability to play guitar in order to receive praise from their peers. Their good friend confronts these claims by saying they admitted to not knowing how to play guitar just last week. This youth gets angry and lashes out.

Attachment style: _____

Your approach:

_____

_____

Scenario 3:

A youth finds themself at an event, but does not know anyone. They decide to approach others and start a conversation. Throughout the event, this youth eventually makes several friends and connections.

Attachment style: _____

Your approach:

_____

_____

Scenario 4:

A youth is in a romantic relationship with their partner. Their partner highlights instances in which this youth has acted in a controlling manner. In response, this youth feels extremely hurt by the comment. They feel insecure & push their partner away—suggesting they should not remain to-gether.

Attachment style: _____

Your approach:

_____

_____

EFFECTS OF THE GENE/ENVIRONMENT INTERACTION

- The combination of genes (nature) and environment (nurture) will have an effect on a youth's reaction to a situation.

- Experiencing adverse situations may affect the following:
    - Sensitivity to stresses & threats;
    - Ability to process & interpret social information;
    - Ability to empathise with others;
    - Ability to regulate emotions;
    - Capacity to seek support and comfort.

- Understand that while engaging with youth, we cannot expect cooperation every time. We must respect the youth's position.

HELP YOUTH FEEL SAFE

- Set limits and boundaries;

- Be available when needed, particularly during times of conflict or distress;

- Maintain predictability & consistency;

- Demonstrate that they are valued by displaying attentiveness & emotional validation (and help them do the same!)

- Maintain realistic expectations;

- Be patient.
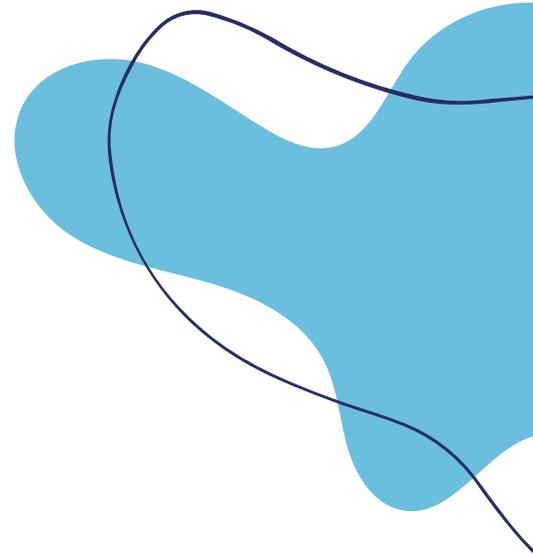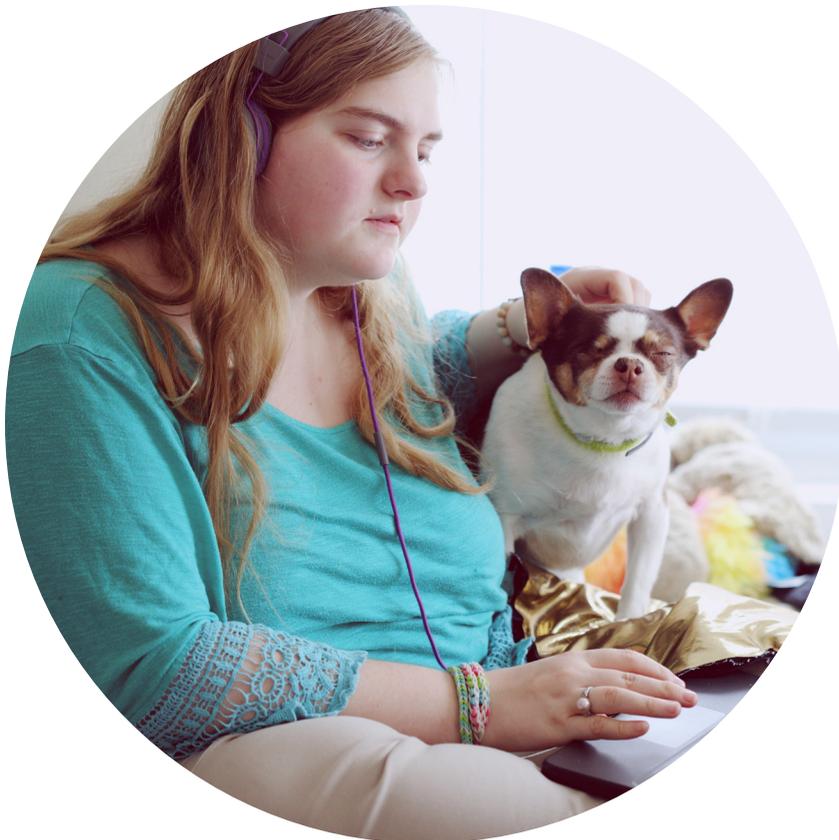
Workshop 2
Skills–Building for Working with Vulnerable Youth

CONSIDER PRIVILEGE

We must consider our own privileges in any and every space we occupy to ensure we are acting in ways that empower those we aim to support. This is particularly important when working with youth whose identities intersect in areas that offer less privilege than your own.

- **Consider power dynamics:**
    - Power dynamics may arise from differences in age, background, education, ethnicity, etc.

- **Consider your tone:**
    - Try to match the youth's tone.

- **Match their language:**
    - Avoid overly-complex language or concepts; be aware of their understanding.
    - Inaccessible language may lead youth to disengage, or feel negatively about themselves.

CONSIDER PRIVILEGE EXERCISE

Let's take some time to reflect on our privileges in order to be more aware next time we approach a youth *(or anyone, really)*.

- Take a few minutes to identify different areas that present privileges in your identity:
    - Race;
    - Ethnicity;
    - Language;
    - Nationality;
    - Class;
    - Gender;
    - Sexuality;
    - Age;
    - Etc.

Consider how you might manage each of these areas of privilege when engaging with youth in vulnerable situations. Feel free to use the space below to write down some of your reflections:

_____

_____

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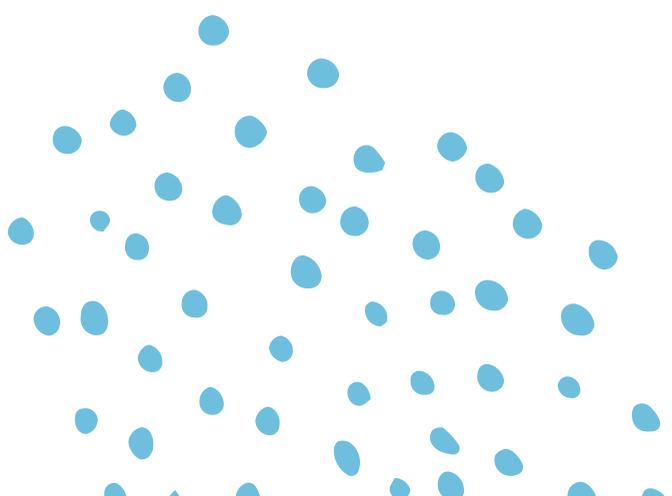
BE CURIOUS

Approach youth in the aim of learning about them.

- **Ask questions:**
  - Do not assume anyone's experience;
  - Do not assume you know what they need. Instead, ask youth what they need.
    Each person is an expert with regard to their own situation, so empower youth in theirs!
    - They know their situation best—highlight their intuition and knowledge;
    - Focus on empowering the youth—highlight their strengths;
    - Work collaboratively to problem solve—amplify their voice and offer check-ins along the way.

THE TWO MOUNTAIN METAPHOR

Here, we introduce a metaphor developed by Russ Harris that is often used in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy:

"You know, a lot of people come to _____ believing that the _____ is some sort of enlightened being, that they have resolved all of their issues, that they've got it all together—but actually, that's not the way it is. It's more like you're climbing your mountain over there, and I'm climbing my mountain over here. And from where I am on my mountain, I can see things on your mountain that you can't see—like there's an avalanche about to happen, or there's an alternative pathway you could take, or you're not using your pickaxe effectively. But I'd hate for you to think that I've reached the top of my mountain, and I'm sitting back, taking it easy. Fact is, I'm still climbing, still making mistakes, and still learning from them. And basically, we're all the same. We're all climbing our mountain until the day we die. But here's the thing: you can get better and better at climbing, and better and better at learning to appreciate the journey. And that's what the work we do here is all about."

The Two Mountain Metaphor is often employed in sessions to highlight that the therapist (or in your case, the counsellor, social worker, project coordinator, etc.), is not above the client (or in your case, the youth). This can be a useful way to dismantle any hierarchy that may exist between you and youth.
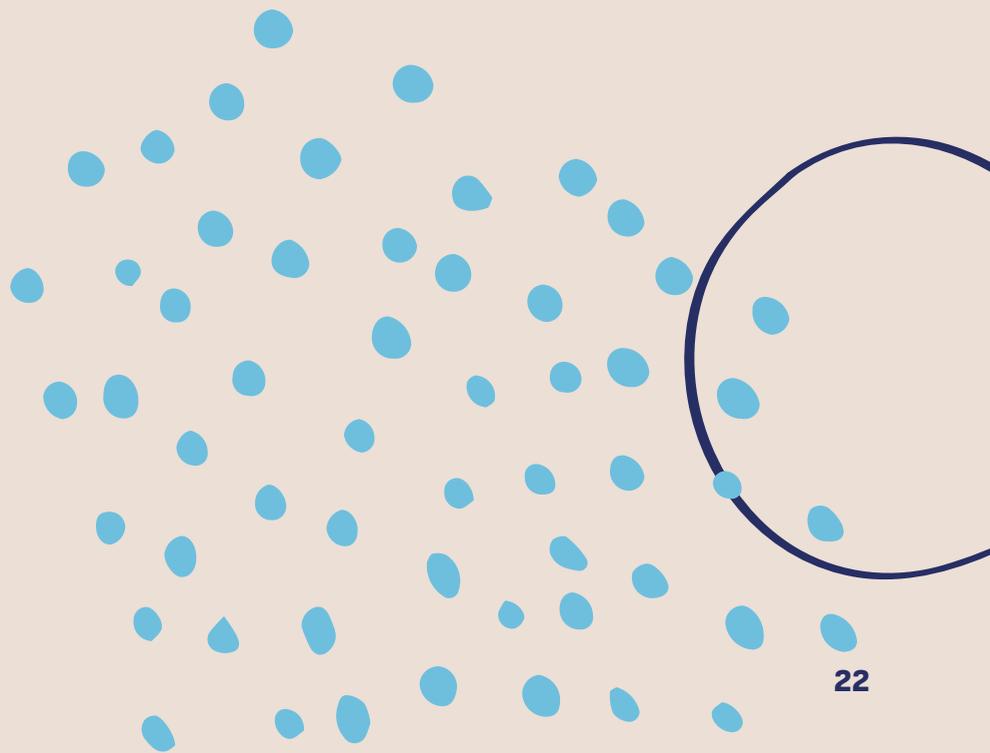
GUIDING THE CONVERSATION

Choosing appropriate topics and knowing when to redirect the conversation:

- **Engage with youth on their level**
  - Refer to topics that are relevant to them;
  - Offer a point of connection.

- **Avoid topics that may cause conflict (you may wish to avoid political topics altogether!)**
  - We do not know much about the youth's background, so be wary of getting into discussions that might cause offence, *especially* if you are speaking to more than one youth at once.

- *Read the room.* **Recognise when the conversation is going sour, and redirect (especially in conversations with more than one youth). Ask yourself:**
  - Is someone disengaged from the conversation (not talking, physically distanced, avoiding eye contact)?
  - Is there a change in the youth's tone?
  - Can you detect any other signals of distress/discomfort/disengagement?
  - How might you redirect the conversation?

Asking questions

- **Ask open-ended questions that lead to conversations;**

- **Ease into the conversation by asking light-hearted questions first. When you feel an alliance has been built, try asking more sensitive questions;**

- **For example, try asking: "In what ways are you struggling with your mental health?" as opposed to: "Are you struggling with your mental health?"**

GUIDING THE CONVERSATION EXERCISE

Based on what you've learned so far, take a few minutes to brainstorm the following questions:

- What are some topics that might cause conflict? How might you avoid these, or handle them if they make their way into the conversation?

- What might be some signs that a conversation is going sour?

- How might you redirect the conversation?

Feel free to use the space below to write down some of your reflections:

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_____

_____

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_____

_____

GROUPTHINK

An important consideration in working with a group of youth is ensuring that each individual feels safe. Creating and maintaining safety will be a primary focus when working with youth.

You may create safety in collaboration with a youth group by establishing *group norms* at the first meeting. *Group norms* are expectations that each group member must uphold in order to be a part of the group.

- It is important to establish a protocol in case *group norms* are challenged, or broken;

- Occasionally revisit the *group norms* to remind youth of their presence;

- Offer space for clarification or adjustment of *group norms*, if necessary.
    – Building norms is an ongoing process—any group member is welcome to ask for a discussion of the *group norms*.

Some examples of potential *group norms* are:

- *Our meetings will begin and end on time;*

- *We will listen to each other and not interrupt;*

- *We will make sure everyone has had a chance to speak;*

- *We will support our facilitator's efforts to moderate discussions;*

- *We will avoid ethnic or gender-based humour;*

- *We will speak respectfully to each other;*

- *We will not discuss content that is shared with the group outside of the group.*

PROMOTING WELL-BEING

When working with youth, it is crucial to promote experiences that may increase their well-being. This can be done by:

- Creating a sense of safety;

- Offering stability;

- Showing support *physically*. This can be done by simply *hearing them out* when they have something to say (remember that youth may have difficulty trusting, and by *showing support*, you might help foster their sense of trust);

- Offering an environment where youth are free to express their emotions in a way that is not reactive or impulsive (this promotes healthy communication!);

- Encouraging prosocial peer relationships. This can be done by engaging youth in productive and healthy group activities where they may encourage one another;

- Focusing on their achievements and strengths;
    - If you notice that a youth has a particular strong suit, working with it can build their confidence and encourage them to continue developing this and other strengths.

- Appealing to their interests and hobbies;
    - Youth will feel compelled to participate in healthy activities if they pertain to their interests.

BRAINSTORM

Complete the following activity in 15 minutes:

1. **Divide the group into Group 1 and Group 2.**

2. **Considering what you have learned so far regarding privilege & approaching youth with curi-osity, brainstorm some open-ended questions you might ask when approaching a youth in a vulnerable situation with your group *(5 minutes)*.**

2 questions to engage the youth:

    1. _____

    2. _____

2 questions to assess the youth's headspace:

    1. _____

    2. _____

2 questions to inquire about the situation:

    1. _____

    2. _____

3. **Take turns presenting each group's questions, and offer each other constructive criticism (identifying potential areas for improvements, and highlighting strengths)** *(10 minutes).*

Feel free to use the following pages to work through these questions:

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