

TRAINERS REPORT

Unmasking youth mental health¹ - the psychological consequences of a pandemic and how to deal with them through the everyday practice of youth work

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Introduction

World health organization on its website (18 December 2020) stated that 1 in 2 young people (aged 18–29 years) are subject to depression and anxiety, and 1 in 6 are probably affected, as the result of isolation during the pandemic. Up to 20% of health care workers are suffering from anxiety and depression. Research "Youth & Covid-19: Impacts on Jobs, Education, Rights and Mental Wellbeing" that was issued by European Youth Forum, shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed young people aged 18–29 out of the global workforce, with one in six youth reporting having had to stop working since the onset of the crisis. Over 70 percent of young people who were either studying or combining study and work at the time of the survey were adversely affected by the closing of schools, universities and training centers.

So, *Unmasking youth mental health* project is meant for youth workers from 20 to 40 years old who directly working (or planning to work) with a groups of young people that are at risk due to the crisis caused by the Chovid-19 virus pandemic.

The key activity of the project is the training for youth workers, which was realized in the period from April 10-15, 2022.

The main objective of the project was to support youth workers to respond to challenges in the context of youth mental health and to contribute developing of quality youth work through the non - formal learning.

The specific objectives were:

1. Provide basic knowledge to youth workers about the mental health of young people in crisis (especially in relation to vulnerable groups of young people) and provide knowledge of basic stress relief techniques that will help them withstand the challenges of a pandemic through a 6-day training;
2. To empower youth workers to provide everyday first front-line support to young people affected by the COVID-19 crisis through the organizing support workshops for youth in local communities in Serbia, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Croatia and Italy (this goal is partly related to training, and partly to activities after training);
3. To build a network of youth workers and partner organizations in which there will be an exchange of knowledge and experience in the field of mental health of young people and which will continue to implement similar activities through European projects.

¹ Project is co-funded by the European Union

Profile of participants

The training included 25 youth workers, aged 20-40, coming from Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Northern Macedonia and Serbia. We supported those youth workers who has acquired various knowledge and skills in youth work, at the same time has no knowledge, skills and experience that will help her/him recognize the signs of challenges in youth mental health, is no skillful to cope with young people who show signs of crisis, does not have enough skills to talk to those young people who are "left behind", as well as to encourage them to look for ways to improve their mental health. Among the participants were also youth workers who themselves come from the underprivileged category.

Topics

The topics we covered in the training are as follows (we will not list here the reflection groups that took place on the end of each day):

- Introduction to the course and expectations,
- Team building activities,
- Exploring your personal crisis situations and support systems (River of my life),
- Defining the term crisis, mental health, indicators of difficulties in mental health („Everything you wanted to know about mental health, but Google was not very good in it“),
- Active listening and Effective communication,
- Practicing communication challenging situations,
- Personal challenges in a communication-crisis situation,
- Empathy (whata is and what is not the empathic communication),
- Perspective and problem solving (group wisdom in the situtaion in their professional life that they find difficult to solve),
- Powerful questions and changing the narrative (how to formulate efective questions that stimulate growth, and narrative and how it influences the way we see our lives),
- Peer support (principles, organization, horizontality),
- Practical facilitation workshop,
- What and who supports me?,
- Limits and boundaries in youth work,
- Protocols (urgent situations, victims of violence in COVID-19 situation...),
- Steps for working with youth in local realities,
- Appreciative inquiry and debriefing in World caffe,
- Next steps and future projects,
- Youthpass and evaluation.

Description of approach and methodology

The methodology used within this training program was based on European non-formal education principles that we share as well, i.e. learner-centeredness, cooperative learning (learning with a group, from the group and in a group), voluntary participation, interactive methods, inputs, balance between

theory and practice, respect experiential learning cycle etc. Training course was based on experiential and cooperative learning methods in order to ensure better learning outcomes of the participants. We used individual work, as well as work in couples, groups, plenary.

Challenge in the trainers' team

The team had already started with online preparations, when the trainer from the Slovenian partner got health problems, because of which she had to cancel her arrival at the training. After consulting with the partners, we decided together that the new trainer should be from the same country and organization. As a street youth worker, he brought some more knowledge and skills to the team, and it turned out that it was also important for the team to be more gender balanced. Furthermore, there were no more problems in the work of the team.

The process

Keeping in mind the topic (mental health), we led the process on two levels - one is personal (to investigate what are the challenges for participants in mental health and which topics in this area are difficult to cope with) and the other is professional (to empower them to be support to young people who turn to them for help in the first stages of the crisis). At the same time, this area of development is still in the domain of youth work, that is, we do not expect the participants to be representatives of the helping professions, but rather professionals in working with young people.

Every training requires creating a safe space for the participants, but because of this topic, the participants felt extra sensitive, so apart from the usual and planned activities for creating specific (deeper) introductions and creating trust, we included some more activities.

At the beginning, it supposed that the participants themselves used the terminology and knew the phenomena of challenges in mental health, but the session, which dealt with the definition of various terms and phenomena, aroused a lot of interest from the participants, and in some segments (when the rest of the program allowed it), we additionally dealt with issues related to anxiety, mourning periods, and anger attacks.

For those topics, we additionally used the gestalt approach technique, empty chair, in order to be better prepared in this kind of situation with young people. We have introduced additional activities such as "Mood Barometer" and "Express yourself with sound and movement". Here are some of their feedbacks: "The exercises seemed fun to me at first, but later, expressing emotions using my body was harder than I expected. Then I started to think how much am I in contact with my emotions, and the answer was not so positive. To be able to work with others, I first have to work more with myself".

As the training progressed, they increasingly assumed an active role and experienced various activities important for the youth work in the topic of mental health. So, being in the role of facilitator of the peer support group was a very useful experience for them. They were able to show how sometimes it is not easy to maintain balance in that group, especially since the whole group is responsible for its work. Here are some of their feedbacks: "When I got the role of facilitator I felt a strong need to

protect other members of the group, I noticed an increased need to take control, but then I found out that it is not the point. The group has its own strength and it just needs support to manifest it".

They (with the help of trainers) made a list of activities and support systems that can help the youth workers regulate themselves in difficult situations (building resilience), as well as what resources are available to them locally.

It seems that for the participants who normally feel that youth should be available 24/7 for young people, it was important to raise awareness about personal boundaries and limitations as youth workers, in order to prevent permanent burnout syndrome and ensured that they can stay working with young people for a long time.

The whole training raised various questions, so we answered them using a fish bowl technique to open space for all questions they didn't have a chance to ask in previous days and for all situations they wanted to ask for advice or to build a plan for support network for youngster with mental health challenges. Also, they were searching for information on national level, about protocols that will be efficient for youngsters that are dealing with mental health issues.

The last day, participants were in small groups, planning follow up activities, creating workshops they would realize when they go home, with young people from their countries. They had a chance to present the workshop scenario in front of the trainers and other participants and to get feedback.

Training activities that which the participants especially pointed out as important to them (and we introduced some of them as additions to already planned activities)

Many activities had a strong impact on the participants, but in the evaluation they specifically pointed out a few, which they think can be important for working with young people, and recommend them to youth workers. Therefore, we briefly describe them here.

Mood barometer

The task is to imagine a line in the middle of the room that signifies zero mood. The space to the left of the zero point indicates a positive mood the space to the right of the zero point indicates a negative mood. Participants choose their position in the room depending on their current mood. After the exercise we sit in a circle and verbally communicate why we chose our position in space.

Human shape and emotions

In this activity, we are trying to explore where emotions are in their bodies. All participants have paper with human shape and their task is to draw or paint different emotion inside of that shape. Is it colorful, is it moving or it is still, where it is in their body etc. At the end, they are sharing with their pair and the other person is trying to give empathy.

My life in time of COVID-19

Participant are walking and when they want, they could approach someone and try, in 5 minutes to speak about - My life in Corona. After that, they walk again, find another person and they need to speak about the same topic, but they have 3 minutes. Than another person and only 1 minute for exchange. The last step is to find a person and try to give answer in 30 seconds, but only by looking each other in the eyes. In the plenary, they present themselves using information they exchange last, but this time, they could use words.

Limits an boundaries

At the beginning, each participant makes personal space from the stich tape. After that, they make personal space and distance in time of lockdown (caused by the COVID-19 pandemic), so how it looks when someone from outside make limits to them and at the end, how does it look when they make they own limits, from inside. After every part, we asked them how they feel, how they react on limits, if they are able to put some limits to the others or they could cross it easily. During the exercise, other participants could enter their space and we are debriefing about it.

Recommendations for improving the program in the future

Based on the experience of working with this group of participants and their feedbacks, in future workshops we will enable a larger number of participants to practice the role of facilitator of the peer support group.

It would be interesting to explore more activities for relaxation and anti-stress. Maybe to organize some activities in the nature, and to raise more awareness how youth workers need to take care of themselves.

Also, maybe it would be interesting to have more study cases, to practice more procedures in youth work.

Everything else was pretty good, we could keep it like this 😊