



Express and Reflect

A Wellbeing Toolkit for Youth Workers

Created to help youth workers support young people to manage their health and wellbeing following the Covid-19 pandemic



NYA
National Youth Agency

Foreword

I am pleased to introduce this toolkit to support youth workers in helping young people reflect on the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and navigate their health and wellbeing.

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the lockdowns which followed were an unprecedented challenge for young people. Disruption to education, isolation, separation, loneliness, loss, worsening mental health, increased cases of neglect and abuse in the home and more, meant that it was vital youth workers were there as trusted support amid the chaos. The NYA worked to guide the sector, as it continued operating tirelessly under Essential Worker status.

Now, as the longer-term effects of the pandemic continue to have an impact on young people, such as mental and physical health, relationships, access to education, readiness for employment and further training and confidence in the future, the need for youth workers is ever more apparent. Youth workers build the trusted relationships that young people need to find their way through the ongoing challenges, bridging the gaps in statutory provision and helping to build social skills, resilience and wellbeing.

Through an adapted version of the Six Ways to Wellbeing (Connect, Stay Active, Be Present, Keep Learning, Give Back, and Take Care of Your Body) this toolkit provides a series of activities to help young people make informed decisions and take charge of their emotional and physical health. Building on the National Youth Work Curriculum and Code of Ethics, as well as incorporating Trauma Informed Practice, this toolkit is designed to support youth workers as they continue to help young people process loss and change, build community connections, and foster creative expression.

The pandemic was hard. Its effects are ongoing. But youth workers have stood alongside young people throughout and continue to do so with dedication and compassion. We encourage you to use this toolkit to support the vital work you do.

With thanks,



Leigh Middleton, OBE

Chief Executive, National Youth Agency

Introduction

The aim of this toolkit is to provide activities based on the [Six Ways to Wellbeing](#) to help your young people reflect on the impact of the pandemic.

The connection between youth work, health and wellbeing can be seen through an adapted version of the Six Ways to Wellbeing. By integrating these principles, youth workers help young people navigate challenges, make informed decisions, and take charge of their health and wellbeing.

Connect:

Build strong relationships with friends, family, and the community.

Give back:

Volunteer and support others to create a sense of purpose.

Take care of your body:

Eat well, stay hydrated, get enough sleep, and make healthy choices.

Stay active:

Engage in sports, dance, or movement to improve mood and reduce stress.

Be present:

Practice mindfulness and self-awareness to manage emotions.

Keep learning:

Explore new skills and hobbies to build confidence.



Wheel of Wellbeing

Each activity is linked to one of the Six Ways to Wellbeing, so you can pick the ones you feel will best support your young people. These activities can be adapted to suit the needs of your group with ideas given.



We advise youth workers to use discretion and care as some of the topics and themes addressed may evoke strong responses. Links to further well-being resources and support are listed at the end of the document.

The National Youth Work Curriculum

Youth work curriculum themes





Acts of kindness

To think about moments of kindness and the impact kindness can have.



Discussion based activity

Wellbeing links: Connect, Be Present, Give Back

Opener:

Young people to think about and share a recent example where someone has shown kindness to them or someone they know. They may want to include kindness they have shown someone recently.

Deeper discussion:

Young people to then think back to a moment of need (the pandemic, another time when they needed support or a significant moment) within your local community and acts of kindness they saw happening, then to share experiences with the group.

Prompts for discussion:

- Who are the people you see trying to help others in your community?
- What did you (or do you) see happening in your local area that's positive?
- Did you take part in any community events to help others or make a positive difference?
- Did you show kindness to anyone during that moment of need?
- How does being kind make you feel?



Acts of kindness - continued

To think about moments of kindness and the impact kindness can have.



Discussion based activity

Wellbeing links: Connect, Be Present, Give Back

Extension activity:

Young people to reflect on who showed them the most kindness during the pandemic or other event. Then, come up with an action for how they can return an act of kindness for that person if possible.

Alternatively, they could choose to pay kindness forward to someone who they know helps other people in their community.

Adaptations:

To have some stories ready to help young people think of ideas or recall similar experiences.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-51908023>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-northamptonshire-52113635>

Have Key Worker categories* (see list below) visible to prompt ideas. Take each category in turn to help young people share specific stories of kindness, plus help think about who they could show kindness to, or just pick one or two examples relevant to your group and setting.

*Categories:

- Youth workers
- Health and social care (doctors, nurses and people who look after our health and wellbeing)
- Education and childcare, (teachers, school staff, child-minders)
- Food and home utilities (people who work in food preparation, distribution, grocery stores, electric/ water/ waste management systems)
- Transport (bus/ train/ underground drivers, taxi drivers)
- Government workers (those administering benefit payments, registry office workers, those linked to safety and security)
- IT and communications (people who ensure letters and parcels get delivered, internet safety)



Through my eyes

To explore experiences during the pandemic and how they feel now.



Creativity based activity: Connect, Be Present, Keep Learning

Planning:

Organise the space for young people to get creative – appropriate to resources you have and needs of the young people.

Stations could include: Drawing, painting, mixed craft/ collage, photography, air dry clay

Opener:

Young people to take a moment individually to reflect on how they would summarise their feelings from the pandemic. Then to think about how they feel now.

Main activity:

Young people to creatively express their then and now, showing their experiences through their eyes. Could be through a range of media if available.

Examples:

Young people could create self-portraits, depicting different emotions/moods at different times. They may want to take photos within the local area that evoke a sense of how they felt. Young people may want to explore through colours and different textures to express different emotions.

Extension activity:

Young People to think about key people that have helped them through their journey up until 'now'. Could creatively depict how that person helped them or how it made them feel.

Alternatively, they could choose to pay kindness forward to someone who they know helps other people in their community.

Further extension / summary:

If possible, in the space, create an area for people to display their experiences for others to see 'through their eyes'. Could provide space for future moments of reflection with the young people and your wider communities.



Gratitude exercise

To take time out to reflect.



Mindfulness based activity: Be Present, Keep Learning, Take Care of Yourself

Planning:

Young people will need something to write or draw on for the main part of the exercise. Main activity ideally held in a relaxing and calm environment, soft lighting, gentle music in the background.

Opener:

Start with some gentle relaxation exercises – three deep breaths, full body stretch, 54321 grounding ([guided video](#), further information from [Calm](#))– something to help them get comfortable and slow down.

Headspace visualisers: [Box breathing](#), [General grounding](#)

Main activity:

To start, ask young people to think about today, what's happened, who they have interacted with and how they have felt. As they think over the day, gradually focus on what's made them happy, given them a boost, or what they've looked forward to. As they do this, they can then identify 3 things that they feel thankful for and why that is (to draw or write down).

As time allows, guide young people to think about different points in time and repeat the process; over the last week, a point in the last year etc.

End with the gentle challenge to try again tomorrow and find 3 new things to be grateful for.

Extension activity:

Young people to think about a person that has meant a lot to them. As they do so, they could write a letter to that person explaining why they are grateful for them. The young people don't have to share the letter, but they could leave it anonymously or directly with the person if possible.



Please note, some young people may write a letter to someone who has died or is currently unwell. Youth worker to manage this activity with sensitivity and care and offer bespoke support, which may include giving young person the opportunity to read out the letter to celebrate the kindness and remember with care.



Remembrance walk

To take time out to reflect and pause.



Active based activity: Stay Active, Be Present, Connect, Give Back

Opener:

Young people to highlight key points in their community that you could walk to in a defined time you have available. If multiple options available, empower young people to create a route they're all happy with within your capacity.

Main activity:

Walk a route around these key places in your community. At each place, young people to share stories of why they are meaningful to them, how they felt if they couldn't visit during the pandemic and if that's changed now.

Extension activity:

For a future community action project, young people to decide on an area or place where they want to run an activity or event. Could be a family event at the local park, giving back to key workers, litter pick etc.

Adaptations:

Options for transport to different places, going to one local space they have in common, or multiple routes if staff capacity.

If staying indoors, print off a map of your area (or a few) and young people to pick out places – could use stickers or pens to mark them as you discuss why they've chosen it.



Creative writing

To help young people think creatively about how they could help people going through challenging times.



Active based activity: Stay Active, Be Present, Connect, Give Back

Opener:

Discussion for young people to think about what superpower they would have and why?

Main activity:

In a format of their choosing, young people to write/draw/paint a creative story of how their superpower could help in a crisis, like the pandemic.

Young people could choose a situation from the pandemic where they wished they had this superpower and create a new story – youth workers to use knowledge of group and individual experiences to decide suitability. Alternatively young people could create their own story about any situation.

Could take the form of a short story, cartoon, script for a show, poem etc. Discussions as young people create their stories could focus on how they can help people without having a superpower – ordinary acts of kindness can have huge impact.

Extension activity:

Create a zine (small scale magazine or booklet) or story book that brings all the different superpowers and ideas together. If dramatised and equipment allows, this could be made into a short film.

Adaptations:

Young people with the same superpower could work together, or could group together to form superpower teams.

Young people could create a short drama to show their superpower(s) in action.



Memory box

To help young people process feelings of loss and change.



Mindful/Reflection Activity: Connect, Be Present

Preparation:

Organise strong paper or cardboard with a box outline for young people to use as a mood board. Alternatively, provide resources for young people to make their own boxes (decoupage). If resources allow, provide craft boxes for young people to decorate and take with them. Young people could also bring their own boxes to decorate if enough notice given and support provided for those who won't be able to bring their own.

Opener:

Discussion on how we are all connected to people, places and things. Even if we move or things change, those connections can stay with us. Start with thinking about the people we feel connected to, then the places that hold special meaning and the things that bring up special memories.

Main activity:

On the outside of the box, encourage young people to add those current connections e.g. drawing their favourite places, items they have like holiday fridge magnets etc.

Inside the box, young people to think about connections that might have changed. If drawing – young people to draw those connections.

If decorating – young people to think about what they could add to the box to hold memories together. Decoration could symbolise the person, place or thing if they don't have anything to add to their box.

Youth workers to help them explore how changes to different connections have made them feel, support they may need. Encouragement for young people to keep their boxes somewhere safe and to make regular time to connect and remember.

Extension activity:

With a partner, share how they are going to connect with someone, somewhere or something in the week e.g. meeting a friend, putting photos up in their room etc. Young people in the group to take a moment of silence to end the session if they want to.

Create a reflection space for anyone to use in the youth club when they need it. Young people could share some positive messages, tips for self-care etc. Youth workers can also leave information for external support as suitable.

Final reflections and endings

Some of these activities can work well together but can also be done individually. We would advise that time is left for individual reflection or time to check-in with a youth worker at the end of your session.

Let young people know that if things feel tough, they're not alone. Encourage them to reach out to someone they trust for support.

You may want to bring everyone together to finish on a relaxation exercise as noted in [the Gratitude](#) exercise or let them choose something fun and appropriate to the group, e.g. a game or mini disco, free time or simply time to reflect. This will depend on your setting and age group of young people.

The activities in this toolkit encourage young people to make sense of their experiences in ways that feel personal and meaningful. By creating space for reflection, expression and shared conversation, you help them recognise both the challenges they've faced and the resilience they continue to build.

As you guide young people through these exercises, the intention isn't to find all the answers, but to acknowledge what has shaped them and what still matters. Small moments of connection, creativity and presence can help them feel grounded and supported as they navigate ongoing change.

Above all, this work reinforces that remembrance is not only about looking back, but also about carrying forward the compassion and community we saw during difficult times. Thank you for offering young people a place where their stories can be heard, honoured and held with care.



While this toolkit is aimed at supporting young people, we understand that the implications of COVID-19 are far reaching, and so we hope it will also be useful as a resource to check-in on colleagues and to support individuals working in the sector.

Further resources

- **The National Youth Work Curriculum**
 - is a flexible framework which allows youth workers to identify how their interventions and activities can be used to support the personal, social and political development of young people.
- **Building a Stronger Britain**
 - [Speak Out Toolkit](#)
- **Youth Work Code of Ethics**
 - The Youth Work Code of Ethics sets out the values, behaviours and professional standards that underpin safe, respectful and empowering work with young people
- **Introduction to Trauma Informed Practice**
 - In this short course, we delve into the impact of trauma and its far-reaching implications on our mental and emotional wellbeing. Designed to empower participants with invaluable insights, this course unravels the intricacies of trauma, shedding light on why it leaves indelible marks on our lives.

Contacts and helpful websites

- [Calm zone](#) | [Childline](#)
- [Kooth Home](#)
- [Useful contacts for 11-18 year olds support](#) | [Mind](#)
- [Mental health for children, teenagers and young adults](#) | [NHS](#)
- [Young people's mental health and wellbeing resources](#) | [The Children's Society](#)
- [Mental Health Charity For Children And Young People](#) | [YoungMinds](#)



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