Strategies for Prioritizing Mental Health and Wellness at YouthBuild Programs

The increased anxiety, social isolation, and uncertainty brought on by COVID-19 have highlighted the disparity in access to quality Mental Health and Wellness (MHW) resources within the communities served by DOL YouthBuild programs. Historical mistrust, low-quality services, and the cultural stigma associated with seeking “help” in some of these communities are a few of the contributing factors leading to poor MHW outcomes.

This tip sheet will offer grantees adaptable, evidence-based, trauma-informed approaches to recognize the symptoms of common mental health conditions; offer wellness-focused tools to better respond to the needs of program participants, staff, and alumni; and understand the pervasiveness of mental health conditions.

Research by the Kaiser Family Foundation indicates that there is an uptick in substance misuse disorders, depression diagnoses, and adolescent suicides due to COVID-19. Additional stressors such as job loss, homelessness, the digital divide during virtual learning, and food insecurity are just a few of the compounding issues impacting youth.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), “prior to the coronavirus outbreak, young adults were already at high risk of poor mental health and substance use disorder, yet many did not receive intervention or treatment.” Poor mental health contributes to increased absenteeism, lack of engagement, and toxic stress that undermine the ability of youth to succeed in academics and employment.

Mental health issues are unfortunately nothing new in America. According to Mental Health in America:

- 1 in 5 American adults will have a diagnosable mental health condition this year
- Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental illnesses
- Depression can occur to anyone, at any age, and to people of any race or ethnic group
- 37% of LGBTQ+ youth also identify as having a mental illness

Recognizing the symptoms associated with common mental health conditions can help YouthBuild grantee organizations better respond to the needs of participants, staff, and alumni. Taking a mental health screening is a quick and easy way to determine if mental health symptoms are present in an individual.
## Mental Health Conditions and Symptoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental Health Condition</th>
<th>Symptoms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anxiety Disorder</strong></td>
<td>Restlessness, Difficulty Concentrating and Sleeping, Muscle Pain, and Irritability</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Substance Misuse Disorder</strong></td>
<td>Continuous Use (with negative side effects), Difficulty Stopping (when you want to), Physical Feelings of Sickness (withdrawal)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Depression</strong></td>
<td>Persistent Sadness, Anxious or &quot;Empty&quot; Mood, Loss of Pleasure in Activities, Fatigue, Feeling Guilty, Hopeless, or Worthless</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)</strong></td>
<td>Re-experiencing Trauma, Avoidance, and Feeling Reactive</td>
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### Preventive Approach: Prioritize Wellness

YouthBuild programs have a unique opportunity to influence the health and wellness of youth participants. Creating a safe and inclusive culture will allow participants to feel safe enough to share their concerns and struggles. In highlighting the role of YouthBuild in reconnecting opportunity youth, [John Hopkins’ Bloomberg School of Public Health (2018)](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajph.2018.01.005) stressed the importance of a more preventive approach and stated that if we “focus on strengthening connections within our classrooms, family and community, promoting youth academic or career engagement, and enhancing meaningful relationships and supports, we could potentially avert youth disconnection.”

Below are preventive measures that promote health and wellness and tools needed to thrive in the classroom, workforce, postsecondary education, leadership, and daily life. These can be used with participants, as well as with program staff:

1. **Check-In:** The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) created a resource called [My Mental Health: Do I Need Help?](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/education-and-prevention/assess-your-mental-health.aspx) Use this resource to explore when mild and severe mental health symptoms begin to surface and last longer than 14 days.

2. **Create a Wellness Routine:** Having a plan in place can help prioritize Mental Health and Wellness. Use a [Wellness Plan](https://www.youthbuildusa.org/investigators/) to set up quarterly goals.

3. **Meditate:** Research shows that one minute of [deep breathing](https://www.youthbuildusa.org/investigators/meditation) can decrease anxiety, increase happiness, and is a tool to manage stress.

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**Tip:** Heart of Oregon YouthBuild (OR) has “advocates” on staff that offer “Be Your Best Self,” a social-emotional learning curriculum that teaches participants healthy coping skills.
Exploring and adopting Mental Health and Wellness evidence-based practices as part of YouthBuild programming will increase awareness and support healthy approaches to successful youth development. This will contribute to creating a safe and inclusive culture that will allow participants to feel comfortable enough to share their concerns and life challenges that may interfere with their attainment of personal and professional goals. Program staff will also be equipped to provide tools and resources to participants to navigate their traumas and begin a healing process without shame or blame. Below are additional resources and promising practices from the field to assist grantees with this journey. Lastly, YouthBuild program staff should be aware of Behavioral Health Workforce and Employment Training, which provides funding for specific training for those in the behavioral health workforce. This may be an opportunity for continuing professional development for YouthBuild staff.

**Additional Resources:**

- [Center for Disease and Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov) - Mental health tools and resources
- [National Alliance on Mental Health](https://www.nami.org) (NAMI) - Find your local NAMI affiliate to learn about free resources and educational supports
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](https://www.samhsa.gov) (SAMHSA) - Substance use and prevention resources

**Promising Practices:**

- [Factsheet: Strategies for Implementing Trauma-Informed Care in a YouthBuild Program](#)
- [Webinar: Substance Use, Trauma, and Other Challenges: Effective Case Management Strategies](#)
- [YouthBuild Connect Call: Student Retention, Mental Health, and COVID-19](#)