RESPONDING IN THE MOMENT:
MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS FOR YOUTH

BACKGROUND

When service providers were asked what types of mental health challenges youth are experiencing in programs, depression and anxiety were the leading two responses. Responding to the urgent mental health needs of youth and young adults requires us to look at our practices and policies to ensure that they are trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and youth-led. This tip sheet offers practical strategies in supporting youth mental health through prevention, crisis intervention, and restorative practices.

KEY POINTS OF PRACTICE WHEN SUPPORTING YOUTH WITH MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Prevention:

- **Community Based Prevention**: Youth mental health is a shared challenge happening in homes, schools, programs, and communities. Educating the community on how to recognize youth mental health needs and providing resources to address those needs is essential when taking a community-based approach to the issue. Sharing accessible mental health screening assessments, distributing a list of local or online affordable mental health services, and holding open events around the topic where people can ask questions and receive answers from a trusted source (i.e., community health professionals) are some ways to begin this process.

- **Train In and Utilize Prevention Models**: Direct care staff need training and support in preventing and managing mental health needs and crises. Staff are better able to utilize skills learned in training when there is a culture of care: self-care or collective care. This helps mitigate staff from being triggered or harmed during a situation. Youth benefit from this as well, they see care modeled, and are in an environment that promotes self - care which makes it a more attainable practice.

- **Start the Process Early**: Have mental health and other risk factor assessments that accurately capture needs. Let the information disclosed and youth lead this process in determining a universal proactive safety plan that works for them on all three levels, pre-crisis, during crisis, and after crisis. This can also be developed in an informal or conversational setting where staff ask essential questions such as "What can staff do to best support you if you are triggered, stressed, etc.?" or "What current coping skills/tools do you use and find helpful?" This method and use of language provides a way to identify needs even with youth who are not explicit about their challenges. Be

attentive and implement steps in the plan for when youth exhibit warning signs as a proactive approach. If conflict is present, address it through restorative practices.

- **Build Relationships with Youth**: Models such as Trust - Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) have been developed around this concept and focus on meeting the needs of youth through connection and relationships. Working in partnership with youth to create a physically and emotionally safe environment helps strengthen that relationship. The partnership also is an additional way to engage youth in discussion surrounding their healing and safety, as well as a way to keep the safety plan relevant and adaptive to changing needs.

Crisis:

- **Utilize Staff Relationships with Youth**: While in crisis youth are processing with their survival brain. Each youth will react differently on all levels: mentally, physically, emotionally. This can look like a variety of responses such as fight, flight, or freeze. The presence of a staff member that has trust with the youth can be the catalyst for de-escalation. This person is better positioned to offer options like deep breathing, walking together, or other identified coping strategies.

- **Be Flexible**: Crisis situations are unpredictable. Youth needs vary and change rapidly during crises, and staff should be able to shift along with those needs. The most organic way to do this is by simply being present and flexible. This could mean yielding the process until youth are able to respond in a healthier manner. Asking youth what they need in the moment helps ensure the best result. Most crisis situations can be de-escalated when youth feel heard, understood, and connected.

- **Prioritize Safety**: Take action to maintain the safety of staff and youth. Staff should have access to 24/7 support to address mental health and other intensive crisis needs and be aware of organizational and program procedures. Youth should be aware of and allowed access to mental health/suicide crisis lines and other resources outside of your organization.

- *Note: During a crisis avoid trying to reason with the person, giving unwanted advice, discussing consequences, or rushing the process. Instead, give personal space, offer options, and solutions.*

Post Crisis/ Restoration:

- **Be Understanding**: Youth may use a lot of energy during a mental health crisis. Allow space for the youth to rest and meet current needs (food, shower, etc.) following the crisis. Remember that post-crisis depletion happens <u>before</u> recovery. Wait to reflect with youth until they are in a stable space to effectively engage.

- **Youth Reflection**: Create a calm environment for reflection. Allow youth to lead this process, and offer guidance by asking questions like "What happened from their perspective? How did they cope? What repair/restoration is needed to relationships, property, etc.? What do they want to put in place to prevent or minimize future crises?"

- **Programmatic Reflection**: Assess how the organizational/programmatic crisis intervention plan was helpful, harmful, and implemented. Consider questions like "Was this process effective at responding to the current need? What went wrong and why? What went well and how did that better the outcome? Was the plan easily executed? How do we better train staff to ensure positive end results?" Reflect on these questions, adapt, and strengthen the plan accordingly and as needed.

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

- Protecting Youth Mental Health – U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory
- Black Emotional and Mental Health (BEAM): Toolkits and Resources
- Mental Health Outcomes Among Runaway, Homeless, and Stably Housed Youth
- Addressing Intersecting Social and Mental Health Needs among Transition-Aged Homeless Youth
- Child Welfare Webinar | The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth
- Accessible Mental Health

RESOURCES ON OTHER RELATED TOPICS

Trauma Informed Care
- Organizational Trauma-Informed Assessment
- Language Matters - Trauma Infographic
- Building Trauma Informed Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs

Social Emotional Learning
- Tools for Supporting Emotional Wellbeing of Children and Youth

Additional Resources
- Crisis Text Line Resource Links
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network
- Me and My Emotions
- In Brief: Resilience Series