

## **Living In Freedom and Thriving**

Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being  
among High School Students



# **LIFT**

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among High School Students

**Living In Freedom and Thriving (LIFT)**

Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being among High School Students

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# Introduction

This program was designed with adolescents, especially high school students, in mind. The goal is for these students to become more self-aware and educated on mental health and caring for their overall well-being. Each topic is designed to help students discover aspects of their personalities, navigate the different challenges they may have to face in life, and dream and prepare for their future.

Through the topics and activities, a safe space can be fostered, where students can freely share their insights, thoughts, and struggles they may be going through. Students can be connected with a community that provides support for their well-being and to help them build their future.

The program consists of weekly meetings throughout the academic year led by keynote speakers and volunteer facilitators, where a holistic approach to caring for students' personal well-being is encouraged.

Each month, different topics are covered using the following format:

## **Week 1: Let's Think About It**

- Plenary session with a keynote speaker or mental health professional on key topics pertaining to mental health and overall well-being
- Group discussion to process key ideas learned in week 1

## **Weeks 2-4: Let's Talk About It**

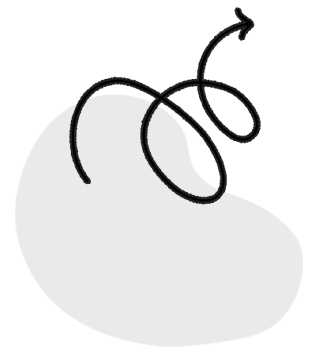
- Different activities each week in a group setting where students can explore further the key ideas from the discussion in week 1
- Group discussion to process the activities and how these truths can apply to their personal lives
- Optional take home activities that encourage self-reflection and personal growth

Beyond the material provided, conversations and discussions can continue for personal application and growth.



MONTH 1

# Freedom to Talk About Mental Health: Creating Safe Spaces



## WEEK 1

### Activity (10 minutes)

1. Form groups of three.
2. List ten words that come to your mind when you hear the term "mental health."
3. Be ready to share your answers with the bigger group.

### Let's Think About It

One of the first things we need to know before we begin a conversation about mental health is the idea of safe spaces. Is this a safe place to talk about something sensitive? Can I freely speak my mind without getting judged? Am I sure that what I say will not be used against me? These questions tell us we all need safe spaces.

A safe space can be physical, like a small gathering of trusted friends over a meal, or it can be symbolic. This is where people are willing to participate and honestly struggle with challenging issues without fear of attack, ridicule, or denial of experience (Bramberger & Winter, 2021). Research shows that students in classroom environments that are deemed "safe spaces" learn more than those who attend classes in "unsafe" environments. They feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (Holley & Steiner, 2013). While this works well in learning environments, how much more when something as personal as mental health is at stake?

Conversations about mental health need to happen with the understanding or foreknowledge of safe spaces. The truth is, we don't know what people are going through and how vulnerable they are at any given moment. Because of this, we need to create safe spaces for others, as much as we need others to create safe spaces for us.

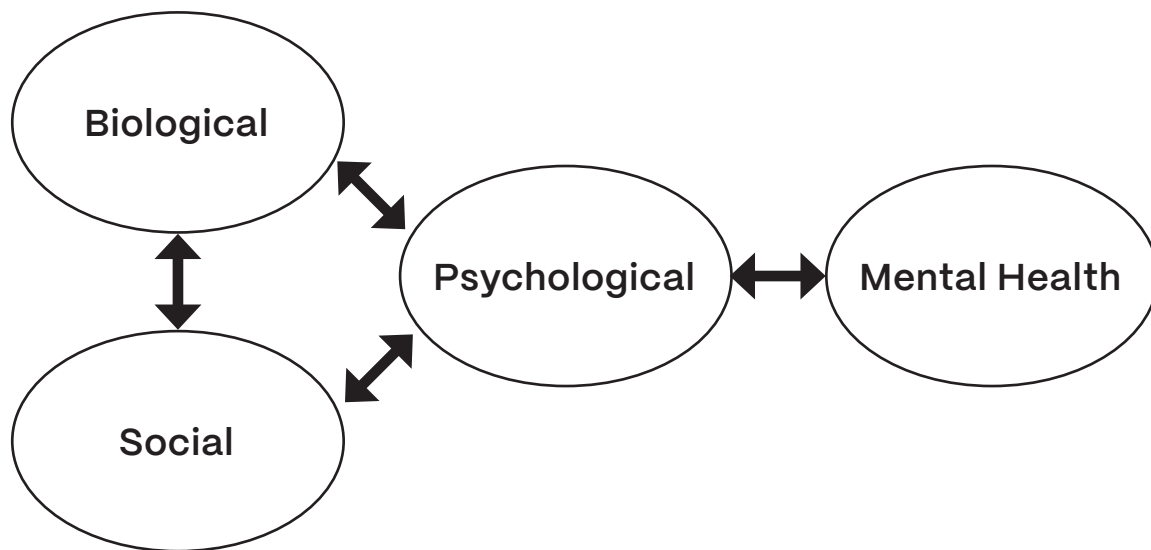
The World Health Organization (2022) defines mental health as the “state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.” We can say we have a good mental health condition when we can cope with adversities, make use of our abilities to reach our dreams, and contribute to society.

While this scenario is ideal, some questions need to be addressed:

- What influences mental health?
- Why do some people have good mental health while others don't?
- When we talk about mental health, what are we really looking for?

In the late 1970s, George Engel, a psychiatrist and medical sociologist, made a staggering proposal that there was something lacking about the way medical practitioners diagnosed patients. He claimed that they were only looking at the physical aspect (like the brain, for example), without taking into account the many other factors that can influence mental health and health in general (Engel, 1977). Their method of diagnosis was not enough, Engel claimed, so he proposed a new way of thinking about mental health that combines three major factors—biology, psychology, and sociology—which we now call the Biopsychosocial (BPS) Model of Mental Health (Campbell & Rohrbaugh, 2006).

### The Biopsychosocial Model of Mental Health



### The Biological Aspect

The biological aspect includes stressors related to genetics, past and current diseases, injuries, hormones, diet, exercise, and drugs. What is the history of the person's illness? Are there psychiatric disorders present among other family members? These questions matter because it is possible that the presenting mental health concern is connected to the person's genetics. In other words, when we talk about mental health, we don't just

look at the biological aspect of the person in front of us. We should also consider his previous medical history and even his family tree.

### **The Psychological Aspect**

If mental health is purely biological, then any deviation from that health can either be operated on or treated medically. But Engel contended that equally important to the overall health of a person is his or her psychological makeup. The psychological aspect includes emotions, resilience, coping skills, emotional intelligence, cognitive biases, behavior, and IQ. What did this person's childhood look like? Who are the most important people in this person's life? How does the person describe himself or herself? What are the things that make the person feel good about himself or herself?

The psychological aspect of a person provides the narrative that serves as the backdrop of the person's presenting problems. This means that any mental health case we encounter doesn't happen in isolation. There's a story that ties it all together somewhere and that story can help us understand how to help the person.

### **The Social Aspect**

The third major factor that directly contributes to our mental health is the social aspect, which includes two interrelated areas: culture and spirituality. People who experience acute and chronic social and religious stressors are more likely to develop mental health problems. This could include death of a family member, sickness in the family, breakdown of parents' marriage, living alone, attending a new school and not getting along well with teachers or students, financial difficulties, homelessness, living in unsafe neighborhoods, and exposure to disasters.

### **Conclusion**

The biopsychosocial model helps us understand that a person's mental health problem most likely doesn't just come from one place. It is often a result of the complex interactions of all aspects of a person's life. This is another reason safe spaces are important. When we encounter people with mental health challenges, we cannot right away deduce that it's because the person is emotionally weak. There's most likely a long story behind the problem that needs longer conversations in a place or environment where it's safe to talk.

### **Let's Talk About It**

- Of the three aspects mentioned above, which one is not a challenge for you?
- Of the three aspects, which one is the most difficult for you right now?
- What simple steps can you take to attain total mental health?

## Self-Care Assessment

As we begin our journey to pursuing our overall well-being, let's assess where each of us are. Self-care activities are the things you do to maintain good health and improve well-being. You'll find that you may already be doing many of these activities as part of your regular routine.

### Activity (20–25 minutes)

In this assessment, you will think about how frequently or how well you are performing different self-care activities. The goal of this assessment is to help you learn about your self-care needs by spotting patterns and recognizing areas of your life that need more attention.

There are no right or wrong answers on this assessment. There may be activities that you have no interest in, and other activities may not be included. This list is not comprehensive, but serves as a starting point for thinking about our self-care needs.

1	I do this poorly, rarely, or not at all
2	I do this okay or sometimes
3	I do this well or often
★	I would like to improve at this or do this more frequently

1	2	3	★	BIOLOGICAL (PHYSICAL) SELF-CARE
				Eat healthy food
				Take care of personal hygiene
				Exercise
				Wear clothes that help me feel good about myself
				Eat regularly
				Participate in fun activities (e.g., walking, swimming, dancing, sports)
				Get enough sleep
				Go to preventative medical appointments (e.g., checkups, teeth cleanings)
				Rest when sick
				Overall physical self-care

1	2	3	★	<b>PSYCHOLOGICAL (EMOTIONAL) SELF-CARE</b>
				Take time off from work, school, and other obligations
				Participate in hobbies
				Get away from distractions (e.g., phone, email)
				Learn new things, unrelated to work or school
				Express my feelings in a healthy way (e.g., talking, creating art, journaling)
				Recognize my own strengths and achievements
				Go on vacations or day-trips
				Do something comforting (e.g., re-watch a favorite movie, take a long bath)
				Find reasons to laugh
				Talk about my problems
				Overall psychological and emotional self-care

1	2	3	★	<b>SOCIAL SELF-CARE</b>
				Spend time with people whom I like
				Call or communicate with friends and family who are far away
				Have stimulating conversations
				Meet new people
				Ask others for help, when needed
				Do enjoyable activities with other people
				Stay connected with my key relationships (e.g., family, friends)
				Overall social self-care

## **Discussion**

According to the World Health Organization (n.d.), health is a state of complete biological, psychological, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

The more we understand what contributes to our health, the more we will be able to take care and grow in our well-being.

### **Let's Talk About It** (10–15 minutes)

Which among these aspects do you want to start working on now to improve your overall well-being? Why?

## Unveiling Self-Discovery

### **Activity** (25–30 minutes)

This activity encourages self-exploration, introspection, and emotional well-being through journaling.

#### **Instructions:**

1. Prepare your pen and journal or notebook. You can also take notes on your phone, but using a physical notebook helps free you from distractions.
2. Find a quiet and comfortable space where you can focus on journaling without distractions. Create an ambiance that makes you feel relaxed and at ease.
3. Select a specific theme for your journaling session. It could be self-awareness, self-acceptance, personal growth, gratitude, dreams, or any other topic that resonates with you.
4. If you prefer more structure, you can use prompts to guide your journaling. Here are a few examples:
  - What does [chosen theme] mean to me, and why is it important?
  - How does [chosen theme] influence my daily life?
  - What are three things I appreciate or admire about myself in relation to this theme?
  - How can I incorporate [chosen theme] into my future goals and aspirations?
  - Are there any challenges or obstacles I face in relation to this theme, and how can I overcome them?
5. You can also complete any of the following sentences to help you as you start writing.
  - Today, I am grateful for . . .
  - I felt happy today when . . .
  - I felt angry today when . . .
  - Whenever I feel angry, I . . .
  - Whenever I feel sad, I talk to . . .
  - I feel comfortable sharing my thoughts and emotions to . . .
  - Tomorrow, I hope . . .
  - Five years from now, I hope to . . .
6. Reflect on the insights, emotions, or realizations that have surfaced in your writing. Underline or highlight any significant points that stand out to you. Consider how these thoughts and reflections can contribute to your personal growth or understanding of self.

## Discussion

Journaling is a powerful tool that plays a significant role in improving our personal well-being. It can help us face and process our thoughts, emotions, and actions.

Journaling is a transformative practice that promotes self-reflection, emotional well-being, self-expression, personal growth, and overall mental health. It provides a space for introspection, clarity, and self-discovery, ultimately leading to improved personal well-being and a deeper connection with ourselves.

### **Let's Talk About It** (10–15 minutes)

While it may not come naturally to you, journaling is a personal practice, so feel free to adapt these instructions to suit your preferences and needs. You do not have to show others your journal to have them validate it, but you can further process your thoughts and emotions with others to help you.

Let's process together:

1. On what theme did you write on? Share with us how this short activity has given you a peak or insight on yourself. You don't have to share what you wrote, but feel free to share how you think this can help you.
2. What challenges, if any, have you encountered while trying to write your journal today? How do you think you can overcome them as you maintain a regular journaling practice?

Make it a habit to journal regularly, allowing yourself the opportunity for self-reflection, self-expression, and emotional well-being.

## Safe Spaces

### Activity (20–30 minutes)

Safe space is defined as a place that provides a physically and emotionally safe environment for a person or group of people. It is a place where people can freely express themselves without fear of prejudice or judgment.

This activity aims to explore the concept of safe spaces within relationships with parents, siblings, and friends, and foster open and supportive communication for better mental health and well-being.

### Materials:

- Paper or index cards
- Pens, markers, coloring materials

### Instructions:

1. Take a few minutes to reflect individually on your relationships with parents, siblings, and friends. How close or distant are you with them (physically and emotionally)?
2. Think about specific instances or qualities that make you feel safe, supported, and understood in each of these relationships.
3. Write or draw your reflections on the paper or index cards.

You can use the table below to help you as you think of things to write down about your parents, siblings, and friends.

	My parents	My siblings	My friends
Favorite memories with . . .			
Things I like about my relationships with . . .			
Things that make me feel safe with . . .			

## Discussion

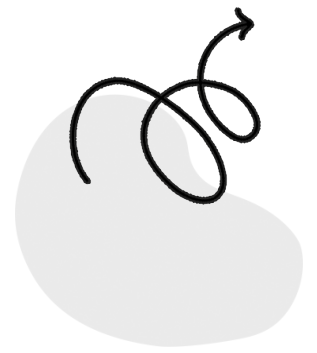
In our pursuit of our health and well-being, a safe space, a healthy environment, and the support of those close to us are crucial.

### **Let's Talk About It** (20–25 minutes)

1. What makes a space feel safe? How does this contribute to your mental health?
2. Share specific examples of moments when you felt supported, heard, or respected within these relationships.
3. How can you apply the idea of safe spaces in your own life? How can you nurture safe spaces within your relationships with your parents, siblings, and friends?
4. In your journal and personal time, reflect on ways you can actively contribute to creating safe spaces for others in your relationships.

## MONTH 2

# Freedom in Identity: Discovering Self



### WEEK 1

#### Let's Think About It

Safe spaces are not just limited to our relationships; they can also extend—and must begin—within us, and this starts by discovering and understanding who we are.

As adolescents, you undergo significant physical, emotional, and cognitive changes, which can affect your social interactions, school performance, and outlook on life. You face many challenges, such as hormonal shifts, peer pressure, academic stress, and an increase in responsibilities (Steinberg, 2008). These can affect your mental health and general well-being. Perhaps you have felt these overwhelming internal and external pressures, which can make you question your capabilities, goals in life, and sense of self or identity.

Although identity formation continues throughout life, adolescence is when you begin to consider the impact of your identity on your present dealings and future endeavors. Though you may not explicitly ask, "Who am I?," your circumstances and the decisions you have to make surface the need for clarity in your sense of being. This active period of "finding yourself" is when you also begin to explore your personal values and beliefs, which is an essential part of laying the groundwork for the subsequent developmental stages.

Therefore, it is crucial that, as young as you are, you discover your true identity. This will determine the course of your life.

Establishing your sense of identity is one of the most crucial goals of the adolescent stage, according to the traditional psychosocial development theory made popular by psychologist Erik Erikson. As teenagers, you learn about yourself and the kind of person you want to be by trying on multiple identities in different areas of life, such as fashion, hairstyles, groups of friends, romantic partners, and interests like sports, music, arts, etc.

Throughout this period of experimentation, identity emerges. You begin to see yourself as separate from your primary caregivers, usually your parents. However, significant childhood experiences have already made their imprint on your being. You bring with you your self-representations, marked by who you were called out to be at home and in early environments. While external voices used to dictate who you are and what you will become, these will now be dictated by your own voices, either willfully or unconsciously.

Surrounded by a growing world with a myriad of choices and loud, imposing voices (externally and intrinsically), the quest for the self becomes more confusing. The quest can even become overwhelming and frustrating, especially if you have not yet learned how to cope with stress in a healthy manner from childhood. As Erikson's theory on stages of development posits, if appropriate interventions are not applied in an adolescent's life, there is a possibility that difficulties will be compounded later on in life.

James Marcia (2010) elaborated on Erikson's theory by pointing to **exploration** and **commitment** as two crucial stages in the maturation of an individual's sense of self. Exploration refers to ways in which you experiment with your identity (Portland State University, 2021). For example, you may do this by trying on new perspectives, clothing styles, social circles, academic interests, political inclinations, religious beliefs, and extracurricular pursuits. On the other hand, commitment refers to the acceptance of the multifaceted authentic self acquired throughout exploration.

As developmental theories and psychosocial studies present the explorations that you go through in relation to your environment and relationships, the role of society is, therefore, essential in the formation of this identity. In this pivotal season of your life, we encourage you not just to seize experiences but, more importantly, to choose caring relationships and supportive communities.

**Identity**, or an individual's sense of self, is defined by the American Psychological Association (n.d.) as:

"(a) a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that are not wholly shared with any other person, and

(b) a range of affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social roles."

In other words, identity is the distinct way in which we refer to ourselves—as individuals and as members of social groups. This definition can be viewed in light of psychiatrist Dr. Dan Siegel's extensive work on interpersonal neurobiology, wherein he presents the concept of the "relational mind." He points out that the development of the brain and the mind is dependent on the quality of people's interactions (Siegel, 1999).

As adolescents, you are exploring and saturating your minds with personal preferences, and in the process of interacting with other people, your mind (your ideologies, beliefs, values, etc.) take shape. This implies that who you choose to invest your adolescence with can potentially have a great influence on your search for identity.

Here is what the psychosocial stages look like, according to Erikson (1968). Notice the distinct quest for identity in the life stage of adolescents. How true (and stressful) is this crisis for you?

## Erikson's Psychosocial Stages

STAGE	CRISIS	DESCRIPTION
<b>Infancy</b> (0–1 year)	Trust vs. Mistrust	When children are treated with consistent love and care and have their needs met by their parent/s, they should develop the capacity for trust.
<b>Early Childhood</b> (2–3 years)	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	Children should be encouraged to exercise free will and try out new skills. Discouragement (or lack of encouragement) may lead to sustained self-doubt.
<b>Play Age</b> (4–6 years)	Initiative vs. Guilt	Children should be encouraged to be independent. If a child's independent initiatives and play activities are overly controlled, they may develop sustained guilt.
<b>School Age</b> (7–12 years)	Industry vs. Inferiority	A sense of industry is a desire to be creative and productive. A school child should be encouraged in their creative and productive endeavors. If belittled for incompetence, a sense of inferiority may set in.
<b>Adolescence</b> (13–18 years)	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Young people seek a sense of self and their place in the world. If they feel they lack a sense of belonging to any identity group, they may develop uncertainty about their identity that lasts into adulthood.
<b>Young Adulthood</b> (Early 20s)	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Young adults commit their efforts to developing intimate relationships with significant others. If they are unsuccessful, they will develop a sense of isolation.
<b>Adulthood</b> (Late 20s–50s)	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Generative adults contribute to society and the raising of future generations through parenting. Self-absorbed adults stagnate and fail to contribute to the flourishing of their societies.
<b>Old Age</b> (60s onward)	Ego Identity vs. Despair	As people enter their twilight years, they reflect on their contributions to society. Those dissatisfied with their lives will develop a sense of despair as they face the looming end of their lives.

## **Conclusion**

Your identity is greatly influenced by your community. Therefore, it is crucial to be discerning and deliberate in surrounding yourself with people who can guide you in the right direction towards a healthy well-being.

## **Let's Talk About It**

1. Introduce yourself by answering the question, "Who am I?"
2. Describe your "ideal" self.
3. What is one thing that you do not like about yourself? What is one thing that you like about yourself?

## Who Am I? Identity Exploration Exercise

### Activity (20–25 minutes)

Identity is how you think about, describe, and present yourself. It can be made up of different roles, traits, and experiences. For example, an identity may include parent, survivor, dog owner, chronic illness sufferer, and kind person. Developing a strong identity can give meaning and direction in life.

This activity provides a unique way to help students explore their identity. Name each part of your identity, describe what it means to you, and rate how strongly you identify with this part. At the end of the worksheet, create a nickname or title for your identity that encompasses its most important aspects.

This identity exploration exercise can help you get to know the distinct parts of yourselves and understand how you come together to create a unique individual. This exercise is well-suited for internal family systems therapy and explores how you understand or construct your identity.

Instructions: On the tables below, name the parts of your identity and describe what they mean to you. Then, rate how much you identify with each part (1 = very little, 10 = very strongly).

*Note: You do not have to use all the boxes.*

Part of My Identity	Rating (1–10)
<i>Example: Creative writer</i>	8
<i>What it means to me: Example: Writing stories, whether fictional or about my daily life, helps me destress and express myself, my thoughts, my emotions, my deepest desires</i>	

Part of My Identity	Rating (1–10)
What it means to me:	

Part of My Identity	Rating (1-10)
What it means to me:	

Part of My Identity	Rating (1-10)
What it means to me:	

Part of My Identity	Rating (1-10)
What it means to me:	

Part of My Identity	Rating (1-10)
What it means to me:	

Reflect on the most important aspects of who you are, then write a title or nickname for your identity. For example: *The Animal-Painting Artistic Dancer, The Sudoku-Loving Singer-Writer, Curious yet Fun-Loving Mathematician*. Be as creative as you like!

My title/nickname:

## Discussion

### Answer the following:

1. Why do you identify more strongly with some parts of yourself than others?
2. How do the different parts of your identity relate to your values?
3. What insight did you gain from completing this exercise?
4. How does your internal sense of self compare to the identity you present to the world?

Discovering your identity is crucial, especially at this stage in your life. As we discover parts of who we are and how they contribute to our overall identity, we become more aware and appreciative of how we were designed and created. It also helps us see aspects where we can grow more to improve our health and well-being.

**Let's Talk About It** (10–15 minutes)

- As you discover more of who you are, how can you learn to embrace parts of yourself that you initially did not like?
- In what ways can you turn these into your assets, strengths, or things that can help you to grow and to serve others?

## Unleashing Your Inner Superpower: Embracing Your Unique Strengths

### **Activity** (25–30 minutes)

This activity aims to help individuals recognize and embrace their unique strengths, talents, and abilities, foster self-confidence, and promote positive mental health and well-being.

### **Materials:**

- Paper
- Pens or markers
- Optional: Art supplies, such as colored pencils, stickers, or craft materials

### **Instructions:**

1. Take a few minutes to reflect on your own unique “superpowers” a.k.a. your strengths, talents, or abilities. These don’t have to be extraordinary such as feats of strength or seemingly supernatural abilities. They can be as simple as caring for others with a personal touch, cooking or preparing meals for loved ones, or giving thoughtful gifts.
2. Think about what sets you apart from others and what you excel at. Write or draw your reflections on a piece of paper. If you would like to visually represent your personal superpowers, you can use different art materials.
3. Create a superhero identity using images, colors, symbols, or words that represent your unique strengths and abilities.
4. Let’s take turns sharing your reflections on your personal superpowers and your artwork within the group.
5. Then, we’ll take turns sharing an affirmation or compliment about the unique strengths and abilities of the person on your right. Offer words of encouragement and empowerment to each other, recognizing and celebrating each of our unique abilities.

### **Discussion**

Overall, this activity helps us cultivate self-acceptance, boost self-confidence, and foster a positive mindset by embracing and celebrating our unique strengths and abilities. It encourages us to recognize and use our superpowers, leading to increased self-awareness, personal growth, and improved overall well-being. As we know ourselves, we not only grow and have a healthier disposition about our identity, but we can position ourselves to be of help to others as well.

## **Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

- Take a few moments to reflect on how you can actively maximize your personal superpowers in your daily life. Write or draw your personal action plan, which can include specific actions, goals, or self-empowerment statements related to embracing and expressing your unique strengths.
- Encourage them to carry their newfound appreciation for their superpowers forward, recognizing and celebrating their strengths, and supporting others in recognizing their own unique abilities.

## Weaving Connections of Diversity and Unity

### Activity (30–45 minutes)

This activity aims to explore individual identities in a social context, celebrating diversity while fostering connections and empathy among participants for enhanced health and well-being.

#### Materials:

- Large sheets of paper or a roll of craft paper
- Markers, colored pencils, or pens
- String, yarn, or ribbon
- Scissors
- Optional: Art supplies for decoration (e.g., stickers, glitter, collage materials)

#### Instructions:

1. On a large sheet of paper or a section of craft paper, create your own identity map by drawing and writing about various aspects of your identity, such as culture, hobbies, beliefs, talents, or experiences. Be creative and feel free to express yourself authentically.
2. Take turns sharing your identity maps with the group.
3. In your sharing, you can ask questions, provide feedback, or share connections you find between your own identity and those of others.
4. Now, you will be assigned with one color of string, yarn, or ribbon. Cut a length of string that represents your identity and tie it to parts of your paper. Then connect the other end of the string to someone you share similarities with, leaving room for others to add their own strings.

#### Discussion

There is an African term, *Ubuntu*, that translates to "I am because we are." *Ubuntu* explores the idea that our identity is closely tied and connected to the community we grew up in and currently live in. The people around us, whether our family, relatives, friends, or neighbors, help shape who we are, intentionally or unintentionally (Paulson, 2019).

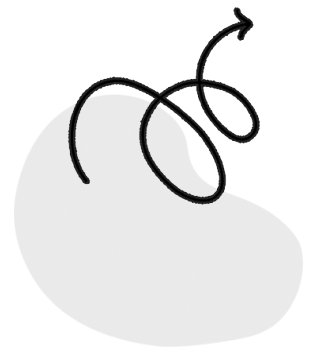
While our community and background do not completely explain why we are the way we are, it is one way of looking at our identity and how our lives, in turn, affect others. We humans are designed for relationships and are not meant to live in isolation or as separate from other humans and communities. Whether we are introverted or extroverted, no one can survive apart from others.

**Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

- What are your personal takeaways from this activity?
- How are you unique or different from your groupmates? In what ways are you alike?
- How do you think your similarities and differences help you cultivate a healthy relationship with them?
- Why do you think it is important to know how different and how similar we are to each other? How do you think that helps with knowing and strengthening your self-identity?

MONTH 3

# Thriving in Empowerment: Cultivating Protective Factors



WEEK 1

## Let's Think About It

Last month, we talked about self-identity as the internal awareness of who we are and how that identity fits into our social environment. But did you know that having a strong sense of identity greatly benefits our mental health? It has been shown that those who have a stronger sense of self-identity tend to manage the symptoms of depression better than those who do not, making self-identity a protective factor (Polacsek, 2021). So what then are protective factors?

"In this world, you will have troubles . . ." These are words uttered by Jesus Himself, as written in the book of John. True enough, we all face challenges on a regular basis. No one, regardless of age, race, or gender, is immune to the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Even you, the younger members of our society, are not exempted. From the mundane worries of an unstable internet connection during online classes to a more serious concern of raising enough funds to pay for tuition fees, you have so much going through your minds. In fact, a study conducted by the University of the Philippines Population Institute (2021) revealed that one in five Filipinos aged 15–24 has considered ending his or her life due to adversity.

We have all experienced the overwhelming fear of not having enough, not doing enough, and not being enough. Are you familiar with the feeling of dread that comes when you are drowning in problems and do not have adequate resources to cope? Left unresolved and unmanaged, these seemingly harmless nuances can negatively affect our physical and mental health or our well-being in general. The good news is that we all possess certain characteristics that can reduce or buffer the effects of the risks, stress, and trauma

that we go through. These are known as **protective factors**, and these factors can be strengthened and developed (youth.gov, 2009).

Several factors, including biological, psychological, or social, can either protect us from developing mental health concerns or increase our chances of developing one. Several studies have shown that when it comes to mental health maintenance and promotion, the most effective interventions are the ones aimed at strengthening our protective factors.

Protective factors refer to clearly defined characteristics at the biological, psychological, and social level that are associated with a decreased probability of problem outcomes or that reduces the negative impact of a risk factor on problem outcomes (APA, 2023). These are beneficial influences that can enhance your quality of life and even the safety of your community. For example, exercising regularly decreases the probability that a person may suffer from coronary heart disease. Therefore, exercise acts as a protective factor.

While **risk factors** increase the likelihood that an individual will develop a certain condition (youth.gov, 2009), protective factors are associated with positive adjustment and development throughout the course of life-threatening conditions and cultural situations (Lopez et al., 2019, as cited in Wilson, 2023).

To better understand how protective factors contribute to our well-being, we need to look into the progression of mental health issues. The lack of protective factors in a person can lead to the development of risk factors which, as mentioned, increase the risk of that person developing a mental health concern.

The progression of mental health issues



As discussed from our previous sessions, we can better understand mental health through the Biopsychosocial (BPS) Model of Mental Health. As such, protective factors can also be grouped into the biological, psychological, and social aspects. A recent study, which aimed to evaluate the protective and risk factors on the psychological well-being of adolescents, concluded that the following protective factors are beneficial to adolescent mental health (Gamble, 2021):

1. **Biological factors** refer to the physiological make-up of an individual. In terms of biological protective factors, ample evidence suggests the importance of healthy behaviors. These include engaging in physical activities such as sports, sufficient sleep, and a regular nutritious diet. Ecopsychology also seems to benefit all of us and especially you as the young population. Spending time with nature and within natural environments have been shown to minimize the risk for mental health issues.
2. **Psychological factors** encompass our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, including personality, beliefs, and coping methods. Psychological protective factors include high levels of resilience, or the ability to bounce back—to return to healthy functioning—following adverse circumstances (APA, 2023). Character strengths such as proactive behavior and positive coping strategies were also found to be protective factors. The ability to view your environment and situation with a sense of humor can also help you cope with life's challenges. Even simple behavioral changes such as reducing passive screen time and sticking to daily life routines have proven to be beneficial.
3. **Social factors** include socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural aspects. Emotional and social support, the quality of family relationships, and connectedness have been known to support adolescent psychological well-being. Protective parent-child relationships, positive relationship with parents, positive family climate, and positive perceptions of home life were also seen as protective.

A study among university students in China was conducted in March and April of 2020, at the wake of the state-enforced quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal was to identify prevalent mental health symptoms and how protective factors can prevent these. A total of 1,912 university students participated in the study, which revealed the prevalence of anxiety, depression, and traumatic stress symptoms. Results showed that protective factors are beneficial to students' well-being amidst the stress brought about by the pandemic. Specifically, practicing mindfulness, a biological and psychological protective factor, has been known to minimize the symptoms of all the above-mentioned mental health concerns. Perceived social support, a psychological and social protective factor, was found to be beneficial to those experiencing anxiety and depression (Sun et al., 2021). In the same way, prosocial behaviors that are directed towards promoting the well-being of others such as caring, helping, sharing, and volunteering, appear to serve as social protective factors. Findings from this study suggest that in response to the high need for psychological health during times of adversities, strengthening one's protective factors is beneficial (Nadeau, 2022).







## Conclusion

Challenges are part of life but that does not mean that we have to be defeated by it. Sometimes all we need is a listening ear and a helping hand. Building positive relationships and being surrounded by those who care for us can offer us a safe space where we can freely express ourselves. With the right tools, we can be empowered to rise above these challenges and even become better versions of ourselves.

## Let's Talk About It

### Activity

Instructions: On a scale of 1–5, 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, review each of the following protective factors and mark the scales to indicate how well you are performing in each area.

<p><b>Social Support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• ability to talk about problems</li><li>• people to ask for practical help (e.g., study with someone for a difficult test)</li><li>• feelings of love, intimacy, or friendship</li></ul> 	<p><b>Coping Skills</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• ability to manage uncomfortable emotions in a healthy way</li><li>• awareness of one's own emotions, and recognition of how they influence behavior</li></ul> 
<p><b>Physical Health</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• adequate exercise or physical activity</li><li>• a balanced and healthy diet</li><li>• medical compliance (e.g., regular visits to the dentist)</li></ul> 	<p><b>Sense of Purpose</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• meaningful involvement in work, education, or other roles (e.g., relationships in the home)</li><li>• understanding of personal values, and living in accordance with those values</li></ul> 
<p><b>Self-Esteem</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• belief that one's self has value</li><li>• acceptance of personal flaws, weaknesses, and mistakes</li><li>• belief in ability to overcome challenges</li></ul> 	<p><b>Healthy Thinking</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• does not ruminate on mistakes, personal flaws, or problems</li><li>• ability to consider personal strengths and weaknesses rationally</li></ul> 

## **Discussion**

Instructions: Refer to the protective factors on part 1 to answer the following questions.

1. Which protective factor has been the most valuable to you during difficult times?
2. In the past, how have you used this protective factor to your advantage? Be specific.
3. Name two protective factors that you would like to develop/improve.
4. What specific steps/actions can you take to improve on those protective factors?

## Mapping Your Daily Routines: Uncovering My Protective Factors

### Discussion

Protective factors are certain characteristics that we all possess which can reduce or buffer the effects of the risks, stress, and trauma that we go through. These factors can be strengthened and developed throughout our lives. Specifically, biological protective factors refer to the natural characteristics or processes in our bodies that help protect us from negative outcomes or promote our overall well-being. These factors are inherent to our biology and can play a role in safeguarding our physical and mental health.

In our activity today, let's look at how our schedules reflect how we work on our protective factors that help us become physically healthy which contributes to our overall health and well-being.

### Activity (25–30 minutes)

#### Materials:

- Paper with printed templates of a daily schedule table
- Colorful pens or markers and highlighter pens

#### Instructions:

1. Take one sheet of paper or one of the printed templates of a daily schedule table.
2. Create a visual representation of your typical daily routines using the table or you can make your own table on a separate sheet in case you need more space.
3. Fill the table with your daily activities and commitments, starting from waking up until going to bed. We have provided a sample for you in the first column.
4. You can include academic activities, personal care, meals, hobbies, social interactions, relaxation, and any other regular activities you engage in.

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
Morning						
8:00 Wake up						
8:30 Eat breakfast						
9:00 Take a bath, prepare for church						
10:30 Go to church						
Afternoon						
12:00 Have lunch with my family						
1:00 Go to the park with my family						
3:00 Siesta time or personal time						
4:30 Wake up						

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
Evening						
5:00 Help prepare for dinner						
6:00 Eat dinner with my family						
7:00 Clean the table						
8:00 Catch up on school work						
9:00 Take a shower, brush teeth						
9:30 Do devotions and write on journal						
10:30 Go to sleep						

**Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

- Take a step back and reflect on your time allocation. Review your schedules and identify patterns, routines, and areas where you spend the most time or feel overwhelmed.
- Do your schedules align with your priorities, goals, and well-being? How much time do you spend on your protective factors?
- In which areas do you think you need to make adjustments to improve your well-being and productivity and to allot more time for your protective factors?
- How can you optimize your time allocation? (For example, eat healthier meals, lessen unhealthy snacks, dedicate more time to self-care, create a study routine, or prioritize leisure activities).

### **Optional Homework:**

- Write down your schedule goals on a new table. Consider your circumstances and responsibilities and try to be realistic as you set your goals.
- Outline specific steps you can take to implement changes in your daily routines and to manage your time more effectively.
- Try to follow this updated schedule for a couple of weeks. After 2 weeks, try to write in your personal journal your observations on how your new routines and habits are affecting your health and well-being.

### **Discussion**

You can update your schedule as necessary to fit your lifestyle, goals, and well-being. This can change as you become more mature and grow older, but it's important to know and remember that we need to prioritize our health and well-being in our daily routines. If ever you don't know what schedule or routine will work for you, you can always ask our help or the help of people you trust, like your parents, siblings, or friends.

## Discovering Resilience: Sharing Coping Strategies

### Discussion

Protective factors are characteristics that we all possess which can reduce or buffer the effects of the risks, stress, and trauma that we go through. These factors can be strengthened and developed throughout our lives. Specifically, psychological protective factors may include having high levels of resilience, a good sense of humor, and a broad or understanding perspective, and regularly practicing mindfulness.

Today, let's explore coping habits that you may already be practicing and see whether they are effective protective factors when it comes to our psychological as well as overall health and well-being.

### Activity (25–30 minutes)

This activity aims to create a supportive and open environment for students to explore and share their coping habits or strategies that help them find ease and resilience in tough situations.

#### Materials:

- Paper or index cards
- Cartolina, Manila paper, or whiteboard
- Pens or markers, whiteboard markers
- Optional: Comfortable seating arrangements, soothing background music

#### Instructions:

1. Take a few minutes to reflect on your personal coping habits or strategies. You can think about the activities, practices, or techniques you do to find ease or regain a sense of balance during tough times. Write or draw your reflections on the paper or index cards.
2. Afterward, let's take turns sharing each of our reflections and coping habits within the group. Don't hesitate to ask questions, offer support, or share your own coping strategies that you think can also help others.
3. Then, on a large sheet of paper or a whiteboard, post your coping strategies alongside your groupmates' coping strategies. If possible, you can group them by theme or if there are common answers.

## **Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

- Take a few moments to reflect on how you can incorporate or explore new coping strategies based on what we've discussed in the activity.
- Do you find any similarities in your coping strategies with your groupmates? What are they?
- Do you find any differences in your coping strategies from your groupmates? What are they?
- How can these coping strategies affect our overall well-being? Do you think they add to your psychological protective factors?

## **Discussion**

The collective pool of coping habits we have on the board can serve as a resource and inspiration for future tough situations that each of us may face.

## **Cultivating Connections: Strengthening Social Support**

### **Discussion**

Protective factors are characteristics that we all possess which can reduce or buffer the effects of the risks, stress, and trauma that we go through. These factors can be strengthened and developed throughout our lives.

Social protective factors are positive influences and connections in our social environment that promote well-being and resilience. For high school students, these factors include supportive relationships, positive peer influence, healthy communication skills, school connectedness, participation in extracurricular activities, access to supportive adults, and peer support networks. They contribute to mental health, academic success, and overall satisfaction during high school years.

### **Activity** (20–25 minutes)

This activity aims to foster meaningful connections among high school students, promote social support, and strengthen social protective factors to enhance well-being and resilience.

#### **Materials:**

- Paper or index cards
- Pens or markers
- Optional: Small tokens or stickers for appreciation notes

#### **Instructions:**

##### Part 1

1. Using the paper or index cards provided, write appreciation notes to at least three other students in the group, expressing gratitude for their friendship, support, or positive impact in your lives. Be specific and genuine as you write your notes. You can include specific actions or qualities you appreciate about each person.
2. Exchange and share the appreciation notes you wrote with each other. As we exchange these notes, let's practice active listening and create a supportive atmosphere.

3. Alternatively, if you're not the type who expresses your gratitude through writing, you can do something for, text, chat, or take a selfie with the person you want to appreciate. In whatever way you can, try to show gratitude to at least three in your group.

## Part 2

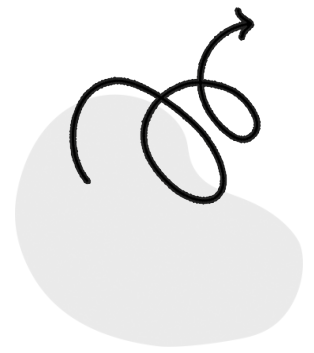
1. On a separate sheet of paper, write down the names of the people in your community (your family, friends, neighbors) who provide support or positive influence on you.
2. Write down the names of at least two people you would like to strengthen your connection with or express appreciation to in the future.
3. Write or draw your personal action plan, including specific steps you can take to deepen connections, offer support, or express gratitude to the people you've chosen.

## **Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

- How did receiving and giving appreciation make you feel?
- What do you think is the role of the social support from your classmates in your mental health and well-being?
- How can you actively strengthen your social support networks?

MONTH 4

# Thriving with Peace: Addressing Anxiety



WEEK 1

## Let's Think About It

Gary Collins once said that anxiety is one of the most urgent problems of our day. If Collins is right, then this may also be true: peace of mind is the crying need of the hour. So how do we attain peace of mind in an age where anxiety is rampant? That's the question we will try to answer in this session.

Most people use the words worry, fear, and anxiety interchangeably. Although these sometimes overlap, if we look closely, we will understand how they differ.

Worry starts in the mind. It is a cognitive process that involves anticipating potentially negative outcomes. For example, your teacher asked you to stay behind after class. Since you have no idea why, you spend the rest of the period thinking that you are in trouble and planning what you might do if you are indeed in trouble. Worry typically starts with what-if questions and mostly negative thoughts about the future (Robichaud and Dugas, 2015).

Fear, according to the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2022), is an emotional response to real or perceived danger. For example, you are walking on an empty street one night and hear a dog barking from a distance. Then another dog on the corner starts barking and before you know it, other dogs in the area are also barking. Your sense of fear kicks in.

As your body prepares to run and climb the mango tree on the other side of the street, it enters a state of anxiety. The APA (2022) describes this connection between anxiety and fear as "fear more often associated with surges of autonomic arousal necessary for fight or flight, thoughts of immediate danger, and escape behaviors, and anxiety more often associated with muscle tension and vigilance in preparation for future danger and cautious or avoidant behaviors."

As human beings, we sometimes experience different levels of anxiety. In terms of duration, there's acute and chronic; in terms of seriousness, there's normal and neurotic; and in terms of intensity, there's moderate and high (Collins, 2019).

1. **Duration.** Acute anxiety is quick, is of high intensity, and only lasts for a short time. When people are suddenly overwhelmed with anxiety, the condition is usually acute. By contrast, chronic anxiety is persistent and long-lasting but of lower intensity. People who are chronically anxious seem to worry all the time.
2. **Seriousness.** Normal anxiety happens when there's a real threat or situational danger. The anxiety is usually proportional to the danger—the greater the danger, the greater the anxiety. By contrast, neurotic anxiety is an intense, exaggerated feeling of helplessness and dread even when the danger is mild or might even be nonexistent. In other words, neurotic anxiety is disproportionate to the real danger because something else is happening in the person's mind.
3. **Intensity.** Moderate anxiety is often healthy. It can motivate people to avoid dangerous situations and might even lead to increased efficiency. High anxiety, however, shortens a person's attention span. It makes concentration difficult, affects memory, hinders performance skills, interferes with problem solving, and sometimes causes physical symptoms like headaches or paralysis.

There are times when a person's anxiety would require professional help. APA (2022) explains:

Anxiety disorders differ from developmentally normative fear or anxiety by being excessive or persisting beyond developmentally appropriate periods. They differ from transient fear or anxiety, often stress-induced, by being persistent (e.g., typically lasting 6 months or more), although the criterion for duration is intended as a general guide with allowance for some degree of flexibility and is sometimes of shorter duration in children . . . Since individuals with anxiety disorders typically overestimate the danger in situations they fear or avoid, the primary determination of whether the fear or anxiety is excessive or out of proportion is made by the clinician, taking cultural contextual factors into account. Many of the anxiety disorders develop in childhood and tend to persist if not treated.

## What Are the Causes of Anxiety?

It would help to identify what could be causing us to feel anxious, so that we can respond appropriately. Though not comprehensive, we can use the list of factors that cause anxiety identified by psychologist Gary Collins (2019).

1. **Threat.** Real or perceived dangers could include instability in our relationships, separation from loved ones or friends, stained self-image, failing grades, or not getting into your dream university.
2. **Conflict.** We sometimes feel anxious when we have to choose between two or more conflicting choices and the anxiety lingers until a choice is made. "Do I go out with friends or do I stay home to study for the exam?" "Do I get into a romantic relationship now or do I wait until I graduate?" "Should I post this on social media or do I talk this out with a friend?" "Do I tell my parents about my struggles or do I keep them to myself?" Sometimes, anxiety lasts even after the decision is made, and we're left wondering, "Did I make the right decision?"
3. **Fear.** Oftentimes, our fears cause us to feel anxious. These fears might include fear of failure, the future, rejection, vulnerability, success, taking responsibility, conflict, meaninglessness in life, sickness, death, loneliness, change, or a host of other real or imagined possibilities. Sometimes, these fears can build up in one's mind and create extreme anxiety—even in the absence of any real danger.
4. **Unmet Needs.** There are six fundamental needs of human beings:
  - Survival (the need to have continued existence)
  - Security (economic and emotional)
  - Sex (as an expression of love and as a sexual being)
  - Significance (to amount to something)
  - Self-fulfillment (to achieve life goals)
  - Selfhood (a sense of identity)

When we fail to meet these needs, we feel anxious. Interestingly, even if these needs are all met, that still doesn't guarantee that we won't feel anxious.

5. **Individual Differences.** We act differently in anxiety-inducing situations. Some are almost never anxious, others feel anxiety most of the time, while many fall somewhere in between. We don't know why this is the case. It could be due to psychology, personality, sociology, physiology, or maybe even theology.

## Managing Anxiety and Attaining Peace of Mind

Managing anxiety and attaining peace of mind are difficult but possible, especially with the help of a caring community. Here are some practical things that we can do to manage anxiety (Collins, 2019).

1. **Identify your triggers.** The causes of anxiety listed above might be a good place to start. Write them down or talk it out with a parent, friend, teacher, leader, or a person you trust.
2. **Calm the tension.** In the coming weeks, we will learn some breathing exercises and mindfulness techniques that can help us manage the tension within.
3. **Seek help.** Struggling with anxiety is difficult and debilitating, especially when you are by yourself. We all go through difficult seasons in our lives. Bad days happen. We need each other as we go through life's journey. Reach out to someone you trust. You may also ask your facilitator to help connect you if you need professional help.

## Conclusion

As we go through life, we experience different levels of anxiety that deprive us of peace. There are times when a person's anxiety would require professional help. Regardless of the level, feelings of anxiety (and even worry or fear) are valid. Processing these uncomfortable emotions in a safe space is a step towards mental health and peace of mind.

## Let's Talk About It (10–15 minutes)

- What are the usual things that make you anxious? Which of the factors that cause anxiety resonate with you?
- What do you usually do to manage your anxiety? Describe what works for you.

## Introduction to Anxiety

### Discussion

Anxiety is the body's response to situations that are interpreted as threatening. Without any feelings of anxiety, you would probably make bad decisions, such as not studying during exams, being complacent in crossing the streets, not minding your valuables when you're in public places. However, too much anxiety can even lead to avoidance or unpleasant physical, emotional, and cognitive symptoms.

Our activity today can help increase your awareness of things that make you anxious, as well as how you respond to feelings of anxiety. *The following activity has been adapted from Therapist Aid LLC, TherapistAid.com.*

### Activity (30–35 minutes)

Answer the questions below as honestly as you can. If you are comfortable, share some of your answers to the group after answering.

What are three things or situations that make you feel anxious (at home, in school, or with friends)?
1.
2.
3.
What are three physical symptoms that you experience when you feel anxious? How does your body respond?
1.
2.
3.
What are three thoughts you tend to have when you feel anxious?
1.
2.
3.
What are three things you do to cope when you are anxious?
1.
2.
3.

**Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

- How do you normally respond to anxiety? Based on the activity, did you notice any patterns?
- How does it feel to examine your experience of anxiety? Which questions in the activity helped you understand more about your experience of anxiety?

## The Path of Serenity

### Discussion

Our reactions to something often stem from our emotions or what we are feeling. Emotions are constructed based on our physiological sensations, memories, the situation we're in, people we're with, and the language we've learned to describe our feelings. However, not being aware of these emotions, or not being able to process them can lead to anxiety, too. Naming our emotions helps us identify the source of our anxiety, and in turn, helps us combat anxiety.

In this activity, we will practice naming different kinds of emotions we experience on a daily basis. *The following activity has been adapted from the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Development.*



**Materials:**

- Papers
- Colored pens, pencils, or markers

**Instructions:**

1. On a blank piece of paper, write down the following. Feel free to write anywhere on the paper. Use the wheel above to help you name your emotions.
  - Three emotions you feel at school or when you're studying
  - Three emotions you feel at home with your family
  - Three emotions you feel when you're with friends
2. In your list:
  - Encircle the emotions that repeat.
  - Put a question mark next to those you don't really understand.
  - Underline the emotions that surprised you as you went through the activity.
3. Compare your paper with the others in your group. Discuss using the guide questions below.

**Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

- Which emotions repeat the most? Why do you think so?
- What are the situations, or who are the people that trigger certain emotions? (e.g., pressure in school, responsibilities at home, lack of self-care)
- How do you normally respond when you feel those dominant emotions? What do you think is a better way to respond?
- Moving forward, how do you think this activity will help you in identifying your emotions and managing them?

## **Calm within Chaos: Techniques to Soothe Anxiety**

### **Discussion**

Earlier, we talked about the importance of safe spaces in order to take care of our mental health. Our first safe space is actually ourselves. There are ways to create our personal safe space through different techniques or coping mechanisms. Today, we will learn more about and practice some of these techniques. *The following activities have been adapted from Therapist Aid LLC, TherapistAid.com.*

### **Activity** (30–35 minutes)

#### **Deep Breathing**

Deep breathing can be done at any time. It also requires nothing else but our body. Deep breathing helps us physically slow down, and also slows down the traffic of our emotions. Here's how to do it:

- Sit or lie down comfortably and place one hand on your abdomen.
- Breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds, deep enough that your abdomen expands.
- Hold the air in your lungs for 4 seconds and then exhale slowly through your mouth.
- Repeat the process as many times as you like, until you feel more calm and relaxed.

## Imagery

Thoughts have the power to change how we feel. Recalling or imagining things that lead to positive thoughts can help reduce anxiety and even make us feel more relaxed. The imagery technique encourages us to engage all of our senses and calls us to be mindful. Imagine a place where you feel the most calm or secure. Make sure to imagine it in detail and consider the following questions:

- What do you see around you? What do you see from a distance? Name the things you are seeing.
- What sounds can you hear (e.g., animals, nature)? Are they soft or loud? Are there any sounds you hear from a distance?
- Are you eating or drinking something enjoyable? What does it taste like?
- What can you feel? What is the temperature like? How does the air feel on your skin? When you touch certain objects in that place, what do they feel like (e.g., soft, rough, cool, hot)?
- What can you smell? Are they strong or faint?

### **Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

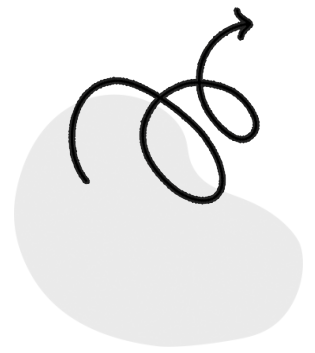
There are many more techniques you can learn to combat or reduce anxiety. While they require awareness and focus, these techniques are relatively easy to do. Moreover, learning different calming techniques reminds us that we have the capacity to confront and manage our anxiety.

Let's process together:

- How was your experience practicing the techniques? What's something new you discovered about managing your anxiety?
- Recall situations that make you feel anxious. How can you use these techniques to combat anxiety in those situations?
- Do you think these activities will be helpful for you in the long run? How can you incorporate them into your regular routine?

MONTH 5

# Thriving with Joy: Addressing Depression



WEEK 1

## Let's Think About It

The desire for happiness unites us all. Surely, everyone wants to be happy and we even go out of our way to search for what would satisfy this need. Much to our disappointment, the road to happiness is narrow and the feeling is fleeting, which leads to an endless cycle of seeking happiness. With the recent turn of events—the pandemic, the high inflation rate, natural calamities, violence, and wars—is it still possible to experience positive emotions or has the world succumbed to hopelessness?

In recent years, depression has become a significant global mental health concern. In fact, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared depression as the leading cause of disability worldwide, with staggering economic impact in terms of productivity loss and health care cost (Puyat et al, 2021). Depression is ranked 8th as the leading cause of disability among Filipinos (WHO, 2017). Approximately 3.3 million Filipinos are experiencing depressive symptoms. This raises serious concerns about the state of mental health in our country.

Since adolescents are among the most vulnerable population, this issue also affects you. Research has shown that 1 out of 10 Filipino adolescents and young adults aged 15–24 experience moderate to severe symptoms of depression. Prevalence has been noted to be forty times higher among females. Those who experience these symptoms are also more prone to self-harm and suicidal ideation. Factors that appear to contribute to symptoms of depression (Puyat et al., 2021; Valdeavilla et al., 2019) are:

- Lower educational status
- Love or relationship problems
- Living in urban areas
- Concerns involving academics, family, friends, and money

"I've been feeling sad these past few days. Could I be depressed?" Most ask this nowadays. Indeed, there is a fine line between sadness and depression, and although many people mistakenly believe they are the same thing, they are not.

Sadness is a basic human emotion that everyone experiences in response to an unpleasant life event such as a loss, a break-up, the death of a loved one, or any unfavorable incident. While each individual may feel sadness in varying degrees and duration, its temporary nature is what makes it different from depression (Riddle, 2022).

While it is not advisable to do a self-diagnosis, it would be helpful to be informed of the several factors and processes that professionals consider in determining a clinical diagnosis for depression. Consulting the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders is one of the diagnostic steps. Depression or Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) is classified under Depressive Disorders in the DSM. Disorders under this category differ in terms of duration, timing, and presumed cause or origin (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

The exact cause of depressive disorders remains unknown, but biological and psychosocial factors have been known to contribute to its development. About half of the incidence of depression may be attributed to genetics, making those with a strong family history more vulnerable. Abnormal regulation of hormones and neurotransmitters also play a role in depression. Major life stresses such as loss, separation, or trauma can serve as triggers to those who are predisposed to the condition (Coryell, 2023).

Treatment for depression is usually based on the presumed cause and severity of symptoms. Psychological treatments (which are focused on changing ways of thinking, developing effective coping skills, and improving interpersonal relationships) are mostly the first line of treatment for mild depression. Psychotherapies that have been proven effective for depression include cognitive behavioral therapy, interpersonal psychotherapy, rational emotive behavior therapy, and solution-focused therapy. A combination of psychotherapy and medication may be necessary for moderate to severe depression.

While depression rates have recently been on the rise, lifestyle changes and stress management techniques can prevent its occurrence, minimize symptoms, or prevent relapse. The following interventions may help adolescents (WHO, 2021).

1. Talk to someone you trust about how you are feeling.
2. Seek professional help from a guidance counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist.
3. Stay connected with friends and family.
4. Stay active; exercise and take short walks.
5. Stick to regular eating and sleeping habits.
6. Avoid/restrict alcohol intake and refrain from using illicit drugs.

7. Regularly engage in activities that you enjoy.
8. Be kind to yourself, celebrate small wins, and try to focus on the positive.

These techniques may help prevent and manage depressive symptoms but do not intend to replace professional intervention. If you or someone you know is experiencing symptoms of depression, do not hesitate to reach out to a mental health professional.

## **Conclusion**

When someone is suffering from depression, everything may seem gloomy and hopeless. While there is a thin line between sadness and depression, both are valid and can be difficult to deal with. Whether with clinical diagnosis or not, reaching out for help is a protective factor. With the right support and intervention, healing is possible. It's okay to open up to people in your safe space, as well as to seek professional help.

You can still experience not just happiness, but lasting joy. This kind of joy goes beyond the external—it is the result of inner peace, contentment, and satisfaction regardless of our circumstances.

## **Let's Talk About It** (10–15 minutes)

- When you hear the word "depression," what usually comes to mind?
- What are some misconceptions you have about depression? How did the session today address those or renew your perspective about it?

## Exploring the Mind: Unraveling Inner Thoughts and Dialogues

### Discussion

To understand where depression stems from, it is important to identify the underlying thought patterns that can worsen our depression. Below is a list of some of the thinking styles that are common with people suffering from depression, which are known as Unhelpful Thinking Styles (Lancia, 2021). While reading through the list, think about if you have ever experienced these thinking patterns and what the contents of the thoughts have been.

- **Black-and-White Thinking (All-or-Nothing Thinking):** Viewing the world or a situation in either-or terms, instead of acknowledging the variability that each situation can bring
- **Mental Filter:** Only paying attention to specific kinds of evidence; more specifically, the evidence that an event should be viewed through a negatively charged lens
- **Mind-Reading:** Assuming that we know what others are thinking
- **Fortune-Telling:** Predicting the future based on our own negative worldview
- **Emotional Reasoning:** Not using facts; using how you are feeling to support your response to specific situations
- **Labeling:** Making global statements or overgeneralizing aspects of yourself and situations you experience
- **Catastrophizing:** Blowing things out of proportion and viewing the problem as being larger than it is
- **Should-ing and Must-ing:** Using "should" and "must" to put unreasonable demands on yourself
- **Magnification and Minimization:** Magnifying the positive attributes of others and minimizing (or explaining away) your own positive qualities

Often, when you are feeling depressed, your thoughts may be overwhelming. You may not know what to do or how to restructure your thinking (considering other ways of viewing things). Understanding the type of thinking you are doing and where it comes from is the first step to thinking more positively, and thereby, improving your mood.

The following activity has been adapted from the "Unhelpful Thinking Styles Worksheet" and "Depressive Thoughts Worksheet for Teens" of Gabriella Lancia, PhD from PositivePsychology.com.

**Activity** (25–30 minutes)

1. If you want to learn more about your depressive thoughts, start by writing down a recent situation or event that made you upset. If you can't think of a situation, just write down your thoughts when your mood drops. If you have thought about a situation, write those thoughts down.
2. Make a list of the thoughts you have.
3. Next, write the depressive thoughts and the situation in the table provided. Be sure to label what type of thoughts you think they are using the Unhelpful Thinking Styles list.

Use this opportunity to reconstruct your depressive thoughts and change them into realistic thoughts. Use the example in the first row to guide you:

Situation	Depressive Thoughts	Realistic Thoughts
<i>My friend doesn't talk to me as much now. She seems really upset and is giving me short answers.</i>	<i>My friend hates me. [Unhelpful thinking style: Mind-Reading]</i>	<i>She may just be having a bad day and not want to talk much right now.</i>

**Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

- Which among the unhelpful thinking styles or patterns do you tend to have? Why do you think so?
- What are some ways you can combat your unhelpful thinking styles and patterns? List two or three steps you can take this week regarding this.
- Keep going back to the table you filled in to remind you of your unhelpful thinking patterns and redirect your thinking to a healthier or more realistic view.
- How can you help someone who might be going through a difficult time through our activity today?

## From Storm to Sun: Coping Techniques for Depression

### Discussion

There are many activities that we can engage in to cope with depression or other mental health issues. Since we know that different aspects of our lives contribute to our overall well-being, the coping strategies have to do with different aspects of our lives—social, psychological, spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional. Today, let's look at one coping strategy that we can do to combat depression and its symptoms.

*The following activity has been adapted from Therapist Aid LLC, TherapistAid.com.*

### Activity (30–35 minutes)

#### Materials:

- Pens or markers
- Paper or index cards

#### Instructions:

Depression saps a person's energy to do just about anything—even activities they enjoy. As a result, people with depression tend to become less active, which causes the depression to worsen. However, even a little bit of activity can help stop this cycle.

1. Choose activities you are likely to complete. Write them on the table. Below are some sample activities you can choose from. This list is not comprehensive, but serves as a starting point for thinking about helpful activities to include in your routine.

Exercise	Walk, ride a bike, play with friends, follow an exercise video, swim
Socialize	Contact a friend, organize a group hangout, visit family, join a club/group
Responsibilities	Clean/do housework, homework, hone skills and talents
Hobbies	Sports, gardening, drawing, playing music, hiking, playing with a pet, cooking
Personal care	Dress up, get a haircut, eat a healthy meal, sleep early, tend to spiritual needs

2. Practice your chosen activities. Use the following tips to improve consistency. In the table provided, write your plan in light of the tips below. An example has been given in the first row to help you.

Start small	If needed, break activities into smaller pieces. Some activity is better than none.
Make a plan	Set an alarm as a reminder, or tie an activity to something you already do. For example, practice a hobby immediately after dinner every day.
Bring a friend	Including a friend will increase your commitment and make things more fun.

## My Well-Being Plan

Activity	Start Small	Make a Plan	Bring a Friend
<i>Jogging</i>	<i>I will jog every day for 10 minutes after school around our street.</i>	<i>I will set an alarm or reminder to jog every day when I get home.</i>	<i>I will ask my neighbor/best friend to join me in my daily jogs.</i>

### Let's Talk About It (10–15 minutes)

This is just one of the many ways we can cope with depression. There are many more strategies that you can explore as you grow in your awareness and understanding of yourself and depression.

Let's process together:

- How can you adapt this coping strategy to suit your personal preferences and needs?
- Are there any strategies that align well with your current interests or activities?
- How might you modify this strategy to make it more relevant to your own experiences?
- How do you think coping strategies could help you in managing challenging times, including moments of depression?
- Is there a strategy you'd like to recommend to a friend who might be going through a difficult time?

## Taking My Thoughts and Emotions Captive: Gratitude Exercise

### Discussion

In our previous topics, we discussed some ways we can improve and safeguard our overall well-being, which include protective factors. Looking back at our activities—the coping strategies and self-care activities that are already incorporated in your own routine—you can see some of the ways you have been strengthening your own well-being and combating different mental health issues in your own way.

In our activity today, let's revisit one of our previous activities: journaling. Only this time, we'll be making a journal that is specifically focused on gratitude or thanksgiving. Negative thinking is a defining feature of depression. Positive experiences are minimized, while negative experiences are magnified. Gratitude helps combat this tendency by shifting focus toward positive experiences, rather than negative ones.

Practicing gratitude doesn't necessarily mean that we'll be neglecting our problems or denying their existence. By expressing gratitude every day, we recognize that there is more to our lives than the problems or challenges we face. We can take hold of our thoughts and unhelpful thought patterns and see that there is still always something to be grateful for even in the midst of our depression or difficult circumstances. Among other benefits, journaling about gratitude can reduce stress, increase happiness, and improve self-esteem.

*The following activity has been adapted from Therapist Aid LLC, TherapistAid.com.*

### Activity (25–30 minutes)

#### Materials:

- Pen or markers
- Notebook
- Optional: Colorful art materials (stickers, crayons, oil pastel, water color)

#### Instructions:

1. Write a detailed entry about three things you are grateful for today. This could be a person, a project, a meal with friends, or anything else that comes to mind. These experiences can be small ("The weather was perfect when I went to school") or big ("I got a high score on my exam").

2. Choose one of the following questions to answer about each of the three good things:
  - Why did this happen?
  - Why was this good thing meaningful?
  - How can I experience more of this good thing?
3. If you don't know where to start, you can also start with any of the following:
  - The best part about today is . . .
  - I had a fun experience today in . . .
  - An act of kindness I witnessed or received is . . .
  - Today, I was pleasantly surprised with . . .
  - I feel happy to have experienced . . .
  - I am glad that I saw . . .
4. Feel free to be creative in your journal. Use different art or coloring materials as you express your gratitude in your notebook.
5. Repeat this exercise every day for one week.

#### **Writing Tips:**

- Don't rush to write down the first thing that comes to your mind. Take time to truly think about what you're grateful for. Expect each entry to take about ten to fifteen minutes.
- Writing about people who you're grateful for tends to be more powerful than writing about things.
- Explain, in detail, why you're grateful. For example, if you're grateful for a friend who is nice, describe what they do that's nice and why that makes you grateful.
- Aim for two solid entries each week. Keep your journal somewhere you'll see it, and plan when you can write. Set an alarm on your phone if you might forget.

#### **Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

- Did you find our activity today helpful? How did it make you feel?
- Does gratitude or thankfulness come naturally to you? Why or why not?
- In what ways do you usually express your gratitude? How do you think you can develop a heart of gratitude?
- What steps can you take to ensure this strategy becomes a habit that supports your mental health journey?

MONTH 6

# Thriving with Hope: Addressing Loss and Grief



WEEK 1

## Let's Think About It

Nothing is permanent in this world except change, people say. True enough, as we go through life, we are faced with this reality. We may lose some friends that we've had for years due to a change or relocation, we may lose our health over an unexpected illness, or we may even lose that loved one who has been our source of strength. Grief and loss can be emotionally overwhelming and no one is immune from it. While we cannot avoid these intense feelings, we must learn to address it and believe that in the midst of the difficulty, we can still have hope.

In the past months, we talked about feelings of anxiety and depression which increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. When we had a lockdown in 2020, we experienced innumerable losses globally and individually. Some of us were restricted from spending time with friends and celebrating special occasions like graduation, birthdays, and holidays. Some suffered the effects of parents losing their jobs, and some lost a family member or a friend to sickness. For some, this was your first experience with death. Because of these tragic losses, you may have felt very sad, confused, hurt, angry, or afraid. These feelings are part of grieving from losses.

Grief is a normal response to the loss of any significant person, object, or opportunity, and though it is universal, it differs for every person (Collins, 2007). It sometimes manifests like feelings of depression (Worden, 2018). Similarly, running away from grief may cause feelings of anxiety (Smith, 2018). If not properly dealt with, the overwhelming emotions related with grief may overshadow the exciting season of adolescence, where your whole life is ahead of you.

## Normal Grief

Losses are part of life. As a normal response to a loss, it is okay to grieve. Following a death experience or any major loss, normal grief can be categorized as follows (Worden, 2018):

Body Sensations	Emotions	Cognitions	Behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hollowness in the stomach</li> <li>Tightness in the chest or throat</li> <li>Oversensitivity to noise</li> <li>A sense of nothing seems real</li> <li>Breathlessness or feeling short of breath</li> <li>Weakness in the muscles</li> <li>Lack of energy</li> <li>Dry mouth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sadness</li> <li>Anger</li> <li>Blame</li> <li>Guilt and Self-Reproach</li> <li>Anxiety</li> <li>Loneliness</li> <li>Fatigue</li> <li>Helplessness</li> <li>Shock</li> <li>Yearning</li> <li>Emancipation</li> <li>Relief</li> <li>Numbness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disbelief</li> <li>Confusion</li> <li>Preoccupation</li> <li>Sense of presence</li> <li>Hallucinations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sleep disturbances</li> <li>Eating disturbances</li> <li>Distractedness Absent-mindedness</li> <li>Social withdrawal</li> <li>Dreams of the deceased</li> <li>Avoiding reminders of the deceased</li> <li>Searching and calling out</li> <li>Sighing</li> <li>Restless hyperactivity</li> <li>Crying</li> <li>Visiting places or carrying objects that remind the survivor of the deceased</li> <li>Treasuring objects that belonged to the deceased</li> </ul>

While the awareness of our body sensations, emotions, cognitions, and behavior help us identify our experience of grief, the five-stage model of grief by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) helps us navigate through this dreadful experience. The stages are not linear, and not everyone goes through each stage, but the knowledge of the stages can help in coping with the pain of loss.

## **Overview of The Five Stages of Grief™** (Kubler-Ross, 1969)

### 1. Denial

David Kessler, co-author of Kubler-Ross on grief of loss, explains that denial is necessary for survival. Losses seem to take with them all of life's purpose and meaning, leaving the person struggling to get through each day and simply make it to the next day. The feeling of numbness in this state of shock and denial somehow helps in coping, protecting the person from the overwhelming feelings caused by the loss. In this stage, we frequently hear people say, "Is this for real? I can't believe I will never see my loved one ever again."

### 2. Anger

Of all the several emotions that start to surge at this stage, it is anger that we are most familiar with. This rage somehow provides the much-needed strength for survival in this stage. Kessler also describes anger as an anchor amidst the meaninglessness of life after loss. He illustrates how grief, initially, may feel like being tossed over troubled waters, void of connection. It is the anger towards someone or something that provides a structure, like a bridge that grips the person toward the object of the anger. Underneath this bridge of anger is the vast ocean of pain, whose depths reflect love's intensity. Anger in this stage is unbound and can extend to anyone or anything, such as:

- The doctor
- People who did not go to the funeral
- A pastor
- The person who died
- Yourself ("It's all my fault!")
- God ("I trusted You, but You did not hear my prayers!")

### 3. Bargaining

Grief therapist and author Claire Smith describes griever finding themselves in this stage bargaining or negotiating with a higher power or with themselves as they try to find a way to alleviate the pain that they are feeling. Some would verbalize bargaining and may sound like this, "Please God, I will never be angry at my dad again if You'll just let him live." This is the stage preoccupied with what-if questions, if-only statements, and the excruciating longing to undo what happened to negotiate an escape from the pain of guilt and regret.

### 4. Depression

This stage is realized as the person tries to resume life. Faced with the reality that things could never go back to how they were, a shadow of emptiness and hopelessness haunts the person. "When will this pain end? Will I ever be happy again? How can I go on each day without you?"

### 5. Acceptance

Kessler explains that this stage is not about being okay, but more on recognizing the permanence of the new normal, and that this reality has forever been changed. It is learning to live with the new norm without the loved one or that which was lost. The person can say something like, "Things will never be the same again. I may not be okay all the time, but I will continue living. Life goes on. I will be okay."

## Grieving and Mourning

Though the knowledge of grief and its stages can be helpful to an extent, it cannot be denied that it cannot spare us from the pain of the grieving process. Yes, grieving is a process, and for some, it may be life-long. It is important to understand that there is no one right way to grieve (Smith, 2018) and there is no recommended timeline for it.

An essential aspect of grieving is the process of mourning. While grief refers to unpleasant thoughts and feelings (internal), mourning is the (external) expression of those thoughts and feelings. Losses in life and death of loved ones are painful, and denying or suppressing the pain is even worse. Mourning with safe people can help us grieve our losses and meet the following needs (Wolfelt, 2001):

- Need 1. Accept the reality of the death.
- Need 2. Let yourself feel the pain of the loss.
- Need 3. Remember the person who died.
- Need 4. Develop a new self-identity.
- Need 5. Search for meaning.
- Need 6. Let others help you, now and always.

## Helping Others Who Are Grieving

Being surrounded with safe people will usher us to the realization that taking part in others' journey is part of our own healing and growth. Here are some of the best and worst things to say to someone in grief.

### **The Best Things to Say to Someone in Grief** (Adapted from Kessler, n.d.)

1. I am so sorry for your loss.
2. I wish I had the right words.
3. I don't know how you feel, but I am here to help in any way I can.
4. You and your loved one will be in my thoughts and prayers.
5. My favorite memory of your loved one is . . .
6. I am always just a message/phone call away.
7. May I give you a hug?
8. We all need help at times like this. May I help you with . . . ?
9. I am going to the grocery now, can I get you a . . . ?
10. (Say nothing. Just be with the person).

### **The Worst Things to Say to Someone in Grief** (Adapted from Kessler, n.d.)

1. At least s/he lived a long life. Many people die young. / At least s/he was spared from the difficulties in life. Many people had to suffer for a very long time.
2. S/he is in a better place with no more pain or suffering.
3. This is what s/he wanted.
4. There is a reason for everything.
5. You will be able to move on some day.
6. You can still have another spouse/child or friend.
7. S/he was such a good person that God wanted him/her to be with Him.
8. I know how you feel.
9. S/he did what s/he came here to do and it was his/her time to go.
10. Be strong.

## Meaning Making

Emerging studies from the past couple of decades point to the addition of another stage of grief which emphasizes that the key step in the grieving journey is the reconstruction of meaning as a response to the loss. Psychologist Robert Neimeyer, a major proponent of this concept, teaches that meaning is formed through sharing life stories (Worden, 2018). Furthermore, Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis (2014) highlight that meaning making is not just a burden for the bereaved person, but a journey that is to be shared with others.

## Conclusion

Author Jamie Anderson once wrote that grief is love with nowhere to go. Our safe space can serve as an avenue where we can freely express this strong emotion. Losses are part of life and as a natural response, grief is a valid and necessary emotion. It may take time, but grieving and mourning can be the catalyst for a renewed sense of purpose, direction, and hope. Making meaning out of our life's losses now becomes our much-needed protective factor.

## Let's Talk About It (5–10 minutes)

- How do you usually cope with loss and grief?
- In light of what we learned today, how do you think the way you handle loss and grief will be affected?

## Symptoms of Grief

### Discussion

Writing down how you feel is one way to help you process and navigate through the grief you're experiencing. For this activity, you may use the same notebook or journal from previous activities.

It's okay to take some time reflecting on your thoughts before you write them down. The important thing is to be as honest as possible when you write.

*The following activity has been adapted from the "Grief Sentence Completion" of Gabriella Lancia, PhD from PositivePsychology.com and the "Grief Sentence Completion" of TherapistAid LLC from TherapistAid.com.*

### Activity (25–30 minutes)

Use the following prompts to help you express your thoughts and emotions about a significant or a recent loss. Complete the sentences below as honestly as possible. Consider your feelings at the moment about these statements before writing them down. Feel free to take a moment to reflect if you are unsure.

1. Right now, what I feel in my body is \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. I am sad when \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. The thing I miss the most about the person I lost is \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Things that have changed since the loss are \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Because of the loss, my family \_\_\_\_\_

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6. If I could talk to the person I lost one more time, I would say \_\_\_\_\_

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7. One memory I hold dear with the person I lost is \_\_\_\_\_

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8. One lesson I learned from the person I lost is \_\_\_\_\_

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**Let's Talk About It** (10–15 minutes)

- How did this activity make you feel?
- Is it natural for you to explore and express your thoughts and emotions? Why or why not?
- How do you think this activity helped you? Why is it important to name your feelings and face them?

## Coping with Grief

### Discussion

Finding a safe space or being able to talk to someone you can be comfortable and honest with can help you process and cope with grief.

*The following activity has been adapted from the "My Grief Plan" of Gabriella Lancia, PhD from PositivePsychology.com.*

### Activity (25–30 minutes)

For this activity, you may use the same notebook or journal from previous activities.

If you're struggling to cope with grief or know anyone who's going through a similar situation, these four statements can help you write down your emotions as you navigate through them. When doing this activity with a partner, be sure to actively listen and encourage them with words of affirmation.

1. When I feel sad, I can do the following positive things to cope (e.g., crying with a friend, writing in my journal my thoughts and feelings, praying)

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2. Some of the people I can talk to who can help me feel better are (e.g., my siblings, group facilitator, a friend)

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3. I plan to take care of myself by (e.g., drinking lots of water, taking a shower)

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4. Some positive thoughts I can think of to help me feel better are (e.g., "I am not alone," "I can ask for help")

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**Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

- Think about a self-care practice that you've found effective in dealing with grief. How does this practice help you navigate your emotions?
- Share an activity or hobby that you've turned to as a way to cope with grief. How does engaging in this activity make you feel?
- Consider a time when you allowed yourself to feel and express your grief fully. How did this openness impact your ability to cope and heal?
- Consider a person who has been a source of support for you during your grieving process. How has their presence or assistance made a positive impact on your journey?
- How do you think our activity on reflecting on grief and possible coping strategies will help you in the future?

## Helping Others Cope with Grief

### Discussion

If you could see someone you love who has already passed one last time, what would you tell them? Or if you could turn back time and relive the moment before a significant change or loss in your life happened, what would you do?

Role-playing can be a helpful way for those who are experiencing grief and loss to navigate through their emotions. It can help turn unhealthy thoughts and feelings into healthy ones.

### Activity (25–30 minutes)

For this activity, you may do this in a one-on-one setting, as a group, or by having the person sit in front of an empty chair.

Before doing the role-playing, complete the questions below on a blank piece of paper or notebook.

What are some of the things I miss because of this experience of loss and grief?

1.
2.
3.
4.

**Scenario 1: If you have lost someone dear to you (e.g., death of a loved one, a friend who moved away, death or loss of a beloved pet)**

Once you are finished, share what you wrote and talk to the person you lost as if he or she were there. If it would help, assign one person from the group to represent the person you lost. You can use the guide questions below to help.

- Have you ever told this person that you appreciated these things? Even if you did, imagine the person was in front of you and tell him/her what you appreciated the most about the person.
- Is there a memory that stands out to you or an event you shared together? Recount these memories while continuing to speak to the person as if he/she were there.
- Is there anything you would like to share with this person that you weren't able to before? Take this opportunity to do so.

**Scenario 2: If a significant change happened in your life that led to a feeling of loss (e.g., transferred schools, moved houses, missed an opportunity because of the COVID-19 pandemic)**

Once you are finished, share what you wrote. Assign one person from the group to represent the significant change you have undergone and talk to it as though it were a person. You can use the guide questions below to help.

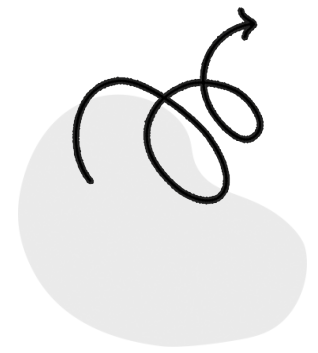
- What would you have changed about what happened or about your response to what happened, if you were given a chance?
- How did the significant event affect you mentally, emotionally, physically, relationally?

**Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

- How did the activity make you feel? Was the activity helpful for you? Why or why not?
- Imagine that you're someone who is guiding another individual through their first experience of grief. How would you provide guidance and offer ways to cope with the overwhelming emotions?

MONTH 7

# Thriving in Freedom: Addressing Addiction



WEEK 1

## Let's Think About It

When we hear the word addiction, we often think about the uncontrolled use of prohibited drugs. But the scope of addiction is very broad and not limited to substance use. It goes beyond the substance that is put in, because something crucial is taken away from the person suffering from addiction—freedom.

Addiction is the state of physical and/or psychological dependence on substances, activities, or behavior. It can also be applied to non-substance-related behavioral addictions (APA, 2023). A distinct characteristic of addiction is that its seemingly rewarding effects provide a compelling incentive to repeat the activity despite detrimental consequences.

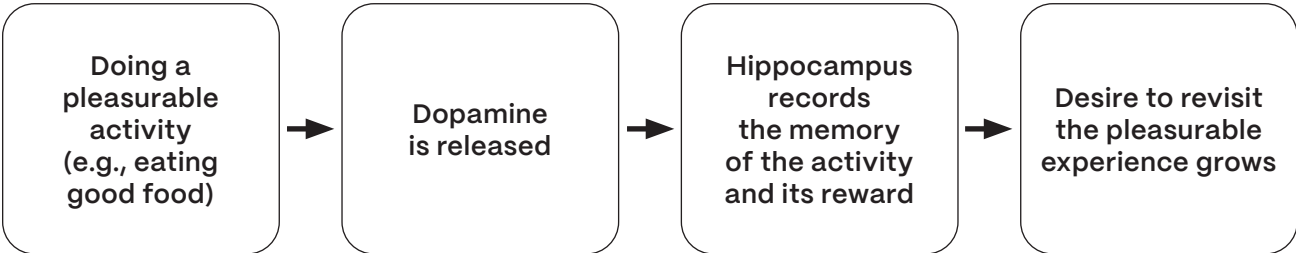
Addictions can come in two forms: physical/chemical and behavioral (Raypole, 2020).

Most of us are familiar with **physical addictions**, which involve ingesting or putting substances in a person's body. The three major classifications of physical addiction are alcohol addiction, illicit drug addiction, and prescription drug addiction (Center, 2021). Common addictive substances include alcohol, tobacco, opioids, cocaine, marijuana, amphetamines, hallucinogens, inhalants, prescription drugs, and street drugs.

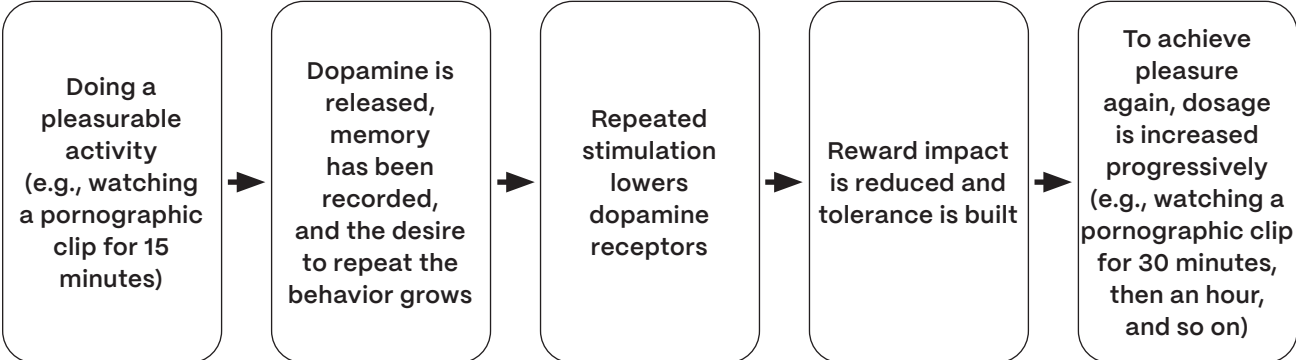
**Behavioral addiction**, on the other hand, happens when a person can no longer stay away from potentially destructive activities that provide a brief feeling of satisfaction. That individual starts to act compulsively because he or she gets hooked on the pleasant emotions that the particular act provides. Some behavioral addictions are love and relationship addiction (Addiction Center, n.d.), binge eating, sex addiction, masturbation, pornography, excessive internet and gadget use, overworking, excessive binge watching, gaming, exercise, shopping, or gambling (Center, 2021).

As severely as someone may get addicted to substances, so too can a person become hooked on negative habits. Compulsions—repetitive behaviors or mental acts that a person feels driven to perform in response to an obsession (Geller, 2022)—cravings, an inability to stop, and a dysfunctional lifestyle are all indicators that an addiction of some kind is present.

A person who suffers from addiction is often stereotyped as someone who is innately bad or lacks self-control, but there is a deeper cause behind these compulsions. Addiction has biological, psychological, and social causes. Biologically speaking, our brains are programmed to do tasks related to survival, and the brain’s reward system is activated whenever we complete a pleasurable task. Dopamine is released, which drives us to repeat the activity in order to feel the pleasure that was experienced (Alta Mira Recovery Programs, 2021). Think of your favorite coffee shop. Why do you keep returning to that place? Perhaps the coffee tastes good or the staff served you well. Regardless of the reason, you felt good and you keep going back in order to experience that good feeling again. This concept is further explained by the following diagram:



If the substance is taken or the activity is done continuously over a long period of time, an individual develops tolerance, and the impact of the reward is reduced. Because of this, the individual would need “higher doses” in order to achieve and sustain the desired pleasurable feeling, which then becomes a vicious cycle. Take pornography addiction, for example. Its mechanism is explained in the following diagram:



In terms of psychological factors, certain personality traits are known to be related to the risk of addiction. Impulsivity and sensation-seeking have been linked to substance use and gambling disorders. Significant adverse experiences such as trauma and abuse can also contribute to the development of addiction. These events sensitize the brain's pathways for distress by adding to the burden of stress, thereby overwhelming a person's coping ability. People with existing mental health conditions have difficulty in managing emotions and impulses, which increases their addiction risk (Psychology Today, 2020).

Social factors that may contribute to the development of addiction are having a family member with an addiction problem, a poor parent-child relationship, family disruptions such as parental separation, and any form of abuse within the family. Availability of and accessibility to alcohol, cigarette, drugs, pornographic materials, social media, or others also mitigate the risk. Lastly, the strong desire to belong, especially during adolescence, can influence the need to adapt to the behavior of their peers, regardless of the consequences (Psychology Today, 2020).

Addiction is officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association as a disorder. It is listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders as Substance Related and Addictive Disorders (APA, 2022). Just like any other disorder, it is a complex condition that results from the interaction of several factors.

The good news is that addiction can be prevented, treated, and managed. A person's likelihood of developing an addiction is generally higher when more risk factors are involved. However, protective factors such as self-efficacy, parental monitoring and support, positive relationships, and community anti-drug policies and resources reduce an individual's risk (NIDA, 2020).

## Addiction Prevention Tips

### 1. Awareness and Education

Learning more about the risks of physical and behavioral addiction is one of the best and most effective ways to prevent it. It would be helpful to attend seminars on addiction sponsored by schools, churches, NGOs, and the local government, and have an open discussion with people who care for you as well as people you trust.

### 2. Healthy Coping Skills

Most people engage in addictive behaviors to cope with unpleasant emotions such as stress, anxiety, fear, and depression. While this may provide relief, it is only temporary and, if prolonged, may do more harm than good. Positive coping mechanisms play a key role in preventing addiction. Examples of healthy coping strategies are:

- Talking to someone you trust or a therapist
- Taking a walk or running outdoors
- Embracing creativity by writing, drawing, painting, or playing an instrument
- Keeping a journal to express emotions
- Deep breathing techniques
- Prayer and meditation

### 3. Involvement in Something You Are Passionate About

Individuals who discover purpose and interest in their lives tend to be happier and healthier, which makes them less vulnerable to addiction (The New York Times, 2022). Participating in something you care deeply about will motivate you to live more purposefully and healthily. Furthermore, it will occupy your time and provide you with a fulfilling activity to engage in when you're down.

### 4. Self-Care

Self-care practices do not have to be extravagant or time consuming. They can be as simple as taking time out, eating a healthy meal, or getting enough physical activity. You can attain the best possible physical and mental health by taking care of yourself, thereby reducing the urge to engage in addictive activities (Ahammed, 2023).

## 5. Healthy Relationships

The opposite of addiction is connection, and human connection is one factor that helps prevent addiction (Weiss, 2018). Having the support of your friends and family is significantly more beneficial than engaging in addictive behaviors. Protecting one's mental and emotional well-being requires having healthy connections.

These are just a few tips that may decrease a person's risk for addiction. However, if you or someone you know is already bound by some form of addiction, it's not too late. Help and treatment are always available. The first step is to reach out for help.

## Conclusion

The irony of addiction is that those experiencing it think they are free because they can do whatever they want. But this is not what freedom is all about. Being able to do what is good, true, noble, and right, as well as finding and fulfilling our purpose—that is true freedom. The process may take a while, but as we strengthen our protective factors and reach out to those we consider a safe space, then true freedom from addiction is possible.

## Let's Talk About It (10–15 minutes)

1. Think of a substance (i.e., food, drink, cigarette) or activity (i.e., online gaming, social media scrolling) that you can't go a day without.
  - If it is a substance, how much do you consume in a day?
  - If it is an activity, how many hours do you spend on it per day?
2. What event usually happens or what emotions are you feeling before you take the substance or begin the activity?
3. Think of a more productive activity that you can do whenever you feel the urge to take the substance or start the activity.

## Stretch to Decongest! Let's Exercise Together

*Note: Before starting, ensure students are comfortable and inform them that they should communicate if anything feels uncomfortable.*

### **Activity** (25–30 minutes)

Stretching exercises are a great way to help us be relieved of stress and tension within our bodies, not just physically but in other aspects as well. Doing so with our community or safe space helps us build connections while promoting movement and flexibility. This also encourages trust, communication, and teamwork.

### **Instructions:**

With your group, follow the simple stretching sequence below. You can assign a stretching leader whom the rest of the group can follow. You can repeat any of the stretches as many times as you like within the set amount of time.

#### 1. Shoulder Rolls

- Stand or sit comfortably.
- Inhale deeply and lift your shoulders up towards your ears.
- Exhale slowly and roll your shoulders back and down.
- Repeat this movement for several breaths, coordinating the shoulder roll with the breath.

#### 2. Side Stretch

- Stand with feet hip-width apart or sit upright in a chair.
- Inhale as you reach one arm overhead, lengthening the side of your body.
- Exhale and gently lean to the opposite side, stretching the extended arm.
- Inhale back to center and switch sides.
- Repeat this stretch a few times on each side, syncing the movement with your breath.

### 3. Seated Forward Fold

- Sit on the floor or on the edge of a chair with legs extended.
- Inhale deeply, lengthening your spine.
- Exhale as you hinge at your hips, folding forward while keeping your back straight.
- You can reach for your shins, ankles, or feet, depending on your flexibility.
- Inhale to lengthen the spine again and exhale deeper into the stretch.
- Repeat this movement with the breath rhythm for a few repetitions.

### 4. Back Stretch (Modified for Sitting)

- Sit comfortably on a chair or the floor with your hands resting on your knees or thighs.
- Inhale deeply, arching your back slightly and lifting your chest while looking up (like a seated cow).
- Exhale as you round your spine, tucking your chin towards your chest (like a seated cat).
- Flow smoothly between these two movements, coordinating with your breath.

Breathing and Coordination Tip: Take slow, deep breaths. Inhale as you lengthen or expand the body, and exhale as you deepen the stretch or move into a more relaxed position. Find a pace that suits your comfort and ability to synchronize breathing with movement.

As you do these stretches, talk to each other, breathe deeply, and respect each other's boundaries throughout the activity. This activity is about gentle stretching and connection, not pushing beyond their limits both physically and relationally.

## **Discussion**

One of the ways we can combat unhealthy ways of coping which can lead to addiction is developing and maintaining healthy relationships. Another is staying physically active to relieve stress. As we build healthy connections with others and keep our body moving, we are able to fill our time with more meaningful and fulfilling activities. We also end up making better memories and our mind and emotions become stronger and happier.

## **Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

- Was this activity helpful for you? In what ways?
- Do you think the skills learned in this activity, such as communication and teamwork, are transferable to other aspects of life? How so? Would you consider including this in your weekly routine?
- Who are the people in your life that you are most comfortable with? List at least three to five names. How can you build stronger trust and connections with them?
- From the list above, are they the same people you open up to when you have problems, struggles, or challenges? If not, who are the people you run to for help or to just hear you out?
- How can you grow more in sharing your struggles and challenges with the people you trust and those who can help you?

## Habit Hack: Reflect, React, Renew

**Activity** (25–30 minutes)

**Materials:**

- Index cards or paper (two per person)
- Pencils or pens (use the same color)

**Instructions:**

Part 1 (5–10 minutes)

1. Reflect on your habits, especially the ones you tend to cope with or do when you're having a hard time. List as many as you can.
2. Encircle or underline one unhealthy habit that you have observed in your life.

Part 2 (15–25 minutes)

1. On a separate sheet of paper or on an index card, write down the unhealthy habit you identified. Do not write anything else (e.g., your name or any indicators that the person who wrote this is you).
2. Fold the sheets of paper and give it to your facilitator. This is a judgment-free activity and no one will be singled out.
3. The facilitator will then shuffle the sheets of paper to maintain confidentiality, and pick one randomly.
4. The facilitator will then read aloud that habit without revealing the author. Pay attention to what the facilitator is saying, whether the paper picked out is yours or not.
5. If you can, answer the following questions or make suggestions as to how the person can address or deal with the habit identified:
  - a. Do any of you relate to or have experience with this habit?
  - b. What are the potential consequences of this habit?
  - c. How might this habit impact your life in the short- and long-term?
  - d. Are there any strategies you know of that could help overcome this habit?

Since we will be discussing each other's struggles and the habits we're working on, ensure that there is a supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere throughout the activity.

## Discussion

This activity allows students to reflect on their habits in a safe environment, fostering empathy and understanding while encouraging them to consider healthier alternatives.

As we previously discussed in the main session, sometimes, the way to combat unhealthy habits or addictions is through investing our time in something more worthwhile or replacing these habits. As we acknowledge that we have unhealthy habits, we can help strengthen our own resolve in avoiding them and move forward to ways we can help better ourselves in the different aspects of our lives.

### **Let's Talk About It** (10–15 minutes)

- Did any of the habits mentioned resonate with you personally? How did it feel to hear them discussed openly?
- Have you ever tried to change a habit? What challenges did you face? How can these challenges be overcome?
- What steps can you take to begin changing or addressing your identified unhealthy habits?
- When you feel like doing your unhealthy habits, what is usually going on at the moment (e.g., situation around you, emotions within you, thoughts in your head, people around you)? Instead of just working to replace those habits, how do you think you can improve the way you face these situations or challenges?

## Living in Freedom with Healthy Habits and Strong Connections

### Activity (30–35 minutes)

Our activity will help us continually build healthy relationships and foster accountability when it comes to our habits, whether healthy or unhealthy. Today, let's continue the atmosphere of a safe space, where we will freely listen to each other free of judgment and promote care and understanding for one another.

### Materials:

- Index cards
- Pens or colorful markers

### Instructions:

#### Part 1

1. Group yourselves into three with the people you're comfortable with.
2. In your group, share one healthy habit you have and one you struggle with. Discuss the triggers surrounding your unhealthy and healthy habits (e.g., what urges or pushes you to do them: certain emotions, people, moods, time of day, challenges you encounter).
3. Write down unhealthy habits you or your partner mentioned on one side of an index card.
4. On the other side of the same card, write a supportive message or tip related to maintaining healthy habits. Discuss the card with your group, this time identifying how their encouragement or tip might help you face these healthy or unhealthy habits.

#### Part 2

1. Go back to the bigger group, and as a whole discuss the overall experience. As you are comfortable, share your healthy or unhealthy habits and what triggers these.
  - What are the common healthy habits among the group? What are the usual triggers for these or in what circumstances or situations do they usually happen?
  - What are the common unhealthy habits among the group? What are the usual triggers for these or in what circumstances or situations do they usually happen?

2. With your smaller group, come up with an action step you can take that may help you address the triggers of your unhealthy habits. In the same way, think of an action step that can help you continue your healthy habits, regardless of your circumstances. Set a reasonable timeline for yourself to practice these steps or plans (e.g., one week or two weeks). Write this on a separate index card. Keep both index cards for your reference.
3. If you are comfortable, ask your small group to check in on your progress in terms of the plans and timeline you set, and whether or not you've done your healthy or unhealthy habits. You will be each other's support system in adopting healthy habits and overcoming unhealthy ones for the time period you set.

## Discussion

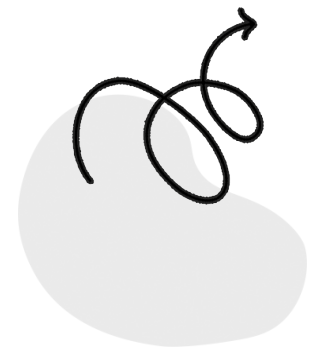
This combined activity fosters both connection-building and accountability. It allows students to share personal experiences, offer and receive support, and create a framework for ongoing encouragement in maintaining healthy habits and overcoming unhealthy ones within a supportive peer network.

### Let's Talk About It (10–15 minutes)

- Having a strong, healthy community helps us reduce the risk of developing an addiction. Let's identify the people around you who can help you:
  - Who are the people in your network that help you develop healthy habits?
  - Who are the people who check in on you when you're having a hard time?
  - To whom can you hold yourself accountable when you continually do your unhealthy habits?
  - Who do you allow to speak into your life?
- How did sharing both healthy and unhealthy habits with a partner influence your connection with them?
- Did discussing these habits with someone else make you more or less comfortable than anonymously writing them down?
- How might having an accountability partner assist in making changes to unhealthy habits or maintaining healthy ones?
- What can you do to be a supportive accountability partner for someone else?

MONTH 8

# Thriving in Community: Addressing Bullying



WEEK 1

## Let's Think About It

Adolescence is the fifth stage of psychosocial development and is what proponent Erik Erikson would describe as a time when an individual experiences identity versus role confusion. As a child transitions into adulthood, the adolescent may feel insecure about himself or herself and how to fit into society. This is why feeling accepted and being a part of a community is crucial at this stage. A sense of community meets a teenager's social, practical, and emotional needs while providing an avenue for learning. Sadly, this is also the stage when one is more prone to oppression and criticisms from society in the form of bullying.

The American Psychological Association defines bullying as a form of aggressive behavior in which someone intentionally and repeatedly causes another person injury or discomfort. What makes this behavior unacceptable is that the bullied individual did not do anything to deserve this bullying nor does the person have the capacity to defend himself or herself (APA, 2023).

The Philippines ranks first among 70 countries with a high incidence of bullying among adolescents aged 13 to 17 (Felipe, 2023). According to the National Baseline Survey on Violence Against Children, 65% of students in the country have been a target of bullying. Their survey showed that 3 out of 5 respondents have been a victim of bullying or violence in the hands of their peers. In terms of gender, the incidence seems to be higher among females (70.5%) as compared to males (35.4%). In total, about 17.7 million Filipinos have fallen victim to terrible acts.

These numbers only account for verbal or physical attacks, threats of harm, or other forms of intimidation perpetrated by someone in close proximity to the victim. However, in this day and age, the bully can even torment victims through technology such as social media, text messaging, or email, an act known as cyberbullying. The latest national data shows that almost half of the adolescents who belong to the above-mentioned age group are affected by some form of cyberviolence. The prevalence is almost the same for females (43%) and males (44%). Most victims experience verbal abuse over the internet or mobile phones, with some being victimized by acts which are sexual in nature (UNICEF, 2019).

In relation to these, online bashing and cancel culture are prevalent among the youth. Bashing is a form of cyberbullying wherein the victim is subjected to accusatory or abusive verbal attacks and harsh public criticism via social media activities (clickworker, n.d.). Canceling, on the other hand, involves blocking, unfollowing, and/or verbally targeting victims on social media platforms (Staff, 2023). Although more common online, cancel culture can take place both online and in real life. Ignoring and isolating are common experiences someone may have when they have been “canceled” by peers (Hager & Wen, 2022).

Adolescence is the age when peer connections are incredibly important, thus being socially ostracized can have devastating effects. Studies have shown that adolescents who have been bullied are more likely to experience mental health problems compared to those who were not (Kallmen & Hallgren, 2021). The most common mental health concerns observed are trauma, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and suicidality. Common symptoms manifested are disrupted sleep, lower self-esteem, and poor performance in school.

## **How Should One Respond to Bullying?**

Every student is going to experience some level of aggression at some point. How the person reacts is going to be a factor whether or not the aggression will progress into bullying. Interestingly, a student’s involvement in bullying changes across roles and over time. The person can sometimes be a victim, a bystander, or a perpetrator of bullying across different situations. A bullied student at school, for example, would sometimes turn into a bully of his/her siblings at home (Swearer & Hymel, 2015).

Bullied kids use different kinds of coping strategies to deal with the aggression they experience. Coping strategies usually have two goals: to regulate distressing emotions of the victim and to solve the problem that causes the distress—that is, the issue with the perpetrator (Hunter et al., 2004). Coping strategies vary a lot depending on age and gender. Ten- to fourteen-year-old males, for example, can ignore, fight back, or stand up

to bullies while younger ones often run away or cry. Girls more often cry or ask others for help (Hunter et al., 2004).

There are four kinds of coping strategies that bullying victims do to reduce victimization: seeking help, problem solving, avoidance, and self-defense (Xie et al., 2022).

### 1. Seeking help

Seeking help is when a victim enlists the help of siblings, friends, parents, and teachers to deal with a bully. According to research, telling someone to seek help is considered to be the best strategy to counter bullying (Hunter et al., 2004) as it leads to better social adjustment of the victim, fewer internalizing problems like crying and self-pity, and decreased victimization. In a study cited by Smith (2014), more than half of bullying victims who sought help stopped being victims after two years.

### 2. Problem solving

Problem solving is a constructive active response where the victim sorts out the issues that cause the bullying. This could include seeking to dialogue with the perpetrator in order to arrive at a resolution and to possibly try to be friends with the perpetrator. While this is theoretically effective and might even deescalate future bullying exchanges, most victims are unlikely to feel empowered to do this. Victims usually find it hard to muster enough courage to confront a bully without requisite training or help from other people (Murray-Harvey et al., 2012).

### 3. Avoidance

Avoidance is when the victim pretends not to be affected and walks away from the bullies as if nothing happened. According to research, this is deemed to be a less effective coping strategy as this is only a form of escaping or distracting attention from the problem without actually dealing with it (Hunter et al., 2004). Seriously bullied kids, however, use this approach the most because this is the least confrontational. Instead of inconveniencing others by seeking help or facing up to the bullies, victims simply wish that the bullying would eventually sort itself out (Murray-Harvey et al., 2012). This coping strategy often leads to self-blame, worry, loneliness, and further difficulties in social adjustment among kids. Additionally, perpetrators misconstrue avoidance as submission, or weakness. When the victim doesn't do anything, the bullying may never stop and might even intensify (Flanagan et al., 2013).

#### 4. Self-defense

Fighting back, aggressive behavior, or revenge are some of the most common responses to bullying. They are also the least effective of all the coping strategies (Smith, 2014). They may stop the perpetrator at the moment but they have been found to perpetuate peer victimization, lead to an increase in behaviors such as externalizing (e.g., aggression) and internalizing (e.g., anxiety, emotional problems), and are associated with lower levels of social adjustment for those involved (Flanagan et al., 2013).

One of the interesting things about the coping strategies mentioned above is the disparity between what is believed to be effective strategies versus what victims actually do. Research has proven that seeking help is the most effective strategy against bullying but victims seem to favor avoidance and retaliation. This is because of the unequal power dynamics between the victim and the perpetrator. As the bully increases in power, the victim loses self-confidence (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Seeking help would only confirm the victim's weakness, which the perpetrator could exploit and make the bullying even worse. Additionally, seeking help from teachers doesn't always guarantee that the victim could get the level of support that is needed. A significant reason is that most teachers do not have the proper training to handle the incidents (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002).

This leads us to turn our attention to one of the most underutilized groups of people who are usually present in bullying incidents—the bystanders. Bystanders' reactions are crucial in inhibiting or fueling bullying. One study shows that enhancing the bystanders' awareness and empathy greatly deters bullying in schools (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). This means that in places where there is not a robust school-wide program in place to deter bullying, victims can still find help among sympathetic strangers.

### **Conclusion**

Strengthening relationships with one another, especially those within our safe spaces, is crucial to combat bullying. When we have a strong sense of community, we will long to protect each other not just from physical, but also verbal, harm. This in turn will help strengthen one's inner being and contribute to a person's overall health.

### **Let's Talk About It**

1. Have you experienced being the victim of bullying? What are some observations that you have about yourself through that experience?
2. What parts of today's discussion resonated with you? Why?
3. Do you have people you can run to when you're having a difficult time in your relationships or when you experience bullying? Who are they?

## Discovering and Protecting Our Boundaries

### Activity (25–30 minutes)

Our activity today is familiar to anyone who has played with friends on the streets. It has different names like Pepsi 7-Up and Red Light, Green Light, as popularized by a Korean series. Today, let's see how this fun game can help us understand our physical and social boundaries.

### Materials:

- Tape measure/ruler
- Chalk

### Instructions:

1. Look for an area nearby where there is enough space for your group to run and be active.
2. One player gets to be the "stoplight" (or "traffic light"). You can do any quick game to determine who will get to be the stoplight.
3. Designate a starting line and a finish line, or the "boundary line." Ensure there's enough space for players to move between these points. You can use a ruler to measure how far apart the starting line and boundary line will be.
4. The stoplight will be placed at the boundary line, away from the other players. The goal of the other players is to move as fast as they can to tag the stoplight or step into the boundary line. The stoplight can yell "Green light!" to signal players to move, facing away from them.
5. At any point, the stoplight can call out "Red light!" and turn around to face the other players. Upon hearing "Red light," all players must freeze immediately. Any player caught moving after the command is given must return to the starting line or face a designated penalty (e.g., taking a step back).
6. The stoplight can alternate between calling "Green light!" to allow players to move and "Red light!" to make them stop throughout the game.
7. The first player to reach and tag the stoplight or cross the boundary line without being caught moving during "Red light" is the winner and will be the next stoplight. Repeat the game as time permits.

If your space is limited or you will be doing this indoors, you may make the following adjustments, while following the general rules above:

- No running is allowed.
- There will now be three lights which the stoplight can say with corresponding actions:
  - Green Light = Walk
  - Yellow Light = Slow Motion
  - Red Light = Stop
- If there are too many to play safely in the space, divide into groups and play multiple rounds. The first person to finish round one can be the stoplight for round two, and so on.

## **Discussion**

While the activity we had today involved crossing literal, physical, and visible boundaries, we can gather some insights that we can apply to our personal lives and our less obvious and figurative boundaries.

In the game, players move forward when it's safe (Green Light) and stop or freeze when it's not safe (Red Light). Likewise, in life, people have the ability to set boundaries for themselves to feel safe and comfortable. Respecting personal boundaries is similar to freezing in the game when the stoplight says, "Red Light." Sometimes, people will be vocal about others crossing their boundaries, but often that is not the case. That is why, we should treat each other with grace and be open to adjusting our own demeanor when relating with others.

In the same way, we can be open to others when they cross our boundaries. As we discussed, it is primarily our duty to protect our own boundaries, since nobody can really tell what they are at first glance. We can be vocal when our boundaries are crossed and when they are upheld.

Through our activity, we have hopefully learned how to uphold our own boundaries and when to move forward and when to stop or pause in interactions, fostering a culture of mutual respect and understanding.

## **Let's Talk About It** (10–15 minutes)

- What insights or lessons from the game and our discussion can we apply to our daily interactions to create healthier relationships?
- Think of a situation where you felt you needed to set a boundary or say “stop” in your life. How did you navigate it?
- How can you respect and protect your own boundaries? How can you respect and protect other people’s boundaries?
- Why is it important to listen and understand when someone says “stop” or indicates discomfort in social situations? How might understanding and respecting boundaries contribute to creating a supportive and inclusive community?
- Who are the people you allow yourself to be vulnerable with? Who are the people you allow to be closer to you?

## Friends Check-In: Identifying Your Meaningful Connections

### Activity (15–20 minutes)

Auditing your contacts or friends list can be a thoughtful exercise in assessing the connections you maintain. Here's an activity that prompts reflection on your relationships:

#### Materials:

- Notebook or paper
- Pen or pencil

#### Instructions:

1. Start by creating different categories for your contacts. These could include: close friends, acquaintances, family, school contacts, online friends, etc.
2. Go through your contacts list, whether on your phone, social media, or any other platform. As you go through each contact, write down the name in the respective category in your notebook.
3. Consider what each relationship means to you and how it contributes to your life. Consider the impact each contact has had on you. Reflect on interactions and past experiences. Here are some criteria that can help you in your assessment:
  - a. How frequently do you interact with him or her?
  - b. On a scale of 1 to 10, how comfortable are you with him or her?
  - c. On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you trust this person?
  - d. Do you consider this person to be supportive?
  - e. Do you have shared interests or values with him or her?
  - f. Is he or she a positive influence on your life?
  - g. Do you think they consider you close or dear to them?
4. Evaluate each contact based on your criteria. Place them in the appropriate category (close friends, acquaintances, etc.) based on your assessment.
5. Reflect on the distribution of contacts across categories. Are there categories that seem to have more or fewer contacts than you expected?

6. Consider and focus on the relationships that enrich your life.
  - a. Identify and prioritize individuals who have consistently supported and positively influenced you.
  - b. Consider investing more time and effort into nurturing these relationships.

## **Discussion**

This activity allows for a thoughtful examination of your social connections, enabling you to prioritize and invest more in relationships that matter so you can maximize your relationships and have a support group, walking through the ups and downs of life with you.

### **Let's Talk About It** (10–15 minutes)

- Based on the activity, are there contacts you'd like to engage with more frequently or deepen the relationship?
- How did categorizing your contacts impact your perception of your social circle?
- How can you reinforce and nurture relationships with contacts who have consistently shown support and positivity?
- How can you be more intentional in being a positive influence for others? Identify some people you can do this for. Name some practical ways you can start doing this.

## **Bullying Battleground: A Gratitude, Appreciation, and Empowering Exercise**

### **Discussion**

As Filipinos, we usually have a hard time receiving the positive things people say about us. But being able to graciously receive compliments is a helpful way to combat the effects of bullying on us and even improve our self-esteem.

This activity aims to promote positivity, build self-esteem, and encourage graciousness in both giving and receiving compliments as a way to counteract the negative effects of bullying.

### **Activity** (25–30 minutes)

#### **Materials Needed:**

- Paper
- Writing materials (markers, pens, etc.)

#### **Instructions:**

1. Write the names of the people in your group on a piece of paper. Allot enough space for you to write as many compliments or good things about this person, including encouragements for the person as well.
2. As you write, go beyond the physical traits of the person. Be specific and sincere about what you are writing (e.g., a certain situation that reminds them of you, how they have helped you or inspired you).
3. Afterward, form a circle with the whole group.
4. Take turns reading aloud the things you wrote, focusing on one person each round until the whole group has said good things about that person. Repeat for the next person until everyone has heard positive things about themselves.
5. As you listen to the compliments for yourself and others, don't make jokes out of it or mock the person who is meant to receive the encouragement.
6. If you can, write down each of the compliments and encouragements you received. Acknowledge these positive words and if you're comfortable, thank each one of your groupmates briefly. Constantly revisit this list and look back to this moment when you feel down or need a self-esteem boost.

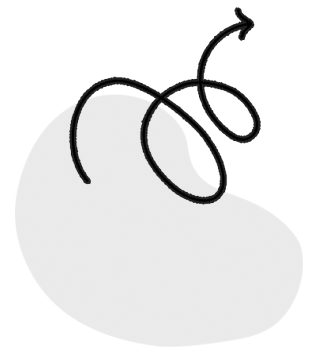
Our words have an impact. They can either build up or tear down. May we create a culture of support and encouragement not just in this group but in our circles and spheres of influence, believing that we can contribute to other people's well-being.

**Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

- How do you feel after our activity today? Do you consider it helpful? Why or why not? Did receiving compliments affect your mood or self-perception?
- Which of the compliments you received resonated with you the most? Why? How can accepting compliments positively impact your self-esteem and relationships?
- How does it feel to express gratitude for the compliments you received?
- Outside of this group, think of a mentor or caregiver in your life who affirms who you are and encourages you. How can you spend more time with them or at least keep your communication with them consistently?

MONTH 9

# Thriving with Purpose: Making Meaning of Our Present and Future



WEEK 1

## Let's Think About It

In the past few months, we've talked about what it means to have good mental health. We've identified safe spaces as the first thing we need in order to get started on mental health conversations where we can safely express ourselves. Before we shared deeply personal things, we made sure that the people who will listen to our stories won't judge us and use our stories against us.

In our safe spaces, we talked about our identity, recognized the protective factors (meaning, the helpful things) that we already have in and around us, gave space for our feelings of anxiety, depression, and grief, and talked about life challenges, such as addictions and bullying.

As we end our program, it is good to look back and appreciate the personal growth we have experienced and the friendships we have built. At the same time, it is good to recognize where we are in our journey, and look forward to our future. We can start by creating a mental health plan.

The Biopsychosocial (BPS) Model of mental health that we discussed in our first month not only gives us a useful grid for assessing ourselves but also provides us with helpful insights as to how we can prepare for our future. The three major aspects of mental health are worth repeating here: biological, psychological, and social—which technically includes the cultural and spiritual dimensions of our lives. We want to consider all these components in drafting our mental health plan to manage and eventually be free from maladaptive or destructive patterns.

## Revisiting the BPS Model for Mental Health

### 1. Biological Aspect

Creating a mental health plan includes caring for our physical bodies. While some parts of the biological aspect are beyond our control (genetics and age-related changes, for example), a large part of it is well within our power to improve. With the right nutrition and exercise, diseases can be avoided. With proper medical intervention and lifestyle changes, hormonal imbalances can be managed. A physically healthy person has a greater chance of having good mental health. This means that a well thought out mental health plan should include proper care of our bodies. Some examples include getting enough sleep, exercising as appropriate for our own age, eating healthy food, and finding the right balance between school and other enriching activities.

### 2. Psychological Aspect

The psychological aspect of mental health involves learning how to regulate emotions, growing in resilience to adversity, developing healthy coping skills, and learning to handle stress. What do you do when you don't get the grade you wanted or needed? How would you react when you are rejected by someone you love? How do you regulate your emotions when people oppose your best ideas? What is your game plan when the people you love walk out on you?

### 3. Social Aspect

It is no secret that the pathway to emotional and mental health always involves other people. Humans are social beings. We need a caring and supportive community to become emotionally and mentally healthy. We need people who rejoice with us in good times, and people whom we can call when we are having a hard time. In turn, the people in our safe space or community can also call us when they are the ones struggling. This includes family members, close friends, campus organizations, interest clubs, and churchmates.

It is our hope that the time we spent together has helped us get connected to a caring community, which we can continue to develop into healthy life-long relationships even after the program.

## Creating a Mental Health Plan

Healing from emotional wounds and caring for our well-being is a life-long process, and it would be helpful to have a mental health plan as we navigate the different challenges of life. Whereas we cannot possibly cover every area of our lives, following are some of the practical steps you can take.

1. Know your triggers and coping strategies.

In psychology, a trigger refers to any stimulus that elicits an intense or unexpected emotional reaction (APA, 2018). A person could be feeling happy at any given moment and in the next moment, grief, anger, or memories of past trauma can come flooding back because of certain triggers. People are wired differently, so what triggers one person may not trigger another. Therefore, it is important that we identify our own triggers and determine our unique way of coping.

For example, if seeing a drunk person triggers an automatic fight-or-flight response in you, you probably need to create a game plan where you identify specific steps to take when you come face-to-face with a drunk person. Or if gory photos trigger your anxiety, you might want to be strategic with your social media use in order to avoid being exposed to such images. These are temporary fixes you can execute even when you are alone. For clinical and advanced cases, it is best to seek professional help.

2. Renew your thinking process.

It is said that the battleground where we win or lose is the mind. Changing the way we think can also change our feelings, which greatly influences our behavior. In other words, a way to a transformed life starts with the renewing of the mind. And most of the time, this would entail processing our thoughts and feelings with people whom we consider our safe space.

Likewise, one of the most important mental health hacks is to deliberately choose what we feed our minds. Instead of indiscriminately reading or watching all kinds of media, we can choose those that will have a positive impact on our lives.

3. Pursue a life of purpose.

All the suggested steps, tips, hacks, and procedures we have learned so far are helpful in creating a workable mental health plan. We must recognize, however, that all of them are limited to a certain degree. This is why we approach mental health from different directions. There's no single psychological theory or principle that cures all of life's problems. We then need to recognize that no matter what we do, we are not going to be totally free from adversity. So instead of trying so hard to build a perfectly curated life that is free from pain and stress, maybe the best course of action is to try and discover our purpose in life.

Having a clear sense of purpose is a very powerful mental health booster. Purposeful people, according to research, produce better physical, mental, social, and even financial outcomes. They are also happier and they tend to live longer (Pfund, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

There are many ways to find our sense of purpose. We can look inwardly and explore the things we care most about, like our dreams, aspirations, passions, strengths, skills, and talents. We can also ask guidance from others whom we trust—our families, loved ones, mentors, people we admire the most, and even other inspiring members in our community. And we can also look to God, and seek for the grand purposes that God designed for our lives.

## **Let's Talk About It**

1. Look back at your first week in the program. How were you then? How are you now?
2. Identify areas in your life that have changed since you started the program. Why do you think that is?
3. What are some of the things you have learned from this program that you will carry with you every day and into your future?

## From Childhood Dreams to Future Goals

### **Activity** (20–25 minutes)

For our activity today, let's take a stroll down memory lane and remember our dream jobs in our childhood.

### **Materials:**

- Paper (at least 3 sheets per student)
- Pencils
- Coloring materials (markers, crayons, etc.)

### **Instructions:**

1. Take a moment to reflect on the job or career you aspired to have when you were younger. What did you dream of becoming when you were a child? Think about the reasons behind that dream and what attracted you to that profession.
2. On the first sheet of paper, draw or illustrate the job or career you dreamt of having when you were younger. Be as creative as you want, using colors and details to depict your childhood dream job.
3. Now, consider the job or career you are contemplating on having instead.
4. On another sheet of paper, draw or illustrate the job or career you are considering today. Represent this future goal with as much detail and creativity as you can.
5. Reflect once again, but this time on the career you want to pursue if you weren't considering anything else (e.g., if money weren't an issue). What interests or passions have evolved or changed since your childhood dreams? What career paths are you leaning towards now? (Note, if this is the same as your current career goal, you may skip this and the next step.)
6. On a third sheet of paper, draw or illustrate your current dream job. Represent this future dream career with as much detail and creativity as you can.
7. Take a moment to compare your drawings side by side. Reflect on the changes in your aspirations over time. What factors influenced your shift in career interests from childhood to now? How have your skills, interests, or experiences shaped your current career considerations?

## Discussion

This activity aims to encourage self-reflection on personal career aspirations, recognizing changes and growth in interests from childhood to high school, and fostering an understanding of the factors that influence career choices.

### **Let's Talk About It** (20–25 minutes)

- What's the first job you wanted to have as a kid? Why? Is it the same as your dream job right now? Why or why not?
- What challenges or obstacles might you face in pursuing your current career aspirations compared to your childhood dream job?
- How do you feel about the differences between the idealized version of your childhood dream job and the practicalities of your current aspirations?
- What are the things that you think hinder you from pursuing your dream job either from your childhood or today? How might you face these challenges?

## Finding Meaning Amidst Challenges: A Reflection Exercise

### **Activity** (25–30 minutes)

Exploring and understanding personal purpose amidst challenges can be a powerful exercise. Here's an activity designed to help individuals navigate and understand their purpose amid struggles and limitations.

#### **Materials:**

- Paper
- Writing materials (pens, pencils, etc.)
- Magazines or images (optional)

#### **Instructions:**

1. Reflect on the difficulties, uncertainties, or circumstances you face. Write down these challenges or worries on a piece of paper.
2. As you are comfortable, share your challenges with your small group or with a trusted partner. As we do so, let's create a safe and supportive environment for each other.
3. Now, recall moments in your life that brought you joy, satisfaction, or a sense of accomplishment. These can be small achievements, enjoyable activities, or moments of kindness you've experienced or contributed to.
4. List or discuss your strengths, talents, or activities you enjoy. Through this you'll be able to recognize your individual abilities and passions.
5. Think about how your challenges or struggles might connect to your personal values or aspirations. How do you think overcoming these difficulties could contribute to your sense of purpose?
6. Optional: Using the magazines or images provided, create collages representing your aspirations, strengths, and the ways you perceive your purpose. Cut out images or words that resonate with you.

#### **Discussion**

Our present realities are a major factor to how we perceive ourselves, our lives, and our future. But we don't have to be defined by them. As the popular saying goes, "Habang may buhay, may pag-asa" (As long as we're alive, there is hope). Remember that progress is possible, even in small steps.

## **Let's Talk About It** (15–20 minutes)

- How did it feel to acknowledge and share your challenges with others, if you did so, during the activity? Did you notice any similarities or shared experiences among your peers while discussing challenges?
- What were some moments or activities in your life that made you feel happy, accomplished, or content? How do these moments relate to your personal values or aspirations?
- Which strengths or talents did you recognize in yourself during the activity, regardless of your situation? How might these strengths or interests contribute to your journey in understanding your purpose or tackling challenges?
- What small steps or actions can you take, based on this discussion, to move closer to exploring your interests or overcoming challenges and to build on your strengths?

## Vision Map: Look Back to Move Ahead

### Activity (20–25 minutes)

As we wrap up our program, let's look back and look ahead! For our last activity, let's try to creatively map out our dreams and goals for the future, while looking into ourselves and our journey so far towards self-discovery and our overall well-being.

### Materials:

- Paper (construction paper, manila paper)
- Coloring materials (markers, crayons, etc.)
- Magazines or newspapers

### Instructions:

1. Think about the following:
  - a. Things you enjoy doing
  - b. Things you excel at or can do well (Consider hobbies, talents, skills, or interests. This could be a mix of activities, skills, or passions that you feel define a part of you.)
  - c. Nice things people said about you (e.g., what other people think or notice about you, what people say you're good at, notable affirmations from others)
  - d. How you envision yourself in the future (This doesn't have to only be about your future career or job; it can also be about your future family life or any other dream you may have.)

- List down the things you've thought of in Step 1 under their respective categories. Write your name on the last row of the table below.

Categories	
Things You Enjoy Doing	
+	
Things You Excel At or Can Do Well	
+	
Nice Things People Say about You	
+	
How You Envision Yourself in the Future	
=	
Your Name:	

- Using the art materials, create a visual representation of your aspirations and goals, while also including your current interpretation of your uniqueness (your interests, hobbies, skills, talents).
- Share your vision board with the group. Talk about the different aspects of your life and the future you dream of for yourself or your family such as health, relationships, career, hobbies, and personal growth.

## **Let's Talk About It** (20–25 minutes)

- What are the common themes and goals in the group?
- How do you see your personal vision contributing to a more fulfilling life?
- In what ways can your personal goals positively impact your community or those around you?
- What are some of your treasured moments, memories, and takeaways from the whole program? Who are the people you've gotten to know throughout the program? How have they made an impact in your own life?
- What lessons, insights, and learnings from the program and about yourself do you want to carry with you for yourself, your family, your friends, and your future?

## **Discussion**

Now that you've gone through the whole program, our hope is that you have discovered more things about yourself and ways in which you can continue to pursue and prioritize your well-being. As we have learned together, the journey to our overall health and well-being is a lifelong journey that we can walk together with our safe spaces.

More than our own personal growth, may we also grow in community and in turn help others in their journeys of discovering themselves and walking towards a healthy well-being.

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