

evidence to practice:
**universal, community-based
approaches to enhance young
people's wellbeing**

part 2: **community engagement**



This two-part resource has been developed for people working in youth mental health services or other sectors to enhance young people's wellbeing.

Part 1 focuses on:

- What is mental health and wellbeing?
- Why focus on enhancing wellbeing?
- What universal interventions work to enhance the wellbeing of young people?

Part 2 (this resource) focuses on:

- Engaging with the community to enhance young people's wellbeing.

In this resource, the term 'young people' refers to people aged 12–25.

Engaging with the community to enhance young people's wellbeing

This section is designed to guide the community engagement activities of youth mental health services, or individuals involved in promoting mental health and wellbeing in the community. Historically, the community awareness and engagement activities of youth mental health services have aimed to increase mental health literacy, promote help-seeking and help-giving and reduce stigma towards mental ill-health. However, there is also the opportunity to integrate activities that empower young people, build agency, self-efficacy and enhance their wellbeing.

There are cultural considerations to be mindful of when engaging with First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. See the 'helpful resources' section for more information.

Community engagement

The delivery of wellbeing promotion activities and interventions requires strong community engagement. Community engagement is a two-way process of developing collaborative relationships to enhance wellbeing outcomes.⁽¹⁾ Collaboration with young people, families and other sectors is needed to extend beyond a treatment focus and address the broader social determinants of population mental health and wellbeing.^(2, 3) Community engagement and wellbeing promotion activities may occur across various settings where young people spend their time, such as home, schools, workplaces, social and cultural activities and in the media.

Community engagement can play a significant role in enhancing wellbeing by contributing to awareness, skill building, stigma reduction, supportive networks and service environments, as outlined in greater detail below.

Awareness and education

Raise awareness about mental health issues, debunk myths, and educate community members about the importance of wellbeing. This can be achieved through public campaigns, workshops, educational programs in schools, and community events focused on wellbeing.

Skill building and empowerment

Offer opportunities for individuals to develop coping skills, resilience, and self-care strategies. This can be achieved through workshops, training programs, and support groups that focus on stress management, mindfulness, and overall mental wellbeing.

Stigma reduction

Combat the stigma surrounding mental health by promoting open conversations, improving mental health literacy, sharing personal stories, using person-first language and avoiding stigmatising language, and normalising discussions about mental health challenges. This can be done through public talks, storytelling events, or initiatives that encourage individuals with lived experiences to speak out.

Support networks

Facilitate the development of support networks and peer support systems. This includes establishing support groups, helplines, and online communities where individuals can connect with others who share similar experiences and challenges safely. These networks provide emotional support, reduce isolation, and promote a sense of belonging.

Access to services

Improve access to mental health services by providing information about available resources, navigating pathways for support, advocating for better funding and infrastructure, and building relationships with and collaborating with mental healthcare providers and organisations. This helps work towards ensuring that individuals in need can easily access appropriate and timely support.

Inclusive policies and environments

Advocate for policies and practices that prioritise mental wellbeing in various settings such as schools, workplaces, and public spaces. This may involve promoting mental health-friendly policies, advocating for workplace accommodation and mental health and wellbeing promotion strategy integration, and creating safe and inclusive environments that foster positive mental health. Policies that can support and value wellbeing and address the social determinants of health extend beyond the health sector.

Collaboration and partnerships

Establish collaboration between mental health professionals, community organisations, local government, and community members. By working together, these stakeholders can develop comprehensive strategies, share language and resources, and create a collective impact on youth wellbeing. This is more successful when underpinned by governance.

Levels of community engagement

Health and wellbeing promotion activities were traditionally driven by professionals, with little or no input from the targeted communities. More recently, community engagement has become a central component of clinical guidelines and national strategies for promoting public health and wellbeing across many countries. This shift has been driven by two schools of thought.⁽⁴⁾ From a 'utilitarian' perspective, it is believed that through engaging with the community, more suitable interventions will result, which may enhance wellbeing outcomes. A second perspective is grounded in 'social justice' and civil rights, and views empowerment and community development as the goal in itself. While the primary aim is to enhance wellbeing, a social justice lens has a broader focus to also make up for inequities in power and democracy.⁽⁴⁾

One commonly used framework for community engagement is the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation (Figure 1).⁽⁵⁾ This framework offers a continuum of engagement levels that guide organisations in determining the appropriate level of public participation for their specific context. The spectrum consists of five levels:

1. Inform

At this level, organisations provide one-way communication to the public, sharing information about decisions, actions, or projects. The goal is to provide transparency and keep the community informed, but there is limited opportunity for public input or involvement.

2. Consult

This level involves seeking public input and feedback on specific issues or options. Organisations collect information, opinions, and perspectives from the public to inform decision-making processes. However, the final decision-making authority remains with the organisation.

3. Involve

Involvement allows for two-way communication between organisations and the public. It provides opportunities for collaboration and co-creation. Organisations work with the public to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are considered in decision-making processes, although the final decision remains with the organisation.

4. Collaborate

Collaboration entails working directly with the public throughout the decision-making process. Organisations and the public share responsibility and actively work together to develop solutions, strategies, or plans. The decision-making authority is shared between the organisation and the public.

5. Empower

Empowerment represents the highest level of community engagement. It involves transferring decision-making power and authority to the public or community members. The organisation facilitates and supports community-led initiatives, allowing the community to design and implement solutions themselves.

The IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation offers a flexible framework that allows organisations to assess the level of community engagement required based on the complexity of the issue, the level of impact on the community, and the desired outcomes. By using this framework, organisations can select the appropriate level of engagement and design tailored strategies and activities to involve the community effectively in decision-making processes. This framework conceptualises the most impactful type of community engagement as empowering (devolving control and decision-making to the community); and the least impactful as information provision and exchange (Figure 1).⁽⁵⁾

Figure 1. IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation (5)

Increasing Community Engagement And Impact

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Community participation goal	To provide the community with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain community feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the community throughout the process to ensure that community concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the community in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the community.
Promise to the community	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how community input influenced the decision. We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how community input influenced the decision.	We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

This model supports the notion that youth mental health services should develop more collaborative and empowering relationships with young people, their families/carers and organisations that support them in the community in order to have a greater impact on youth wellbeing. Raising awareness and psychoeducation about causes, myths, symptoms and treatments for common mental health difficulties can improve mental health literacy and decrease stigma (e.g., attitudes and beliefs).(6) While it is an indispensable population-level public health approach, it may be less effective for enhancing wellbeing in young people compared to other interventions further right on the spectrum.(7)

The role of self-efficacy

Models of community engagement are underpinned by theories of change. A review of 131 studies found that community engagement interventions can indeed change health behaviours and perceived social support across a range of contexts.(8) A common concept across many theories of change is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to successfully execute specific tasks, achieve goals, and handle challenges in various areas of life. It is a person's confidence in their own capabilities to effectively perform and produce desired outcomes.(9) Together, self-efficacy and empowerment contribute to individuals' sense of agency, autonomy, and control over their lives. Building self-efficacy can empower individuals to take charge of their circumstances, make choices aligned with their goals and values, and actively participate in creating positive change in their own lives and communities. Likewise, empowerment processes and experiences can strengthen individuals' belief in their abilities, fostering higher self-efficacy and an ongoing cycle of empowerment.

A review of strategies for building self-efficacy are beyond the scope of this resource, however there are four sources of self-efficacy which provide a framework on which such strategies could be developed;

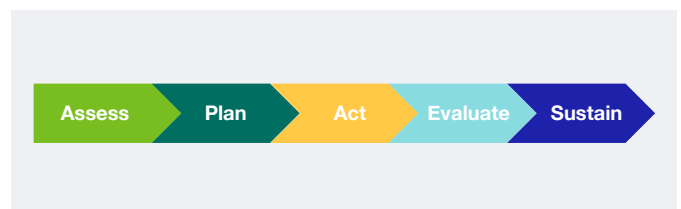
- **Mastery experiences:** these are gained when succeeding at new challenges, leading to increased self-belief.
- **Vicarious experiences:** observing others succeed (or otherwise) at something, enables a young person to gauge their likelihood of success or failure at similar activities based on comparisons between themselves and the person observed.
- **Verbal persuasion:** words of encouragement and support from others.
- **Physiological states:** also known as affective or emotional arousal, is recognising the connection between feelings and emotions such as fatigue and fear and its effect on a young person's ability to achieve their goals.(10)

It is important to consider the potential influence of cultural identity on self-efficacy. These four sources of self-efficacy may vary between cultures in three ways; some sources may be more prevalent than others, the sources make take different forms and they may differ in how they are valued.(11) Whether a young person is from a collectivist (where community and group harmony are emphasised) or individualistic culture (where independence is valued) is one cultural factor to consider that may impact upon self-efficacy. Other cultural aspects that may promote different self-efficacy appraisals are the level of tolerance for uncertainty, whether there is a large power differential (i.e., between parents/carers and young people) and how much the culture places importance on status, money and achievement versus quality of life, relationships and helping others.(11)

Models and frameworks to guide community engagement

There are numerous models to guide community engagement that follow similar basic steps (Figure 2). The Community Tool Box, developed by the University of Kansas (<https://ctb.ku.edu/en>), offers practical guidance and resources for community engagement and community development.(12) It provides step-by-step guides, case studies, and tools for effective community engagement across various domains, including health.

Figure 2. Community engagement – key steps(12)



The Nine Step Model of Community Engagement provides a more detailed framework that guides organisations and practitioners in effectively involving and collaborating with communities (Figure 3).(13) While there are variations in different frameworks, the following steps are commonly included:

1. Reflect and strategise

Clarify the purpose of the community engagement process and establish clear goals. Determine what you aim to achieve and why community engagement is necessary.

2. Identify and engage stakeholders

Identify and map the stakeholders who are affected by or have an interest in the issue or project at hand. This includes community members, organisations, local leaders, and relevant institutions.

3. Define the community

Clarify the scope of the community you are planning to engage using geographic and population data.

4. Collect and analyse data

Gather information and develop an understanding of the community's demographics, culture, values, and existing resources. This may include meetings, surveys, workshops, focus groups, or online platforms. Analyse data to help tailor the engagement process to the specific context.

5. Clarify community priorities

Seek to understand the community's priorities and preferred avenues to enhance wellbeing.

6. Document and communicate results

Share the results of the process with the community and stakeholders. Create a communication plan that outlines how information will be shared with the community and stakeholders. Consider the use of multiple channels to reach diverse segments of the community effectively.

7. Plan implementation strategies

Collaboratively develop interventions or programs that address the identified wellbeing needs. Ensure that interventions are culturally appropriate, evidence-based, and responsive to the unique context and preferences of the community.

8. Implement strategies

Implement the planned interventions or programs.

9. Evaluate progress

Monitor progress and impact. Continuously collect and analyse data to assess the effectiveness of the interventions and make necessary adjustments and improvements to optimise outcomes.

Community engagement is an iterative process, and these steps may be revisited and adapted based on feedback and evolving community needs. The framework provides a systematic and inclusive approach to engage communities, foster collaboration, and ensure that their voices and perspectives are valued in decision-making processes.

Figure 3. Nine Step Model of Community Engagement (adapted from the American Hospital Association's Community Health Assessment Toolkit (13))



While there may not be a single definitive framework to guide community engagement attributed to a specific developer, the following entities have made significant contributions to the field:

- The World Health Organization (WHO) has played a crucial role in advancing community engagement for mental health promotion. They have developed frameworks and guidelines, such as the [Mental Health Action Plan](#), which emphasises the importance of community engagement and participation in promoting mental health and wellbeing.
- The [Mental Health Commission of Canada \(MHCC\)](#) has developed resources and frameworks that promote community engagement in mental health promotion and advocacy. Their work focuses on engaging individuals with lived experience, families, communities, and service providers in shaping mental health policies and programs.
- [National Institute for Mental Health \(NIMH\)](#) in the United States, supports research and initiatives related to mental health promotion. While they may not have a specific community engagement framework, their research and resources contribute to the understanding and practice of community engagement in mental health.
- [Mental Health Foundation \(MHF\)](#) in the UK has developed resources and frameworks for promoting mental health and wellbeing, including community engagement strategies.
- Numerous researchers and academic institutions have contributed to the development of community engagement frameworks and provide insights into effective community engagement strategies and approaches to enhancing wellbeing.

Health promotion theories and models

When seeking to implement interventions that aim to change individual behaviour that may improve wellbeing, (such as increasing help-seeking behaviour, practicing mindfulness or eating more fruit and vegetables) it can be helpful to base these on theoretical frameworks.

Implementation science provides insight into the process of translating evidence-based interventions into real-world settings, ensuring successful adoption and integration. To be effective, behaviour change interventions should be based on theories or models of behaviour(14) and should also consider principles and strategies outlined by implementation science. By incorporating implementation science, such as considering barriers and facilitators to implementation and assessing contextual factors, the likelihood of successful implementation and sustained behaviour change can be enhanced. More information can be seen on the [University of Washington's Implementation Science Resource Hub website](#) and the [Rural Health Information Hub's Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Toolkit](#).

Summary

Community engagement is a central component of any health promotion activity and can play a significant role in enhancing wellbeing by contributing to awareness, skill building, stigma reduction, supportive networks and service environments.

There are numerous models, frameworks and theories to inform and guide community engagement. These models emphasise the importance of an iterative and inclusive process that values community input and adapts to evolving needs when implementing community mental health interventions, including those that aim to boost wellbeing. To foster culturally safe, inclusive, and effective community engagement, there are additional skills and knowledge necessary for working with First Nations or CALD communities.

Helpful resources

[Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice](#)

Part 3 is about standards, principles and practice for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Chapter 15 focuses on skills and understanding to support communicating and engaging effectively with First Nations Australians.

[Orygen's Youth Participation with Young People from Multicultural Backgrounds Toolkit](#)

This toolkit explores the benefits of engaging with young people from multicultural backgrounds in the design, delivery, research and evaluation of youth mental health services. It shares practical strategies about how CALD young people can be involved in youth participation activities.

[Not Just "Ticking a Box": Youth Participation with Young People from Refugee and Migrant Backgrounds](#)

This resource aims to assist organisations to consider ways they can support and enable young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds to participate in decisions that affect them.

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headspace centres and services operate across Australia, in metro, regional and rural areas, supporting young Australians and their families to be mentally healthy and engaged in their communities.



headspace would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First People and Traditional Custodians. We value their cultures, identities, and continuing connection to country, waters, kin and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and emerging and are committed to making a positive contribution to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, by providing services that are welcoming, safe, culturally appropriate and inclusive.



headspace is committed to embracing diversity and eliminating all forms of discrimination in the provision of health services. headspace welcomes all people irrespective of ethnicity, lifestyle choice, faith, sexual orientation and gender identity.

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Disclaimer

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