Resources

Keeping Youth Engaged Online

In accordance with the Public Health Agency of Canada sanctioned physical distancing guidelines to slow the spread of COVID-19, community organizations may opt to implement mental health programming online. The transition to online programming invites facilitators to adopt new and unique practices in keeping youth engaged online in the continuous effort to promote youth's connectedness with the program and the community, and to bolster their resilience and sense of belonging.

We consulted and reviewed evidence-informed and community-engaged resources to present the recommendations below for keeping youth engaged online. These recommendations are grounded in trauma-informed care and prioritize safety, agency, trust, and relationships for both youth and program facilitators. For more tipsheets and webinars on youth engagement, click here.

1. **Prioritize Building Relationships with Youth**
    - Dedicate time at the beginning and end of program sessions to intentionally check-in, catch-up, and connect (e.g., incorporating additional ice-breakers and getting-to-know-you activities)
    - Create a safe space for youth to explore and express their thoughts, emotions, and reflections, even if they are not directly related to the programming content
        - Express emotions and empathy and provide validations in your communication with youth

2. **Attend to Youth's Interests, Needs, and Goals**
    - Youth may have additional needs, interests and goals to manage stress unique to COVID-19. Explore ways to add or modify activities to target these emerging needs, goals, and interests in youth's diverse life domains (e.g., peer relationships, mental health, schooling demands).
    - Program facilitators may use the first and second sessions to get to know and understand the participating youth. For example, during the program intake or to wrap up the first session, facilitators may propose this check-out question to the group: *"Share three things you wish to take away from this program?"*
    - If possible, offer opportunities for youth to lead discussions or activities
        - Create space for youth to learn and practice the planned discussion or activity in advance (e.g., individual check-in with a program facilitator for practice and coaching)
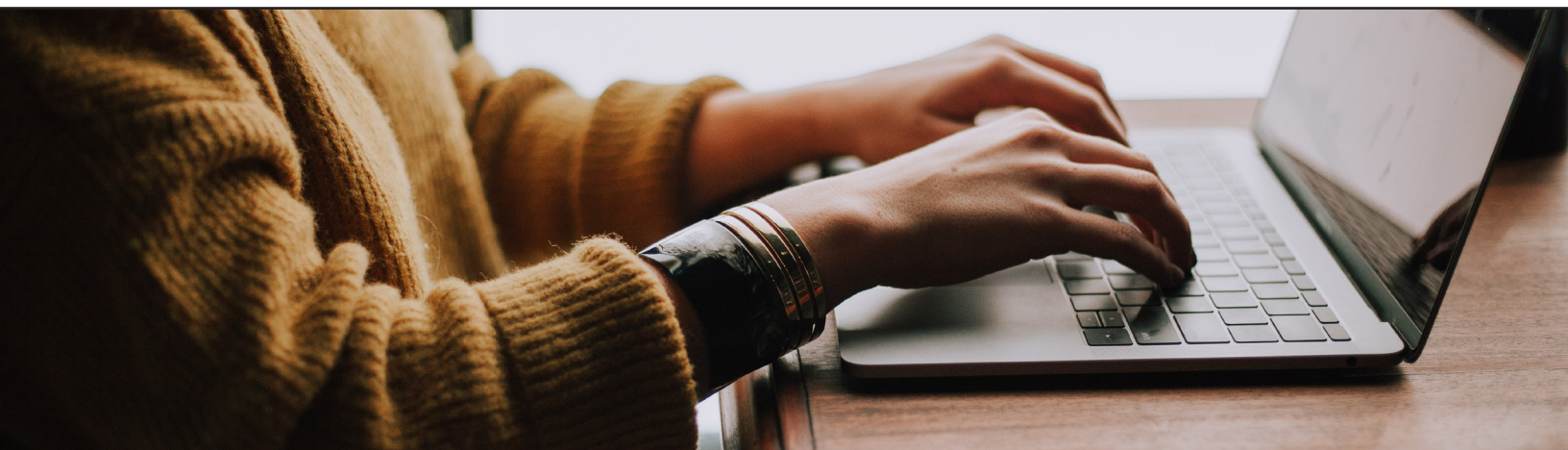
3. Diversify Programming Techniques and Resources

- Incorporate virtual tools (e.g., whiteboards, live polls) and youth-focused-or-led media to create engaging and interactive opportunities for youth participation
- Use break-out rooms for small-group discussions
- Create inclusive and diverse mediums for communication and participation (e.g., chats, private messaging with facilitators)
- Provide movement or musical breaks between activities
- Provide a program kit to youth with necessary handouts, supplies, and activity tools before starting the program
    - Depending on youth's needs and life circumstances, consider providing a safety kit with relevant contacts for supports and mental health resources

4. Prioritize Safety and Seek Youth Feedback

- Co-create virtual programming guidelines and expectations with youth
    - Remain consistent with the established guidelines, expectations, and session plan to maintain predictability for youth
    - Allow youth the right to pass and use the right for every session: Any member of the group may choose not to participate in whatever activity or discussion is going on
    - Be flexible and meet the youth where they are at. In other words, don't prescribe mandatory rules (e.g., video on)
- Consider having individual check-ins (outside the usual group programming) with youth for the entire duration of the program. Facilitators may do these check-ins via telephone or video calls. The frequency of the check-ins will depend on the youth's need and their experience with the program as well as the program contents. For example, facilitators may schedule more frequent check-ins before or after group sessions featuring activities and discussions on more sensitive topics (e.g., relationship violence and safety)
    - During the individual check-ins:
        - Seek youth feedback about their experience of participating in the program virtually (e.g., what they are liking or disliking, challenges they may be having to participate virtually). Explore if adjustments could be made to address youth's challenges and barriers with virtual programming and engagement
        - Familiarize youth with the topics and activities of the upcoming program sessions
            - If a youth identifies particular topics or activities to be distressing, facilitators could take preemptive steps and make context-based adaptations (or eliminate certain activities or discussions to continue to create a trauma-informed virtual space for youth)

With Thanks to

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