

Stocktaking Report on Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing

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Introduction and Context

Youth mental health has emerged as a critical concern across Europe, with rising levels of anxiety, stress, and emotional distress reported among young people – trends that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. National reports from the RECOVER project’s partner countries highlight how disruptions to daily life, social isolation, and academic pressures have negatively impacted adolescents’ well-being. For example, in Austria and Poland, youth consistently cite **academic pressure** as a major stressor: heavy school workloads and high performance expectations have left many feeling overwhelmed, with evidence linking these “always-on” pressures to heightened anxiety, sleep problems, and depressive symptoms. Similarly, a Croatian study found that about **10% of adolescents** showed notable emotional or behavioral difficulties (e.g. withdrawal, concentration problems), indicating a substantial minority struggling with mental health challenges even if they don’t meet clinical thresholds. These challenges often manifest subtly – through irritability, exhaustion, or social withdrawal – rather than obvious crises, underscoring the need for early awareness and support.

Modern stressors are multi-faceted. **Social media and peer comparisons** have become a double-edged influence: on one hand, online platforms can provide community and creative outlets, but excessive social media use has been tied to increased depression and anxiety among teens. Workshops revealed that many young participants feel caught in unhealthy comparisons on social media – seeing idealized posts by peers and feeling inadequate – which negatively impacts their self-esteem and well-being. **Bullying**, both offline and online, remains widespread as well; a survey in Zagreb, Croatia, found nearly **41% of primary school students** had endured frequent insults or aggression from peers, a situation often unchecked in schools due to limited resources. Stigma around mental health issues persists in many communities, making it hard for young people to openly seek help. As a result, many youth “suffer in silence” until problems worsen. Taken together, these findings paint a picture of overlapping challenges – from pandemic-induced loneliness to academic and social pressures – that demand proactive, supportive interventions. Crucially, evidence shows that grassroots and peer-driven initiatives can make a positive difference: for instance, a Croatian peer

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education project demonstrated how empowering youth as educators can foster resilience and **reduce stigma** around mental health. This aligns with European Youth Goal #5 (“Mental Health and Wellbeing”), which calls for greater awareness, early intervention skills, and stigma reduction among young people and those who support them.

Youth workers often stand on the front lines of these issues. In everyday youth work settings, they are typically the trusted adults who notice when a teenager is struggling. However, many youth workers feel under-prepared and under-supported to address mental health needs. Participants in the RECOVER project workshops (comprising youth workers from various backgrounds) identified several common challenges in their practice: a **lack of professional mental health training** (leading to uncertainty in how to handle complex issues like trauma, self-harm or severe anxiety), fear of “saying the wrong thing” and potentially making a situation worse, and the strain of absorbing youths’ emotional burdens without adequate self-care or supervisory support. It was noted that youth workers often experience burnout and emotional exhaustion (“feeling drained”) because they carry heavy responsibilities in supporting distressed youth, often in systems that lack mental health resources or flexibility for youth-centered approaches. In some cases, schools or organizations avoid addressing emotional topics or lack protocols for mental well-being, leaving the youth worker isolated in handling these challenges. These realities point to a clear need: empowering youth workers and youth organizations with better tools, training, and systemic support to promote mental health. As the Croatian national report concluded, there is an urgent need for **early detection** of youth mental health issues, equipping educators and youth workers with coping tools, and building community-based support networks that nurture young people’s resilience.

In response to these challenges, the **RECOVER project** (Erasmus+ 2024-1-PL01-KA220-YOU-00024343) was initiated to strengthen the capacity of youth organizations and youth workers in supporting youth mental health. Rather than replacing professional psychological care, RECOVER aims to prepare youth workers to act as attentive, supportive mentors who can recognize early warning signs of mental health problems and respond in a respectful, helpful manner. The project’s objectives include raising awareness of mental health and its determinants (to combat stigmatization), **strengthening the role of youth workers as first-line support** for young people, and creating safe

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spaces for open conversation and emotional expression in youth settings. As part of this initiative, a series of human-centred, participatory workshops (referred to as A3/R3 workshops in the project framework) were conducted in each partner country. This stocktaking report brings together the **insights and findings from those workshops** into a comprehensive analysis. By combining the on-the-ground observations with current knowledge in the field, the report offers a state-of-the-art overview of youth mental health challenges and – importantly – **pathways for solutions and improvement**. The emphasis throughout is on **practice-focused** recommendations: tangible ways youth workers and organizations can adapt and improve their practices to better support the mental health and wellbeing of the young people they work with. In the following sections, we will outline the workshop methodology, discuss key findings (challenges identified, lessons learned, and positive outcomes), and present recommendations including suggested organizational changes to meet the needs of youth, especially those at risk of mental health issues.

Participatory Workshops Methodology

To ground this analysis in lived experience, the RECOVER project partners implemented a series of **Participatory Self-Analysis Workshops** with youth and youth workers in each country. These workshops were human-centred, interactive sessions designed to engage young people (generally around 15 participants per workshop) and youth workers (around 5 per workshop) in a joint exploration of mental health challenges and coping strategies. The methodology was based on the **Dragon Dreaming Approach (DDA)** – a creative, inclusive facilitation method – adapted in this context through a “Healing Dragons” manual and related tools. The core idea was to create a safe space where participants could **analyze the causes and effects** of mental health issues in their lives and communities, reflect on their needs, and collaboratively **identify possible solutions and support strategies**. Rather than a top-down lecture, each workshop was highly participatory and youth-driven: activities ranged from ice-breakers and personal storytelling circles to body-mapping exercises, group “dreaming” of ideal futures, problem-solving tasks, and action planning sessions. This approach aligns with best practices emphasizing that engaging youth as

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active co-creators – rather than passive recipients – leads to more effective mental health initiatives.

All partner workshops followed a similar structure tailored to local contexts. Typically, a single-day workshop was organized (for example, in Vienna, Austria on 15 March, a one-day session was held) bringing together a diverse mix of young people and youth workers, facilitated by trained moderators. The facilitators introduced creative techniques from the Dragon Dreaming “Healing Dragons” toolkit to guide participants in reflective and collaborative exercises. For instance, one popular exercise was the **storytelling circle**, where individuals could share personal experiences or “stories” of facing mental health challenges. Another was **body mapping**, where participants used art to illustrate how stress or emotions manifest for them physically and mentally. These methods allowed sensitive topics to be approached indirectly through metaphor and creativity, which many youths found less intimidating. Indeed, feedback from the Latvian workshops noted that activities like body mapping and storytelling were favorites, as they enabled participants to express personal challenges “through metaphor, art, and collective imagination” without feeling forced to divulge more than they were comfortable with. Throughout the sessions, participants could contribute at their own pace – “they liked that nothing was forced, and that they could share only as much as they wanted to” according to the Latvian report. This emphasis on **voluntary sharing and trust-building** was crucial in creating an atmosphere of psychological safety.

Each workshop typically progressed through stages: an opening to establish group norms and comfort, guided exercises to reflect on challenges (often framed as identifying one’s personal “dragons” or struggles), group dialogues to delve into root causes, and co-creative brainstorming of solutions or support ideas. For example, participants might collectively map out stressors in their community, then work in subgroups to dream up possible interventions. The sessions usually concluded with an **action-planning segment**, where youth (and youth workers) proposed concrete steps they could take individually or as a group to improve mental well-being. In Poland’s workshops, for instance, participants came up with practical personal actions such as “setting priorities in everyday life,” *learning to delegate tasks or say no* when overwhelmed, scheduling **regular self-care breaks** (finding “10–15 minutes at the beginning of the day just for yourself” to take a walk or have a quiet coffee),

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and practicing relaxation or resilience-building techniques. Some even committed to new habits like keeping a daily journal of emotions or gratitude to better understand themselves and manage emotional tension, as well as creating personal morning or evening rituals to ground themselves and reduce stress. By actively involving youth in generating these solutions, the workshops not only gathered valuable insights but also empowered participants with a sense of ownership over their well-being strategies.

Notably, the workshops were **mixed-group** – bringing youth and youth workers together rather than separating them. This was intentional, as it allowed for rich intergenerational dialogue. Youth could voice their feelings and needs directly to the adults who support them, and youth workers could gain first-hand understanding of the youth perspective. According to the Austrian workshop report, the youth workers involved reported that this *participatory format* significantly **enhanced their understanding of young people's needs**, as they could hear youths' experiences and ideas in an authentic, informal setting. At the same time, young participants benefited from hearing the viewpoints of youth workers and realizing that the adults genuinely cared and were also willing to be vulnerable. All participants were on “equal footing” during the exercises, which helped dissolve some of the hierarchy or fear that often inhibits open conversation. By the end of each workshop, many groups had formed a sense of **community and mutual trust** that participants described as “transformative”. In several cases, WhatsApp groups or contact lists were created on the spot so that the youth and facilitators could stay in touch – an early seed of peer support that would later be encouraged as a follow-up measure.

In summary, the A3/R3 participatory workshops provided a **safe, creative, and youth-centered environment** for exploring mental health. This methodology – grounded in **human-centered design and Dragon Dreaming principles** – proved effective in engaging both young people and youth workers. By integrating reflective techniques with a participatory approach, the workshops allowed participants to deepen their self-awareness and collectively examine the challenges they face, all while practicing empathy and active listening. Importantly, these sessions did more than just talk about problems; they also **co-created solutions**, yielding a wealth of ideas and recommendations. The next sections will delve into the key findings from these workshops: what insights were gained about youth mental health

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and wellbeing, what changes were observed in participants, and what strategies and solutions emerged.

Country Realities

| Austria

The RECOVER A3/R3 workshop in Austria took place in Vienna on 15 March 2025. It brought together 15 young people aged, along with five youth workers and two facilitators. The entire one-day session followed the activities laid out in the *Healing Dragons* manual, using the Dragon Dreaming methodology. The goal was to give participants a space to openly reflect on their mental health, connect with peers, and explore creative ways to understand and respond to their personal challenges.

The mental health context in Austria shows clear signs of concern. Only 7% of youth report feeling happy and satisfied, while nearly half describe their emotional well-being as negative. Academic stress is a major factor, along with feelings of powerlessness, family tensions, and the pressure created by constant comparison on social media. While there have been improvements in public awareness, stigma around mental health and a lack of youth agency still make it difficult for many young people to seek help.

The workshop was structured in four parts. First, participants established trust and built group safety. Then they explored their personal struggles through drawing and modelling their “dragons”—a metaphor for the challenges they face. In the third session, they mapped a group SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), and in the final round, they reflected on the experience and created individual “Hero’s Pledges” for future self-care.

From the SWOT analysis, participants identified strong peer support and a growing awareness of mental health as key strengths. However, many also shared feelings of powerlessness, a lack of coping strategies, and frustration with school systems that offer little emotional support. They saw opportunities in creating peer-led spaces and bringing mental health education into classrooms, but they also flagged ongoing threats like burnout, digital overload, and persistent stigma.

The workshop was rich in emotional insight. One participant said, “I came in skeptical and left with hope—and actual friends who check on me.” Another

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reflected, “Drawing the dragon helped me put a face to my stress—it felt good to laugh at it.” Nearly all participants reported that they felt more confident speaking about mental health after the workshop. A peer-support WhatsApp group was formed by the end of the day, and several participants followed through on self-care goals, such as reaching out for counselling or proposing mental health activities at school.

Facilitators noted that the creative and playful nature of the activities helped participants feel more comfortable opening up. They emphasized that setting clear boundaries and group agreements at the start was key to building trust. The day also helped shift the dynamic between youth workers and young people, encouraging collaboration and shared responsibility rather than top-down instruction.

Looking ahead, the report recommends expanding these participatory methods across youth centres and schools in Austria. There is a need to normalize youth-led mental health conversations and to train more youth workers in approaches like Dragon Dreaming. By creating more spaces where young people feel safe, heard, and supported, Austria can take a major step forward in meeting the wellbeing needs of its youth.

| Croatia

In Croatia, youth mental health is an increasingly visible challenge shaped by a mix of cultural stigma, academic pressure, and limited support systems. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, young people experienced significant emotional distress due to isolation, reduced peer interaction, and social disconnection. These experiences often didn’t meet clinical thresholds but deeply affected everyday functioning. In the city of Osijek, for example, SDQ screenings revealed that 10% of adolescents displayed notable emotional or behavioral difficulties, with clear gender differences in how symptoms manifested. The wider education system often neglects mental health support, while bullying and judgmental attitudes in schools exacerbate feelings of stress, anxiety, and withdrawal.

To respond to this, the RECOVER workshop in Zagreb on March 22, 2025, gathered 15 young people and 5 youth workers. Using the Dragon Dreaming Approach (DDA), the session focused on creating a safe space for participants to explore what most affects their mental wellbeing, identify key life challenges, and envision personal goals and actionable steps. Participants

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highlighted the stigma around mental health as a major barrier—especially how failure is culturally viewed as something shameful rather than an opportunity for growth. Many also voiced stress from the education system, lack of balance between personal and academic lives, and an overwhelming sense that “there is no time for anything.”

Yet the workshop surfaced resilience and hope. Youth recognized the value of peer support and proposed several tangible solutions: setting up safe spaces in schools for emotional expression, forming local support groups, encouraging daily journaling, and embedding mental wellbeing themes into curricula. They also emphasized the need for youth workers and educators to normalize failure and promote reflection as a form of self-care. Participants appreciated that they could come to conclusions on their own during the creative process, reinforcing their self-efficacy. Facilitators noted that the diverse group built strong mutual respect, and that smaller group formats might work even better in future sessions.

Ultimately, the Croatian workshop showed that creative, participatory approaches—like those used in Dragon Dreaming—can empower youth to face stigma, reframe mental health challenges, and take ownership of their wellbeing. Moving forward, sustained engagement, regular reflection, and professional training for facilitators are essential to turn these one-time workshops into systemic change.

| Poland

In Poland, the mental health of young people has become an increasingly serious concern in recent years. Historically, child and adolescent psychiatry was underfunded and overlooked in public policy, leading to what is now described as a systemic crisis in mental healthcare. While recent reforms—such as a shift to community-based care and increased funding—offer hope, challenges like anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation remain prevalent. Suicide is now one of the leading causes of death among Polish teenagers, underscoring the need for early intervention and holistic mental health strategies that go beyond clinical treatment.

The school system in Poland, which is academically rigorous and exam-focused, adds considerable pressure to students, who often feel overwhelmed and unequipped with coping mechanisms. In addition to academic stress, Polish youth face challenges stemming from their digital environment. While

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social media helps with connection, it also heightens exposure to cyberbullying, peer comparison, and digital burnout. Young people, especially in smaller towns, often fear stigma or lack privacy, which deters them from seeking mental health support. There's also a notable lack of emotional self-care habits, and young people often find it difficult to balance rest, self-reflection, and responsibilities. Educators themselves face similar struggles and lack adequate resources or training to support youth effectively.

During workshops organized as part of the RECOVER project in Poland, young people and youth workers highlighted the need for better time management, self-care, and strategies for coping with fear of judgment, emotional setbacks, and chronic stress. Participants emphasized the importance of building resilience, emotional intelligence, and supportive peer environments. They also proposed practical solutions like support groups, time-planning techniques, emotional education in schools, and digital hygiene practices. One standout reflection was the realization that self-care is essential, not selfish—because supporting others starts with taking care of oneself. Overall, Poland's youth mental health crisis requires a coordinated, inclusive, and culturally sensitive strategy. Future approaches must promote mental health education, community support, and systemic reforms that empower youth and those who work with them.

| Latvia

Mental health among Latvian youth has emerged as a critical issue in recent years, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Over half of young people aged 14–24 reported a noticeable decline in their mental wellbeing, with spikes in depression, anxiety, and addictive behaviors. The growing demand for support is evident in the increase in youth accessing services like those offered by the Children and Adolescents Resource Centre, which grew from serving 8,500 young people in 2022 to 12,000 in 2023. Despite these efforts, regional inequalities and gaps in services remain, especially in rural areas. Additionally, the stigma surrounding mental health still presents major barriers, with some schools treating psychologist referrals as disciplinary rather than supportive actions.

Against this backdrop, the RECOVER youth and youth worker workshops in Riga (June 2025) provided much-needed safe and creative spaces. The youth

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workers' session revealed their enthusiasm and commitment, despite lacking formal training in mental health support. They expressed a need for better tools to engage youth and care for their own wellbeing. The Dragon Dreaming methodology offered them practical, creative tools such as mood constellations, storytelling, and reflective exercises. These not only helped deepen emotional awareness but also reignited their passion for youth work.

Meanwhile, the workshop with 15 young people (ages 18–26) revealed shared challenges around academic and career pressures, social comparison, emotional isolation, and limited access to support. The creative, participatory activities helped them explore their emotions for the first time in a safe environment. They particularly appreciated symbolic storytelling and body mapping, which allowed them to express difficult experiences through metaphor and art. Participants reported feeling validated, supported, and empowered—many calling the workshop one of the most uplifting experiences they had in months.

Both groups emphasized the importance of peer connection, safe spaces, and ongoing dialogue about mental wellbeing. The workshops sparked not only personal insight but also a desire for cultural change. Participants proposed spreading such creative methods to rural areas, integrating emotional literacy into everyday youth work, and celebrating small moments of growth. In essence, the Latvian workshops demonstrated that with empathy, creativity, and youth-centered approaches, meaningful mental health support is both possible and transformative.

Key Insights from the Workshops

| Youth Participants' Reflections and Experiences

Across all countries, **young participants** reported powerful personal insights and positive experiences as a result of the workshops. A consistent theme was the realization that **they are not alone** in their struggles. Many youths arrived feeling that their anxieties or emotional challenges were singular burdens, but through open discussions they “realised that they’re not alone in

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how they feel, and that others their age are dealing with similar thoughts and struggles". This recognition provided a great sense of relief and solidarity. Participants frequently cited the **peer support** and understanding they found in the group as one of the most valued aspects of the workshop. The safe, non-judgmental atmosphere allowed them to share fears or challenges that they might never have voiced elsewhere, and hearing "me too" from peers helped dismantle feelings of isolation or abnormality. For many, this was the first time discussing mental health so openly in a group setting. As the Latvian report concluded, the workshops treated mental health "not as a problem to fix, but as a shared journey of emotional awareness, expression, and co-creation," illustrating that when given the right tools and a supportive space, young people can engage deeply and constructively with wellbeing topics.

Another crucial insight for youth was learning to **identify and express their emotions**. The participatory exercises helped "young people to better name their feelings" and understand that they don't need to suppress emotions to be "okay". Several participants admitted they often bottled up feelings or felt pressure to appear "fine." Through storytelling and reflection, they came to see that acknowledging sadness, fear, or stress is healthy and necessary. "Admitting difficulties and turning to others for support is a step towards self-care, not a failure," as one key takeaway in Poland was phrased. This represented a shift from a stigma-driven mindset (where seeking help might be seen as weakness) to a more resilient mindset (where seeking help is a proactive form of coping). In essence, **vulnerability was reframed as strength** during these workshops. Participants gained language for their internal experiences and practiced sharing them, which can be an important first step in addressing mental health issues.

Participants also reflected on the **importance of self-care and balance** in their daily lives. Many young people recognized that they had been pushing themselves too hard or internalizing external pressures. One "key reflection" noted by a group in Poland was that *"sometimes it is impossible to complete all tasks, but nothing will happen – the world will not collapse"* if you leave some things undone. Realizing that "no one is irreplaceable" and that perfection is not required was liberating for students who felt immense academic or social pressure. In the workshops they collectively acknowledged that **no one is perfect and everyone has their own problems**, so it is more important to focus on solving one's own challenges than to obsess over

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others' opinions. This peer-reinforced perspective helped reduce the sense of constant competition or comparison. Indeed, participants explicitly called out **social media and peer pressure** as culprits in unhealthy comparison habits – seeing the curated successes of others online led many to feel inadequate. Through discussion, they *“realized that social media and peer pressure often lead to unhealthy comparisons that have a negative impact on their well-being”*. Bringing this into the open helped the youth commit to being more mindful about social media use (some even discussed practicing “digital hygiene” and limiting screen time as a coping strategy).

The workshops underscored the value of **rest and setting boundaries**. A great number of participants came to the revelation that “rest is needed” – they noticed their lifestyles had been “based on constant activity and productivity, ignoring the need for regeneration”. This admission resonated across groups: young people realized that continually pushing themselves without break was unsustainable, and that downtime or relaxation is not laziness but a crucial part of mental well-being. Consequently, many ideas in the action-planning sessions centered on carving out personal time and space. For example, youths committed to *finding at least 10–15 minutes each morning just for themselves* – whether for a quiet walk, enjoying a cup of coffee, or simple meditation – as a daily ritual to ground oneself and reduce stress. They also discussed learning to **say no** and not overloading themselves: setting priorities, delegating tasks, and *assertively refusing additional demands* when one's plate is full were suggested as healthy practices. These reflections show a significant increase in self-awareness: youths began to see self-care not as selfish, but as a prerequisite for being able to care for others and handle responsibilities. One participant put it succinctly: *“If you don't take care of yourself, you won't be able to take care of others”* – a powerful insight that was widely echoed by the group.

Importantly, the **positive emotional impact** of the workshops on youth participants was evident. Many described the day as uplifting and empowering. In Latvia, for instance, the workshop ended with a “celebration circle” where everyone shared something positive – one young person called it *“the most uplifting moment I've had in months”*, highlighting how rare such affirming communal experiences had been in their life. Participants appreciated that the workshops had an element of **joy and creativity** (despite dealing with a serious topic like mental health). The use of art,

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movement, and play – from drawing exercises to group games – helped break down barriers. The emphasis on small celebrations (acknowledging progress, expressing gratitude, etc.) injected hope and affirmed strengths, rather than focusing solely on problems. As one report noted, incorporating celebration, play, and mutual support helped *“dismantle fear and stigma, creating room for healing conversations that extended beyond the workshop walls”*. Youth left the workshops not only with new coping ideas but also often with new friends or at least a support network they could reach out to. In summary, the young participants emerged with greater self-understanding, reduced stigma about seeking help, a sense of peer solidarity, and concrete strategies for managing their well-being – outcomes that are foundational for long-term resilience.

| Youth Workers' Reflections and Learning

The workshops were equally transformative for the **youth workers** who took part. These included professional youth counselors, educators, NGO staff, and volunteers – the adults who work directly with young people in various settings. For many of them, the experience was a rare chance to step back from their professional role and reflect on their **own well-being and practice**. Youth workers overwhelmingly described the participatory workshop as a *“refreshing and much-needed pause”* from their routine duties. Accustomed to constantly caring for others, they seldom take time to acknowledge their own emotional needs; the workshop provided just such an opportunity. In the safe space of the workshop, youth workers could share their challenges (such as burnout or feeling helpless in certain cases) among peers and also listen to youth perspectives without the pressure of “having to fix” something in the moment. Many remarked that it was one of the few times they’ve been able to focus on their *own* feelings and mental health in a work context, and they left feeling “lighter” or “recharged” by the end of the day. Simply being in a supportive environment where they didn’t have to *perform* or manage a program – where they too were participants – was rejuvenating. It reminded them that they **deserve emotional care as well**, and that tending to their own mental health is not a luxury but actually makes them more effective in their roles.

Youth workers also gained **new skills and tools** from the workshop methodology. The hands-on exposure to the Dragon Dreaming exercises (like

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the “dreaming circle,” emotional check-ins, mood constellations, and celebration rituals) was eye-opening for many. They appreciated the balance of structure and creativity in these methods, and the *non-judgmental environment* the facilitators cultivated. Several youth workers noted that these participatory techniques helped them reconnect with *why* they chose to work with youth in the first place – the activities rekindled their motivation and sense of purpose by focusing on meaningful human connection rather than bureaucratic tasks. One youth worker shared that the **“Dreaming Circle”** – an exercise where everyone shares their vision or dream for better mental health – was particularly inspiring, as it allowed staff to hear youths’ aspirations and reminded the worker of their own youthful idealism. Emotional check-in routines (where at the start of a session everyone names how they feel using perhaps a ‘feelings wheel’ or simple color/number) were another simple tool that youth workers found powerful; it created empathy in the group and flagged who might need extra support, and they realized this could be easily integrated into daily youth work.

In fact, many youth workers were **eager to apply** what they learned *immediately*. The workshops sparked ideas on how to incorporate participatory well-being practices into their regular programs. According to the Latvian report, *“several youth workers reported that they had already begun applying the Dragon Dreaming tools (like mood check-ins, celebration circles) in their summer youth camps and local projects”* shortly after the workshop. One participant introduced a *“Wheel of Emotions”* activity at a community event to help young attendees articulate their feelings, and received very positive feedback. These examples indicate a shift among youth workers toward more intentionally integrating mental health support into their everyday interactions with youth. Instead of treating mental health as a specialized topic for experts, they started seeing it as a *core part of youth engagement*. As noted, the experience “marked a shift toward intentional integration of well-being practices into youth programming, not as a separate topic, but as a core part of engagement”.

Additionally, youth workers left with a deeper appreciation for **youth participation and agency**. Observing how enthusiastically young people responded when given a chance to lead an activity or express themselves freely had a profound impact on the adults. It became clear that youth are not only capable of engaging in discussions about mental health, but they often

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come up with insightful solutions. In one workshop, for example, the young participants brainstormed the idea of a peer-led “mental health meet-up” group at their youth center and even offered to spearhead it – demonstrating initiative to continue support beyond the workshop. Such moments impressed upon youth workers that empowering youth as *partners* (or even co-facilitators) in mental health initiatives can greatly increase the relevance and impact of those efforts. As one of the recommendations from Austria’s workshop put it, organizations should maintain the **participatory ethos** by “involving youth in planning and possibly even in co-facilitation roles as they become ready” for future workshops. The takeaway for youth workers was that *sharing power* with young people – whether in program design or day-to-day interactions – fosters trust and more effective outcomes. This mirrors the broader principle in community youth work that youth engagement works best when young people have ownership and voice.

Finally, the workshops underscored for youth workers the importance of **peer support and self-care within their profession**. Hearing others in their field talk honestly about feeling overwhelmed or unsure made it clear that they were not alone in those experiences. There was a “strong desire for regular exchanges among youth workers to share strategies, tools, and emotional experiences” as noted in the Latvian session. In other words, youth workers expressed that they, too, need safe spaces to process their emotions and to learn from each other. This has implications for organizations: providing forums like supervision meetings, peer support circles, or periodic training where youth workers can openly discuss the emotional aspect of their work could mitigate burnout. As one of the Latvian workshop’s final recommendations highlights, “*youth workers also need more support*” – many voiced a wish to keep learning how to hold space for others **while also looking after their own well-being**. This dual focus on professional development and personal well-being for youth workers is essential if they are to sustainably support young people. The workshops effectively modeled what that support could look like by giving youth workers a rejuvenating experience and practical tools, which they are now carrying forward.

| Creating Safe and Engaging Spaces: What Worked

Several **common themes** emerged across the workshops regarding what environmental factors and approaches were most effective in supporting youth mental health discussions. A standout factor was the creation of **safe, non-judgmental spaces**. Over and over, participants (both youth and adults) emphasized how critical it was that the workshop environment felt welcoming, confidential, and free of judgment or ridicule. In such a space, even delicate or stigmatized issues could be brought up and faced. The workshops achieved this through ground rules (e.g. respect, empathy, everyone's voice is equal) and through the facilitators' modeling of acceptance and empathy. The result, as noted in the Latvia report, was that *"across both workshops, the importance of safe, non-judgmental spaces was repeatedly highlighted"* by participants. When youth feel safe, they are far more likely to open up about topics like anxiety, depression, or trauma, which they might otherwise hide. The creative and **participatory methods** used contributed greatly to this sense of safety. Techniques such as arts, storytelling, and metaphor allowed emotions to surface in gentle, engaging ways rather than forcing anyone to confront issues in a clinical or didactic manner. This meant that even those who were initially shy or hesitant eventually found a medium to express themselves – be it through drawing their "mood" on paper or writing an anonymous note that was then discussed collectively.

The **tone of the workshops** was another key to their success. Rather than maintaining a somber or purely serious tone (which might be expected in a mental health context), facilitators incorporated elements of **playfulness and positivity**. This was not to downplay the seriousness of mental health problems, but to ensure the atmosphere wasn't intimidating. Small energizer games, group laughs, creative icebreakers (like making a silly team chant) and the closing "celebration circles" all added a sense of camaraderie and even joy. As the Latvian team observed, mental health **"doesn't need to be a heavy or clinical topic - it can be creative, engaging, and deeply human"** in approach. Participants responded extremely well to this; many came in nervous, expecting perhaps a lecture or a therapy-like setting, and were pleasantly surprised to find the day **empowering and even enjoyable**. This suggests that youth mental health initiatives might be more successful if they incorporate creativity, art, and play, rather than treating the subject as

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taboo or purely medical. By normalizing discussions about feelings in a casual, peer-supported setting, the workshops helped reduce the **fear and stigma** around these conversations.

A theme closely tied to safe space was the attitude of **mutual respect and active listening**. Youth participants noted how novel it was that adults were truly listening to them without judgment, and youth workers noted the same about listening to youths. This mutual understanding built *empathy*. In Poland, it was observed that participants “focused and listened to each other carefully, giving feedback to each other,” which made everyone feel heard and valued. The **group cohesion** was strong – one report mentioned that the good integration of participants “allowed them to be open and work well together” by the end. However, this level of comfort didn’t happen instantly; facilitators had to work through some initial challenges (for example, in one workshop a few members had difficulty speaking up at first, highlighting the need for good group integration from the start). The learning here is that investing time in **community-building** – icebreakers, small group discussions early on, setting a warm tone – is crucial for any mental health program. If done right, participants can move past hesitation and actively engage, as happened in these workshops once trust was established.

Lastly, the workshops demonstrated the power of **co-creation and youth empowerment** in generating solutions. Participants were not just recipients of information; they were actively **creating knowledge and plans** together. This yielded both high engagement and relevant outcomes. In each country, youths came up with ideas for what they and their communities could do better. For instance, as mentioned, Polish youth drafted personal well-being plans (journaling, setting boundaries, etc.), and Austrian youth suggested structural ideas like ongoing peer meet-ups and stress management support groups at youth centers. In Croatia and Latvia, youth discussed organizing their own awareness events and peer mentoring systems. Because these ideas came from the young people themselves, they are inherently tailored to actual needs and are likely to gain traction. The process showed that **young people are fully capable of analyzing their context and proposing meaningful solutions** when given the chance. It also showed youth workers that their role can sometimes be to facilitate and support rather than direct – essentially, to step back and let youth lead. As one recommendation put it, young people’s concrete solutions (like peer support groups or school wellbeing projects) are

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“powerful evidence that they can and should be involved in designing interventions” for youth mental health. This collaborative ethos, treating youth and adults as partners, proved to be a cornerstone of the workshops’ success and is a model for future practice.

In conclusion, the workshops yielded a rich set of insights: Youth participants gained solidarity, voice, and coping skills; youth workers gained perspective, tools, and inspiration; and both groups affirmed the value of safe, creative, and collaborative approaches to mental health. These findings now inform the **pathways for solutions and improvement** presented in the next section, which translate the on-the-ground lessons into broader recommendations for youth work practice and organizational change.

Pathways for Solutions and Improvement

Building on the workshop findings, this section outlines actionable recommendations to improve youth mental health and wellbeing support, especially focusing on what **youth workers and youth organizations** can do. The recommendations are **practice-focused** and address multiple levels – from individual self-care strategies to organizational and systemic changes – reflecting the idea that supporting youth mental health requires an integrated approach. These pathways are drawn directly from the ideas and feedback generated in the A3/R3 workshops (as detailed in national reports), combined with current best practices in the field. They also include suggestions for organizational changes needed so that youth organizations can better meet the needs of young people, particularly those at risk of mental health issues or disorders. For clarity, we organize the recommendations into key themes:

- **Integrate Mental Health into Everyday Youth Work:** Youth organizations should **embed mental health and emotional well-being into regular programming**, rather than treating it as a one-off topic. This means making conversations about feelings, stress management, and coping skills a normal part of activities – “not just something we do when problems arise,” as one recommendation emphasized. Simple practices can be very effective: for example, incorporating a brief emotional check-in at the start of each youth

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meeting, using creative exercises (art, journaling, storytelling) periodically to help young people express themselves, or hosting informal well-being workshops as frequently as other hobby or skills sessions. The RECOVER workshops showed that approaches like storytelling, drawing, and guided reflection can be woven into youth work with great success, making mental health engagement **“creative, engaging, and deeply human”**. By normalizing these activities, organizations create a culture where mental well-being is openly discussed and cared for, reducing stigma.

- Establish Safe and Supportive Spaces:** Every youth organization should evaluate and improve the **safety and inclusivity of its spaces**. A safe space in this context is both a physical and relational environment where young people feel accepted, heard, and unafraid to be vulnerable. Practically, organizations can train staff in facilitation techniques that promote respect and empathy, set clear ground rules against judgment or bullying, and ensure confidentiality for personal matters. The importance of this is underscored by participants’ feedback: having a non-judgmental atmosphere was foundational to the workshops’ impact. Moreover, *safe space* also implies proactively welcoming **diverse youth**, including those from marginalized or at-risk groups. Future programs should ensure a mix of participants and sensitize activities to different cultural and social backgrounds and to varying levels of mental health literacy. This might involve, for example, offering materials in multiple languages or adjusting facilitation to be trauma-informed. Youth organizations should strive for **gender balance, inclusion of underrepresented groups, and sensitivity to different lived experiences** in their mental health initiatives. When youth – especially those who might feel excluded elsewhere – see that the environment is inclusive and understanding of issues like identity, migrant experiences, or disability, they are more likely to open up and seek support.
- Empower Youth Through Participation and Leadership:** A core lesson from RECOVER is that young people should be treated as **partners and co-creators** in mental health and well-being efforts, not just beneficiaries. Youth organizations are encouraged to involve young people in the planning, design, and even facilitation of wellness activities. This could mean creating a **youth advisory group** for mental

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health programming or inviting experienced youth participants to co-facilitate parts of a workshop (as was done in follow-up to some A3/R3 sessions). The Austrian workshop recommendations explicitly suggest involving youth in co-facilitation roles for future workshops, maintaining the participatory ethos as programs scale up. When youth take on such roles, it not only builds their confidence and skills, but also ensures the interventions remain relevant and appealing to the target audience. Additionally, organizations should support **youth-led initiatives** that emerge. For instance, if participants propose starting a peer support group or organizing a mental health awareness day at the youth center, the organization can provide resources (a venue, some budget for refreshments, adult mentorship) to help make it happen. In Latvia, it was observed that with a little encouragement, young people are ready to “organise peer talks, creative events, and awareness activities in their own communities” – tapping into this energy can greatly extend the reach of mental health promotion. By sharing leadership, youth organizations also help cultivate future youth leaders who are passionate about mental wellness advocacy.

- **Provide Training and Resources for Youth Workers:** To effectively support youth mental health, **youth workers need ongoing training, tools, and self-care support**. Organizations should invest in building the competencies of their staff and volunteers in areas such as mental health first aid, empathetic communication, trauma-informed care, and participatory methods like Dragon Dreaming. As suggested in the Polish report, youth organizations and educational institutions “*should consider adopting the DDA method as a regular tool within their educational and developmental offer*”, which implies training more youth workers to facilitate such workshops effectively. This training should cover the method’s principles and how to create psychologically safe spaces, so that the techniques can be confidently applied. Beyond specific methodologies, the general mental health literacy of youth workers should be developed: understanding common youth mental health issues, knowing the boundaries of their role versus clinical professionals, and learning how to approach sensitive conversations. Participants in the workshops voiced that they had previously hesitated to talk about mental health for fear of doing harm; training can alleviate

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this by building knowledge and confidence (for example, learning how to recognize signs of distress and how to respond supportively rather than fearfully). Additionally, **support systems for youth workers' own well-being** are crucial. Organizations should implement measures like regular debrief sessions, peer support meetings, or access to professional supervision/counseling for staff. Youth workers in the project noted the benefit of exchanging experiences with peers, so setting up a monthly informal meet-up or an online group where youth workers can discuss challenges and self-care tips could help reduce burnout. As one recommendation put it, youth workers expressed a *“strong wish to keep learning how to hold space for others while also looking after their own well-being”*. Prioritizing this dual focus (skill-building and self-care) will lead to a more resilient workforce that can better serve young people.

- Implement Ongoing Support and Follow-Up:** One-off events are not enough – youth organizations should ensure **continuity of support** for mental health and build structures that endure. After a workshop or intervention, it's advisable to have follow-up check-ins or sessions. For example, organizations can schedule a follow-up meeting a few weeks after a mental health workshop to see how participants are doing, reinforce skills learned, and offer further resources. The Austrian workshop insights stressed preventing a workshop from being an isolated event by *“creating structures for ongoing peer support”*. This could take the form of regular peer support groups or “mental health clubs” at youth centers or schools. Even something informal – like maintaining a WhatsApp or Discord group where participants can share updates and encouragement – can keep the momentum going. Youth organizations should facilitate these networks: for instance, assign a youth worker to help moderate a monthly peer-led meet-up or online chat, ensuring basic safeguards are in place. Continuity is also important for individuals who may need extra help. It was recommended to do a check-in with workshop participants a few weeks later to connect them to services if needed. Thus, organizations might create a protocol: anyone identified as particularly vulnerable during an activity is gently followed up with (with their consent), and provided referrals to professional help (counselors, helplines, etc.) if appropriate. This

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demonstrates a commitment to their well-being beyond the initial encounter and helps youth not fall through the cracks after opening up. Overall, moving from one-off programming to an **ongoing support model** (including mentorship, peer groups, and periodic follow-ups) will significantly enhance the impact on youth mental health outcomes.

- Enhance Partnerships and Professional Support:** Youth organizations do not need to handle mental health challenges alone. In fact, a key improvement is to **link youth work with mental health professionals and services**. Workshop participants and facilitators noted that having a *designated mental health professional on-call or on-site* during intensive emotional activities would be a wise precaution. Therefore, organizations should consider partnering with local psychologists, counselors, or mental health NGOs who can provide consultation, training, or direct support. For example, an organization might arrange for a psychologist to volunteer a few hours a month for consultations with youth workers or emergency support during events. This not only ensures that any high-risk cases (e.g. a youth disclosing suicidal thoughts) can get immediate expert attention, but it also helps build the capacity of youth workers by learning from professionals. Another aspect of partnership is **referral networks**: youth workers should be equipped with up-to-date information on where to guide young people for additional help – such as youth-friendly counseling centers, crisis lines, or therapy options in the community. Organizational leaders can maintain these links by regularly coordinating with mental health services and perhaps establishing an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) for collaboration. By creating a bridge between the informal support of youth work and formal mental health care, youth organizations can ensure young people get comprehensive help. This approach aligns with the RECOVER project's philosophy: youth workers act as the first line of support who *encourage and motivate young people to seek professional help when needed*. On the ground, that could mean, for instance, after a workshop a youth worker personally helps a teen schedule an appointment at a counseling center, or invites a therapist to give a talk at the youth club to demystify what therapy is.
- Adapt and Expand Successful Program Models:** Given the positive impact of the RECOVER participatory workshops, a recommendation is

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to **sustain and scale such models**. Youth organizations (and their funders) should consider making these kinds of workshops a regular fixture. For example, an organization could run a quarterly “Youth Wellness Workshop” using the human-centered methods refined in RECOVER. This could rotate topics (stress, self-esteem, relationships, etc.) but maintain the same participatory format. As noted in the Austrian report, it is recommended to continue the workshop format on a regular basis, possibly with follow-up sessions for the same group to deepen their skills and bonds, or scaling up to reach new youth (e.g. other cities or rural areas). The model can also be **integrated into schools or other youth settings** in collaboration with those institutions. Expansion might involve training more facilitators (perhaps those 12 youth workers trained in DDA in the project’s first phase can now train others) to replicate the approach elsewhere. By doing so, the initial pilot efforts transition into a sustainable program. It’s also advised to adapt the content to different contexts – for instance, ensuring materials are culturally sensitive when working with diverse groups, as mentioned earlier. Another aspect of adaptation is combining mental health topics with broader youth interests. Participants suggested that rather than addressing mental health in isolation, it can be embedded within related themes like life skills, career planning, or creative arts. This way, youth who might shy away from a “mental health workshop” might still engage and benefit from wellness concepts incorporated into, say, a leadership camp or an arts project. Flexibility and creativity in programming will help reach a wider range of young people.

- **Strengthen Organizational Policy and Advocacy:** On an organizational level, it’s important to formalize the commitment to youth mental health and influence the wider system. Youth organizations should update their **policies and guidelines** to reflect the priority of mental well-being. This could include instituting a mental health strategy or action plan internally – for example, a written protocol on how to handle mental health emergencies, a commitment to annual training for staff, or a guideline that every long-term program must include a well-being component. Having such policies ensures that the focus on mental health is not dependent on one or two enthusiastic staff, but is an organizational value. Furthermore, youth organizations can

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play a role in **advocating** for youth mental health in the broader community and policy arena. The insights from these workshops are valuable data that can be shared with policymakers, schools, and local authorities. In Austria, the team recommended compiling a brief using content from the workshop report to communicate youth-generated ideas to stakeholders like school officials and mental health services. By doing so, youth organizations can amplify young people's voices – for instance, advocating for youth representation in local mental health strategy groups or pushing for more funding for youth mental health resources. Even at the organizational level, leaders can invite policymakers to youth-led events to witness the participatory approach in action. The end goal of such advocacy is to embed youth-centric, preventive mental health approaches into mainstream youth policy. If decision-makers see that young people themselves are calling for peer support programs, more empathetic teachers, or youth-friendly counseling, it can influence changes beyond the organization (such as a school adopting new wellness policies or a municipality funding a youth mental health initiative). In short, youth organizations should use their unique position – working directly with youth and seeing the challenges first-hand – to inform and shape **systemic improvements** for youth mental health.

The above pathways form a comprehensive strategy: starting from empowering individual young people and youth workers with skills and support, building up to organizational practices and finally linking to broader policy. They are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. For example, training youth workers (capacity building) enables better safe spaces and integration of mental health in daily work; empowering youth leaders feeds into sustainable peer support programs; follow-up structures ensure that initial engagements have lasting effect; and partnerships with professionals extend the support network available to youth. By implementing these recommendations, youth organizations can significantly enhance their ability to meet the needs of young people, especially those at risk of mental health issues. These changes will help create an environment where youth feel heard, supported early, and connected to appropriate help – ultimately fostering a generation of healthier, more resilient young people.

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Conclusion

The consolidation of findings from the RECOVER project's A3/R3 participatory workshops provides a **state-of-the-art snapshot** of both the challenges and opportunities in youth mental health and wellbeing today. On one hand, the workshops illuminated the pressing issues young people face: high levels of stress, pervasive social pressures, stigma around mental illness, and gaps in formal support systems. On the other hand, they also showcased the **tremendous resilience, insight, and creativity** that young people and youth workers bring to the table when given a chance. Perhaps the most important takeaway is a hopeful one: with the right approach, mental health support for youth can be **empowering, communal, and even joyful** – it need not be confined to clinics or crises. As demonstrated in Latvia, when youth and youth workers are treated “not as service recipients, but as co-creators in their own growth and resilience,” the process becomes truly engaging and transformative. Participants across different countries reported feeling more connected, more knowledgeable, and more motivated to care for themselves and each other as a result of these workshops.

For youth workers and organizations, the journey does not end with this report – in fact, it begins anew. This stocktaking exercise has offered clear **pathways for improvement**: integrating mental wellness into everyday practice, strengthening support networks, adopting participatory methods, and making organizational and policy changes that prioritize youth wellbeing. Implementing these recommendations will require commitment and possibly a shift in organizational culture (for instance, valuing emotional learning as much as academic or vocational outcomes). Yet, the evidence and experiences gathered here argue strongly that such changes are both necessary and effective. By acting on these insights, youth organizations can create environments where every young person – including those at risk of mental health difficulties – can feel safe, heard, and supported early on. Moreover, youth workers, empowered with training and backed by their organizations, can confidently take on the role of empathetic early responders, guiding youths to help before issues escalate.

In moving forward, it is also crucial to maintain the **momentum of youth participation**. The workshops may be over, but the conversation with young

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people must continue. As one of the Austrian recommendations suggests, what started as a single successful workshop can grow into a “sustained movement for youth mental health” through ongoing efforts and by scaling up the participatory model. Young people have shown that they are ready to lead and innovate in this space – from peer support meet-ups to creative awareness campaigns. Youth organizations should nurture these youth-led initiatives, providing mentorship and resources while allowing young leaders to take the helm. In doing so, we not only address current needs but also build the capacity of young people to support each other, creating a ripple effect of resilience in the community.

Finally, this stocktaking report itself is part of the **“Quality Mental Health First Aid Kit”** that the RECOVER project envisioned – a practical resource to improve youth work practice around mental health. The insights and recommendations here are meant to be used. Youth organizations are encouraged to treat this report not as an end document but as a working guide: discuss it in staff meetings, use it to design training, adapt the ideas to local context, and share it with stakeholders who can help. The collective effort of multiple countries’ workshops has given us a rich, reliable knowledge base. By applying this knowledge, we can make tangible progress toward healthier, happier youth. In essence, the path forward is one of **collaboration, compassion, and continuous learning**. If we continue to listen to young people, involve them actively, and support the youth workers who stand beside them, we will move closer to a youth sector – and a society – where mental health and wellbeing are safeguarded as a fundamental priority for all.