ACTIVITY 4:
WHAT AFFECTS OUR MENTAL HEALTH?

AIM: Young people consider the history of mental illness as a 'hidden' disease and recognise how stigmas and discrimination still harm young people by preventing them from getting the mental health support that they need in order to ensure their best health (Articles 2, 24). Young people also explore what affects their own mental health day to day.

Preparation:
- Review questions and answers around mental health myths and misconceptions
- Prepare 'Table Topic' cards

Facilitator materials and resources	Participant materials
■ Activity 4 Presentation	■ Five sheets of blank A4 paper
■ A4 or index card and marker	■ Stapler
■ The State of the World's Children report	■ A4 paper, pens and stapler for optional journal activity

FACILITATOR INTRODUCTION

Explain to the group that in modern times we have a better understanding of how mental health works and how it is connected to our physical health, but this hasn't always been the case. For many years, doctors didn't understand mental health or the best ways to care for people who struggled with mental health problems. When people struggled with their mental health they were often treated poorly. Stigmatising, disrespectfuland unkind language such as 'crazy' or 'insane' was used to describe them, and they were often hidden away in institutions called asylums. It wasn't until the 1980s in the UK that these institutions closed and treatment for mental health conditions started to be better understood and treated more openly.

Because mental health conditions were hidden for so long, silence about mental health has become part of our culture. The way we've treated mental health in the past has created the stigma, shame and discrimination that persists today. These stigmas prevent many people from getting the care that they need.

Today we know that mental health is a continuum and that it's healthy and human to feel different emotions like fear, sadness and anger and grief. We also know that it's important to get care if we are struggling and to talk about how we are feeling.

When young people feel empowered to talk about their mental health and emotions as a regular part of life, they help to break any stigma, hidden shame, or embarrassment that people still might feel around mental health. Plus, if young people aren't afraid to tell someone when they are struggling with mental health, they have a much better chance to get help early. When we normalise talking about mental health, we not only make a difference for our own mental health, we also help create change for others.

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Part 1: Mental health myths and misconceptions

1. Explain that throughout history and up until the present day, what we know about mental health has been built on many misunderstandings, myths and misconceptions. If we want to move our society forward in how we see mental health, we need to know what's fact about mental health (both now and in the past), and what is false.

2. Using the Activity 4 Presentation, explain to the young people that they will be shown 10 different statements. The first five of these are statements about mental health and wellbeing and treatment in the past, and the second five of these are statements about the state of mental health currently in the UK and around the world.

3. Review each statement, asking one young person to read it to the group. Ask young people to vote on whether they think the statement is a fact or a false statement (a mental health myth or misconception).

4. As each statement is completed, give the young people opportunities to discuss their reaction to the information shared, and to give their thoughts on what made them think that some statements were myths or misconceptions.

5. Split the young people into small groups to further discuss the topic of stigma and discrimination around mental health. Ask them:

- Considering both the history of mental health and the culture of silence around mental health, how do you think this affects how people feel about talking about their mental health?

- How did the way that people were treated in institutions or 'lunatic' asylums affect their rights?

- How does this history impact your rights today?

- Ask the young people to identify and discuss in turn:

  + One thing that you learned in the activity that is positive or that you liked?

  – One thing that you learned in the activity that is negative or that you didn't like?

  ! One thing from the activity that surprised you, or that you found interesting?

Mental health in India

"In India, people don't talk about Mental Health a lot. It is still kind of a myth among people. Though according to [the World Health Organization], India has one of the largest populations affected by mental health and named India 'the world's most depressing country', people's attitudes toward the issue aren't helping matters. "It's important to destigmatize mental illness and be willing to talk about it, rather than taking a defensive posture and looking for an escape path."

Neha, 18, UNICEF Voices of Youth
Read more from Neha here

Discussion question: Do you think this is the same in the UK, or not? What is different?

Part 2: 'Table Topics' – What affects our mental health?

1. Prepare table cards (index cards or A4 paper folded) with one of the six mental health topics written on each. Split the group into six smaller groups and place one of the cards face down on each of the tables. (For virtual delivery, use the Activity 4 Presentation to assign topics to groups).

2. Explain to the full group that in Activity 2 we learned about triggers and what circumstances might make us experience a specific feeling at any given moment. In Activity 3 we learned that while feelings are part of the big picture of our mental health and wellbeing, sometimes having feelings over a prolonged period of time, like depression or worry, may begin to affect our mental health negatively and move us toward amber and red on the mental health continuum.

3. Ask young people to call out some things that could make young people stressed or anxious or worried for a longer period of time. Alternatively, if young people would like to answer confidentially,

or it feels more appropriate to do so, use an online facilitation tool to have them add virtual sticky notes to a flip chart anonymously.

4. Explain that on each table there is a card that is face down. On the card there is a general topic listed. Once the time starts, the group will turn over their card and have 10-15 minutes to discuss how they think that the topic listed on the card affects the mental health of young people and why. Encourage each group to think about both positive and negative effects. If time and resources permit, allow young people to use the internet to research the topic, looking at publications like UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2021 report to search for current facts.

5. At the end of the time, give each group five minutes to report back on their topic. When each group has reported back ask the whole class what might be the impact on mental health if a person experienced two or more of these factors? For example what might be the impact on mental health of race AND technology or gender and sexuality AND culture/country?

Table topics

- Gender and sexual identity
- Race
- COVID-19
- Smart phones and social media
- Adults and carers
- Culture and country
- Qualifications and exams

Optional activity: Mental health journal

Ask young people to create a journal to track their wellbeing over time, in order to recognise what makes our emotions change and what circumstances might affect where we are each day on the mental health continuum. This can be done digitally, or by using folded A4 paper. Encourage young people to record how they are feeling every day through writing or creative drawing in the way that is most authentic to them and gives them an opportunity to identify why they may be feeling a specific way at any time.

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