

ACTIVITY 5:

TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

AIM: Children consider the history of mental health as a 'hidden' disease and learn about how other youth advocates have been using their rights (Articles 12, 13) to break the silence, to stop discrimination around mental illness (Article 2), and to help ensure that all children have support they need for their best health (Article 24).

Preparation:

- Review the voices of youth profiles and the [UNICEF Voices of Youth](#) platform
- Write a sample Haiku

Facilitator materials and resources

- Activity 5 Presentation
- [How to write a Haiku](#)

Participant materials

- Poster paper
- Coloured pens

Tips for those working in Early Years settings:

- Ask children to draw self-portraits to express their feelings
- Play different types of music and have [children express their feelings with finger paint or watercolours](#)
- Use puppets to demonstrate children talking to others about how they are feeling

Facilitator introduction

Today we understand more about 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 completely understand mental illness or the best ways to care for people who struggled with mental health problems. When people struggled with mental illness they were often treated poorly, called crazy or insane and hidden away in institutions called asylums. It wasn't until the 1980s in the UK that these mental 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 stigma, shame and discrimination around mental health conditions.

Explain to the group that today we know that mental health is a continuum and that it's healthy when we feel different emotions like sadness and anger and grief, and to talk about how we are feeling and if we are struggling.

Explain that when children 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. When we feel more free to talk about mental health, and know how to use rights-respecting words about mental health, we not only make a difference for our own mental health, we also help create change for others.



Part 1: Thumbs up / thumbs down: how to talk about mental health

1. Use the facilitator introduction to give a brief history of mental health as a 'hidden' disease that people don't talk about. Ask children why they think people do not want to or might not feel safe talking about mental health.

2. Use the Activity 5 Presentation to introduce differences in mental health words. The thumbs up word cloud represents words that we use to talk about mental health and mental health conditions. The thumbs down word cloud represents words and practices that we don't use to talk about mental health and mental health conditions (even if these words might have been acceptable in the past).

3. As you work through the activity, facilitate children in a discussion around rights-respecting language by asking: Do you think this language or this word is respectful of someone and their rights or not? Why do you think we should or should not use this language?

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 WHO, 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 destigmatise 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](#)

Part 2: Youth advocates

1. Explain to children that one reason some of the stigma around mental health is changing is that young people, like them, are using their right to freedom of expression to talk about their own mental health. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we've seen even more children talking about how they are feeling and how they are coping with their emotions. In this activity we will meet different children and young people from all around the world who are talking about their own experiences as a way to process their own mental health and make others feel safe talking about their own wellbeing.

2. Use the Activity 5 Presentation to introduce the stories of the young people who have shared their art and stories on UNICEF Voices of Youth, around the topic of mental health.

3. Ask the children:

- What do you think the young person is trying to express through their art or action?
- What can you learn from it?
- Which stories do you best relate to?
- How are the young people using their unique skills or voices?

Part 3: Expressing ourselves on mental health: haiku project

1. Ask the group to reflect on the voices of youth profiles they've heard. Which message did they connect with the most? Ask children to think about how they might enjoy their own right to freedom of expression (Article 13) to speak out on mental health.

2. Support the children to pick a topic around mental health and write a haiku. These can be written on posters or A4 paper and hung around the school or community area where the group meets, or can be created and shared digitally as social media posts (as appropriate for age and resources). Sample haiku topics might include: breaking the silence around mental health, a child's right to mental health, or a haiku around a specific emotion or range of emotions. [See how to write a Haiku poem.](#)

3. As an alternative, children could use a different creative medium, suited to their ability and interests, to share a mental health message. For example, instead of haiku, children could make up a song, draw a comic, create a short play, or make a poster collage with a message.



What is a haiku?

A haiku is a poem with three lines

5 syllables

7 syllables

5 syllables

Here is an example:

**Breathe in and breathe out
We all have good and bad days
Body and mind health**