

Working Effectively with Youths



Youths that NuLife engages with :

- Young people aged 13-17 years old
- Common presenting problems: Vaping; school refusal; anger-related issues; depression; anxiety; victim of school bullying; family violence; child abuse; grief & loss; parental divorce
- Types of engagement services
 - Counselling
 - Casework
 - Outreach
 - Befriending

Understanding Youth Development

- Keyword for this developmental stage: Identity (i.e. 'Who Am I?')
- Key changes & Implications

➤ Biological

Characteristics -

- Concerned about changes to physical appearance.
- Fluctuations in hormones released.
- Brain's developmental shifts in reward centres.

What you can do?

- Help the youth recognise their qualities and strengths.
- Even if the situation seems trivial to you, listen calmly, and acknowledge the youth's feelings.
- Explore ways to engage in exciting activities with as minimal harm as possible to self and others; encourage reflection on values and beliefs to connect with activities.

Implications -

- Self-conscious and may feel inferior.
- Feel emotions more intensely; frequent mood swings.
- Increased impulsiveness; easily bored; focus on positive rewards and thrilling experiences.

➤ Psychosocial

Characteristics -

- Move towards peers, seek independence from adults.
- Seek own identity.
- Social comparisons; desire to fit in with peers while standing out as their own individual.

Implications -

- Exposure to positive and negative peer influence; may be hostile towards parents / authority figures.
- Experiment with new behaviors / activities.
- May have negative impacts on self-esteem; increased self-criticism.

What you can do?

- Keep positive channels of communication open with the youth.
- Encourage reflection on values and beliefs in relation to the activities/behaviors; give space to the youth to explore, make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes.
- Help the youth recognise their qualities and strengths and guide them to develop useful coping skills.



➤ Spiritual

Characteristics -

- Abstract thinking and conceptual thinking.

Implications -

- Grapple with search for meaning of life; consider multiple hypothetical scenarios and infinite possibilities.

What to do -

- Encourage healthy conversations with the youth about their thoughts and ideas about various topics; encourage reflection on own values and beliefs.

Conversing With Youths

- Do not discuss your own thoughts or experiences to the extent that the youth has no room to express their own thoughts and feelings

- Refrain from giving advice. Offer information instead to support the young person in seeking their own answers to the problem.
- Young people can be more resistant to sharing. This does not mean that they do not want to express their feelings or they are trying to hide something from you.
- Do not be discouraged if the youth does not open to you immediately. Continue to reflect their feelings, listen without interjecting unsolicited advice, and listen without judgment. This allows the youth to recognise you as someone who respects and values what they have to say.
- Many youths may perceive themselves negatively. Thus, it is helpful to understand these negative perceptions and guide these youths to improve their perceptions of themselves.
- Avoid jumping into problem-solving or criticizing mode when they have just shared something personal with you. Often, they do not want you to help them to 'fix' things, they want someone to listen to them first. When the young person is calmer and more settled after releasing their emotions, explore with them what solutions or decisions they want to work towards.
- Youths may at times start off conversations by asking you to "promise not to tell anyone". Be mindful that you cannot make such promises to them due to the limits of confidentiality. Be honest with the young person about this and let them know your role is to support them as best as possible and at times this may mean involving other people to help keep them safe.

UMATTER – A NuLife Initiative

- Focuses on four key areas pertaining to Grief and Loss, Depression, Self-Harm, and Suicidal Ideation. Also discusses areas on re-evaluating self-worth, self-loathing and regrets, and self-esteem.
- Many of our young clients have gone through or are still going through situations that are highly stressful, distressing, and painful e.g. Parents going through a divorce; family violence; victim of school bullying; youth abuse; traumatic death of a family member. It is important to have some understanding of the areas of Grief and Loss, Depression, Self-Harm, and Suicidal Ideation to ensure you are able to interact effectively with the youth and direct them to appropriate resources if necessary.

➤ Grief & Loss

- Compared to children, youths have a deeper understanding of abstract concepts about death and grief. They may start engaging with their Befriender on abstract conversations about death and meaning of life.
- Youths tend to experience intense emotional reactions to significant losses, but they do not yet know how to handle or comfortably talk about them. They may withdraw from their peers/family and/or increase their engagement in risky behaviors.

What To Do

- Remain calm, warm, and open to what the youth is sharing with you. They are often not looking for answers, they are just struggling to understand and cope with the ambiguity of it.
- Help the young person to identify people and activities that help them feel safe and supported.

➤ Depression

- Some signs of depression in youth:
 - Social withdrawal especially decreased interest in socialising with peers.
 - Persistent negative mood, irritability, hostility and/or aggression.
 - Engagement in risky behaviors (*e.g. binge drinking, substance abuse, unsafe sexual activities*).
 - Difficulties in school (*e.g. poor concentration, low energy, decline in grades, sudden drop in grades, low motivation to attend*).
 - In general, look out for:
 - Significant changes to behaviors/mood lasting for >2 weeks.
 - Difficulties noticed in several domains of the youth's life (*in school, with peers, at home*).

What To Do

- Maintain a warm, genuine, and supportive interaction with the youth.
- Let them know what you have noticed about their behavioral changes and invite them to share with you what they are going through.
- Do not downplay their emotions. Acknowledge them so that the youth feel understood and supported.
- Be gentle but persistent. The young person may not open immediately, but it means a lot to them to know that you are there and ready to give them the support they need.
- Youths who are depressed may self-harm or have suicidal ideation too. Speak with your volunteer manager at the earliest opportunity if there are such concerns about your Befriender.

➤ Self Harm

- It can be used by youth as a way of coping with distressing feelings, to exert some sort of control in their lives, and/or to gain acceptance from others.
- Behaviors:
 - Youths may cut, deeply scratch, pierce, or burn their skin. They may also bang their head or other body parts against hard surfaces, pull out their hair, or persistently pick at their wounds.
 - Youth who have difficulties speaking about their problems or expressing emotions healthily are at increased risk of engaging in self-harm behaviors. Social media is an easily accessible tool that can expose youth to self-harm behaviors and/or encourage it as a way of managing distress.
- Possible signs:
 - Unexplained cuts / burns / bruises, wearing bandages, expressions of self-loathing / shame / worthlessness, wearing long-sleeved clothing in warm weather, withdrawing from family & friends

What To Do

- Inform your Volunteer Manager at the earliest opportunity if you observe any behaviors by the youth or they have disclosed information to you that would arise to any concerns regarding self-harm.

➤ Suicidal Ideation

- More likely to occur in those who lack a stable support system, have poor coping skills, are victims of bullying, are exposed to others who have completed suicide, experiencing major changes in their life (e.g. problems at home / school), engage in substance abuse, and/or have a mental health condition.
- Possible signs: Frequent talk about wanting to die, express hopelessness / despair, plan for death (e.g. *give away favourite items*), withdraw from family and friends, abrupt joy after continued period of low moods

What To Do

- **Look after yourself**
 - Look after your mental well-being, it is just as important. You need to be mentally and emotionally healthy before you can offer help to another person.
 - Inform your Volunteer Manager as soon as possible if you observe any behaviors that lead to concerns regarding suicidal ideation.
 - This is to ensure both you and the person who is feeling suicidal receive professional support from NuLife.



- **Be attentive and empathetic**

- **Talking about suicide does NOT encourage suicide attempts.** If you suspect the person is contemplating suicide, ask them direct questions (e.g. “Are you thinking about dying or taking your own life?”).
- Listen without judgment. It is more likely to help the person to feel heard and understood and reduce their inclination towards suicide.
- Avoid making patronising or simplistic comments (e.g. “Things could be worse”, “Just sleep it off”, “everyone goes through tough times”, “it’s not that bad”).
- Do NOT tell the person that they are ‘selfish’ for not thinking about how their death would affect their family and friends. A person who is suicidal is often already struggling with guilt and shame about being a burden to others.

- **Encourage them to seek professional help**

- Reassure the person that help is available and that they can reach out for additional support.
- If you know and understand their immediate support system (e.g. close friends, family members, partners), offer to help rally them together to create a strong safety net for the person.
- The person may already be considering approaching a mental health / counselling professional, but may be unsure where to start. Suggest speaking to a mental health / counselling professional and refer and/or accompany them if required.

Refer them to external support systems

- NuLife for counselling support at **6300 8706 / 9734 1560**
- Samaritans of Singapore (an organisation dedicated to supporting individuals thinking of harming themselves) at **1-767** (their 24-hour hotline)
- The nearest Family Service Centre (FSC). FSCs are community-based social service providers who support individuals and families in need. You can identify the closest FSC for the person via this link: (<https://www.msf.gov.sg/our-services/directories>)
- Their respective self-help groups:
 - Chinese Development Assistance Council: **6841 4889**
 - Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura: **6359 1199**
 - Singapore Indian Development Association: **1800 295 3333**
 - Eurasian Community Fund: **6447 1578**
 - Institute of Mental Health at **6389 2222** (their 24-hour hotline)

If there is immediate danger to the person’s life: alert Emergency Services (Police: 999; Ambulance: 995) right away or accompany them to the Accident & Emergency room at the nearest hospital.