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**YOUTH WORK PROFESSIONALS: REALITY OF
WORKING WITH YOUTH IN THE CONTEXT OF MENTAL
HEALTH ISSUES AND SUPPORTING THROUGH
NON-FORMAL EDUCATION**

Report on the results of a sociological research

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Through the implementation of “We Care - Mental Health in European Youth Work”, the project team aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To increase the capacity of the involved organizations to provide inclusive and innovative activities for young people from diverse backgrounds. This includes raising awareness about mental health and integrating this topic in youth activities across Europe.
2. To increase the awareness of youth work professionals regarding signs of mental health challenges, by providing coping tools and methods, and working to destigmatize the topic.
3. To build a network for exchanging best practices.
4. To develop a manual that promotes the importance of mental health and offers guidelines for working with affected youth at the local level, and a checklist of tools for implementing high-quality youth work activities related to mental health.
5. To promote and scale the outcomes at both national and European levels.

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Resume

Young people are a key resource in building a just and democratic world. Nowadays they are facing a great number of uncertainties and challenges that **have severe impacts on their mental health**. Adequately supporting young people today, including through **quality youth work is an important investment Europe has to make for its present and for the future**. Not doing so represents a loss of opportunity to strengthen contemporary civil society, a threat to social cohesion and weakens the potential for dealing effectively with some of the major challenges of our time such as migration, unemployment, social exclusion and violent extremism. One of the general objectives of the **EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027** is to support youth work as a catalyst for the empowerment of young people. Youth work is recognised as a powerful means for equipping youth with key personal, professional and entrepreneurial competencies and skills, and as a bridge into education, training or work, thus preventing exclusion. Nevertheless, “youth workers’ jobs are challenging and dynamic. It takes a lot of energy and resources to work directly with young people, in particular with youngsters who face mental health issues. It is needed to investigate the challenges and needs of youth work professionals to facilitate the quality of their work and make it easier for them to interact with youngsters who experience mental health problems. *[Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 and explanatory memorandum, Council of Europe]*

Thus, the aim of the research is to identify the challenges of youth work professionals regarding work with young people who face mental health issues, and potential tools for youth work professionals' assistance through non-formal education programs. **The background of the respondents varies**, in particular, from their experience of youth work, the type of work they do and duration of it, and most importantly nationality, the country they come from and work in at the

moment. As a result of challenges and needs they face while working with young people will vary depending on the context of the country. **Our tasks, which we set before ourselves in the process of implementing the research, were:**

- Investigate youth work professionals' work experience with young people who face mental health challenges.
- Identify the youth work professionals' need for additional knowledge in the context of youth's mental health support.
- Identify challenges youth work professionals face while working with youth with mental health issues.
- Identify youth work professionals' experience of using non-formal education methods in working with youth who face mental health issues.
- Define methods for youth workers' assistance through non-formal education programs in support of youngsters with mental health challenges.

Research methodology

Given the priorities and goals of the research, **both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies were used.** A quantitative survey was conducted to identify key trends. Subsequently, a qualitative study was conducted using the method of focus group discussions for an in-depth study of isolated trends and obtaining new unique results through joint discussion and argumentation. **The interpretation of the research results** was carried out using the condensation and interpretation of meanings based on the conducted focus group discussions and quantitative analysis of the survey results with the output of one-dimensional tables. A general questionnaire was developed for the respondents, which was modified depending on the respondent's country of origin, which was important for research and analysis of the obtained results. The target countries are Germany, Lithuania, France, Spain, Romania, and Ukraine. **Nevertheless, our survey should not be perceived as representative of all youth work professionals in each of the target countries.**

CHAPTER 1. WORK EXPERIENCE WITH YOUTH WHO FACE MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Youth work professionals' profile

To comprehensively display the main characteristics of the youth work professional in Germany, Lithuania, France, Spain, Romania, and Ukraine, respondents were asked about their gender, age, duration of working in the youth work field, type of work carried out and availability of youth work certifications.

Regarding the **gender of youth work professionals** in target countries, **the majority of them are females**. The results vary from absolute majority as in the case of Romania (**91,9%**) to a slight majority in Germany (**66%**). The percentages of female youth work professionals in target countries are the following:

- Romania (**91,9%**)
- Lithuania (**85,7%**)
- France (**80%**)
- Spain (**75%**)
- Ukraine (**73,6%**)
- Germany (**66%**)

In contrast, the portrait of youth work professionals includes **a minority of male youth work professionals**. The results vary from nearly a third of German youth work professionals (**33%**) who are male to the absolute minority in Romania (**8,1%**).

- Germany (**33%**)
- Ukraine (**26,4%**)
- Spain (**25%**)
- France (**20%**)
- Lithuania (**14,3**)
- Romania (**8,1%**)

Concerning **the age of youth work professionals** in target countries, the results are very scattered. It is interesting that in some countries like Germany, the majority of young work professionals (**66%**) are aged 18-29, in countries like France and Ukraine a third of young work professionals are aged 18-29 (**30%** and **26,4%** accordingly), while in countries like Romania and Lithuania there is close to **0%** of youth work professionals aged 18-29. All the percentages are the following:

- Germany (**66%**)
- France (**30%**)
- Ukraine (**26,4%**)
- Spain (**15%**)
- Romania (**0%**)
- Lithuania (**0%**)

In regard to **youth work professionals aged 30-54**, the results also vary from the vast majority in Spain (**80%**) to a third part of youth work professionals in Germany (**33%**). The percentages of youth work professionals who are aged 30-54 are the following:

- Spain (**80%**)
- France (**65%**)
- Romania (**59,5%**)
- Lithuania (**59,5%**)
- Ukraine (**58,5%**)
- Germany (**33%**)

Finally, the vice-a-versa situation is observed regarding **youth work professionals aged 55+**. The results vary from **40,5%** in Romania and Lithuania to **0%** in Germany. All the percentages of youth work professionals aged 55+ are the following:

- Romania (**40,5%**)
- Lithuania (**40,5%**)
- Ukraine (**15,1%**)
- France (**5%**)

- Spain (**5%**)
- Germany (**0%**)

In general, the biggest fraction of youth work professionals in most of the countries are of middle age (30-54). However, the exception is Germany, where the majority of youth work professionals are aged 18-29. At the same time, in such countries as Germany, Spain, France and Ukraine there are few youth work professionals aged 55+.

Regarding the **duration of work as a youth work professional** for more than 5 years, the results vary from absolute majority in Lithuania (**97,7%**) to less than half (**45,3%**) in Ukraine. There is a possible connection to the age of youth work professionals in target countries. The older the youth work professionals - the more years of experience they have. It is particularly evident in Romania and Lithuania, where the biggest fraction are youth work professionals aged 30-59 or 55+ and the absolute majority have more than 5 years of experience in youth work. All the percentages of youth work professionals who have been doing youth work for more than 5 years are the following:

- Lithuania (**97,7%**)
- Romania (**97,3%**)
- Spain (**75%**)
- France (**60%**)
- Germany (**50%**)
- Ukraine (**45,3%**)

It is interesting, however, that Ukraine is the only country, where the majority of youth work professionals (**60,4%**) do **volunteer youth work**. In other countries, the percentages vary from **0%** to **5%**. All the percentages are the following:

- Ukraine (**60,4%**)
- France (**5%**)
- Spain (**5%**)

- Romania (0%)
- Germany (0%)
- Lithuania (0%)

In regard to **paid youth work**, the results vary from **100%** in Germany to the fourth part of youth work professionals in Ukraine (**26,4%**). All the percentages of youth work professionals who do paid youth work are the following:

- Germany (**100%**)
- Spain (**85%**)
- Lithuania (**54,1%**)
- Romania (**54,1%**)
- France (**32,5%**)
- Ukraine (**26,4%**)

The rest of the youth work professionals who are not included in these categories are working in **educational institutions** as school teachers, social pedagogues, psychologists, and school deputies **or carrying out both volunteer and paid youth work**. Youth work professionals' tasks are usually teaching, mentorship and coaching, project management, organizing training courses and youth projects, creativity potential development, growing-up and psycho-emotional support, career search and adaptation assistance. Some youth work professionals made their way into the field by being participants in some form of international youth work activity and worked on their skills through non-formal education.

Concerning **obtaining certifications to carry out youth work**, the majority of youth work professionals in almost all target countries obtained those. The only exception is Ukraine where less than half of youth work professionals (**41,5%**) have this kind of certification. It can be explained by the absence of a youth work definition on the legislative level and youth work being

an activity that developed quite recently. The percentages of youth work professionals who have certification for youth work are the following:

- Spain (**90%**)
- France (**77,5%**)
- Romania (**54,1%**)
- Lithuania (**54.1%**)
- Germany (**50%**)
- Ukraine (**41,5%**)

Among the **certifications that youth work professionals in target countries have already obtained** are a teacher's diploma, youth work training course certificates and other educational project management, courses in the field of psychosomatics, social education, and emotional or mental health, social work bachelor, NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming), Juleica (youth leader card in Germany), language animation.

Youth work professionals' support practice

Many youth work professionals **already work with youth who face mental health challenges**. These include working with youth who have such mental health problems as anxiety, depression, autism, dyslexia, addictions, down syndrome or eating disorders, for example. The percentages vary from the vast majority in France (**80%**) to the fourth part of youth work professionals (**24,3%**) in Romania and Lithuania:

- France (**80%**)
- Ukraine (**56,5%**)
- Germany (**33,3%**)
- Spain (**30%**)
- Romania (**24,3%**)
- Lithuania (**24.3%**)

However, while working with youth who face mental health challenges, youth work professionals experience many challenges on their own. The most **frequent issues youth work professionals in target countries face while working with young people with mental health challenges** are:

- Ukraine - stress (64,2%), anxiety(60,4%), psychological tension (50,9%)
- Romania - anxiety (51,4%), stress (43,2%), confusion (43,2%)
- Spain - stress (57,9%), helplessness (57,9%), confusion (47,4%)
- France - stress (90%), anxiety (80%), psychological tension (62,5%)
- Lithuania - anxiety (51.4%), stress (43.2%), confusion (43.2%)
- Germany - stress (100%), fear (83.3%), mental tension (66.7%)

Among other significant mental health challenges are also depression, anxiety, panic attacks, emotional burnout, self-identification crisis, apathetic states, borderline, rage and increased ability to initiate interpersonal conflicts, decreased confidence level and life power, apathetic states, passivity, despair in own capacities, comparison with others, overthinking, adaptation problems, socialization difficulties, uncertainty states, low self-esteem, frustration, sadness, lack of concentration, suicidal thoughts and inability to deal with them.

Youth work professionals' perception of challenges young people face nowadays

In order to better understand the difficulties that youth professionals face in supporting young people with mental health, it is essential to know their point of view on the main difficulties faced by youngsters. Youth work professionals believe the current challenges of young people are the following:

- 1. Problems regarding the relationship with oneself, becoming an adult:**
 - fear of showing oneself difficulties
 - tendency to focus on the negative aspects of life
 - fast pace of life in general
 - uncertainty about future

- uncertainty about prioritizing things in life
- information overload
- loss of self-confidence
- lack of self-esteem
- difficulty in managing emotions
- "fake enthusiasm" (individuals feel compelled to exude constant positivity even when facing challenges)

2. Relationship with others (often caused by social media and idealized images there):

- fear of social isolation
- fear of abandonment
- problems with self-image
- comparing to others
- bullying at school or on social networks
- internal closedness
- discrimination and criticism
- invalidation by others
- gender issues (not yet fully accepted by relatives, peers and society)
- a lot of pressure and competition

"Young people are compared to their peers, at school, at sports, in their daily activities (TV, video games, music, drawing...) and in what they see on social networks. This comparison must be synonymous with pressure, the search for progress and perfection that seems to guide the whole of our society today. In a period of one's life when one builds oneself (and where the word of the "adults" is "gold") each of these details has an impact on their self-perception [...] All this archaic and modern farandole transmitted to some generates the malaise of others, even pushing some of the young to isolation, scarification or even suicide. »

3. The situation in the world, and external events young people cannot control

These events cause social connection, create isolation, and make young people traumatized, aggressive and depressed about their present and future:

- COVID pandemic and its consequences
- Russian war in Ukraine
- ongoing conflicts in the world
- economic crisis

“Given the societal and governmental issues, the stress of young people is profound. A blurred future, with difficulties related to housing, increasing finances, a collapsing health system, etc.”

4. Difficult access and visibility of the medical sector and management of mental health problems:

- taboo that still persists when discussing the subject of mental health

“Taboo that still persists around mental health, not yet being taken in regard automatically and the treatment often not reimbursed.”

- growing difficulty and inaccessibility of mental health care services

“Lack of professionals and longer delays which result in symptoms being reinforced by the lack of immediate treatment.”

5. Young people turn to addictions to "escape" the world they live in.

More frequently professionals face young people living with addictions: video games, alcohol, and drugs. The circumstances and consequences often lead to a deterioration of personal well-being and complicate the mental accompaniment.

6. The impact of migration background

Youth professionals are in contact with young people with a variety of profiles. Among them are young people undergoing immigration who have had difficult migratory journeys, and have seen and experienced painful things that have impacted their mental health. Often traumatized by certain events, young people find it difficult to open up and talk about their past, which complicates their

accompaniment. There is a lack of recognition of professionals (psychologists, psychiatrists) in some world cultures, it is often young people whose mental health is degraded and who are not cared for, sometimes leading to deeper illnesses in the long term (bipolarity, schizophrenia). The frequent phenomenon among these youngsters is also refugee syndrome.

- **A loss of belief in the education system and an increase in school phobias**

School drop-out and school phobia phenomena are observed by professionals that affect the mental health of young people.

"School is no longer always a safe and caring place to learn"

"Burnouts and school breaks are multiplying"

All of these challenges have a profound impact on young people's mental health and identity. Due to social, individual and world crises, youngsters find it difficult to project themselves in the future and end up developing mental disorders, as well as feelings of fear, mental tension, anxiety, and powerlessness to resolve current situations or positions for the future.

Some youth work professionals believe self-love plays a crucial role in promoting better mental health among young people. They indicate that loving oneself can contribute to better mental health, helping to resolve at least some challenges naturally. Inner peace is viewed as a key element in problem-solving, making peace with oneself is considered essential when navigating through different life stages. At the same time, there is a need for young people to accept the nuances of life, accept that situations are rarely black or white, and embrace the idea that making mistakes is a natural part of the human experience. Overcoming the fear of failure and managing external expectations were identified as key steps towards promoting better mental health among young people.

It is important that not all youth work professionals in target countries indicate they are **well-acknowledged in such an important topic as young people's mental health**. The percentages of youth work professionals who believe they are well-acknowledged are the following:

- Germany (**56,7%**)
- France (**52,5%**)
- Ukraine (**37,8%**)
- Romania (**37,8%**)
- Lithuania (**37.8%**)
- Spain (**10%**)

Thus, the majority of youth work professionals in most countries still need to get more knowledge on the mental health of young people and how to work with it.

Regarding the satisfaction with the ability of youth work professionals to effectively interact with young people who struggle with mental health, the percentages are the following:

- Germany (**66,6%**)
- Spain (**55%**)
- France (**45%**)
- Romania (**40,5%**)
- Lithuania (**40.5%**)
- Ukraine (**34%**)

Importantly, there is a majority or a big fraction of youth work professionals in target countries who are not currently satisfied with how they can interact with young people with mental health challenges.

There are many youth work professionals, who faced situations while working with young people with mental challenges when they didn't know how to handle those. The percentages vary from the vast majority in Spain (**80%**) to a third part of youth work professionals in Ukraine (**32,1%**):

- Spain (**80%**)
- Germany (**66,7%**)

- France (**65%**)
- Romania (**40,5%**)
- Lithuania (**40.2%**)
- Ukraine (**32,1%**)

These situations include panic attacks, tears, frustration and significant sensitivity of young people to other people's words, suicidal thoughts and actions, behavioural problems, angeriness and depression, schizophrenic inclinations, inability to cope with the information flow, and difficulties with relations with parents. For Ukrainian youth workers, it is also usual to deal with hallucinogenic states among young people, including those caused by the nearby flight of the plane during wartime or the loss of a close person.

Professional knowledge and skills sufficiency

Regarding the **subjective assessment of competence in the youth work field**, the situation is quite similar in all target countries. The percentages of youth work professionals who believe they have **average competence to carry out youth work** are the following:

- Germany (**33,3%**)
- Romania (**21,6%**)
- Ukraine (**20,8%**)
- Germany (**16,7%**)
- France (**15%**)
- Spain (**15%**)

In contrast, a bigger percentage of youth work professionals believe they have **competence higher than average in carrying out youth work**. The percentages are the following:

- Spain (**80%**)
- France (**52,5%**)
- Romania (**51,3%**)
- Germany (**50,1%**)

- Ukraine (**48,9%**)
- Lithuania (**21.6%**)

Despite the fact that a big fraction of youth work professionals in target countries assess themselves as competent in the field, the majority of youth work professionals indicate they **need additional knowledge and support in the youth work field**. The percentages of youth work professionals who believe they need additional support in the youth work field are the following:

- Spain (**90%**)
- Lithuania (**86.5%**)
- France (**85%**)
- Romania (**80%**)
- Germany (**75%**)
- Ukraine (**73,6%**)

They emphasize the importance of **individual approach, communication, presence, empathy and establishment of trust** in the process of interaction with each participant and areas that need improvement. This relationship of trust is also an issue they mention, as it can easily be "lost". It is about their ability to find ways to help young people, their motivation and their commitment to the public.

The word "**Understanding**" was identified as key to describing work with young people with mental health problems. Youth work professionals indicated the importance of creating a safe space for expressing emotions and mutual support. It is important that while talking about their work, youth work professionals express emotions ranging from gratitude for the opportunity to help to feelings of helplessness, lack of experience or inability to identify the problem in the face of the enormity of the challenges facing their wards.

There is a need for more **methods and training in recognising the symptoms, reacting and preventing mental health problems development**. There is also a need on the local level for a **network** that can step in and help in

solving problems when they are detected. **Protocols or structures** that can help in crisis situations are seen as helpful in answering and addressing critical situations.

CHAPTER 2. CHALLENGES AND ASSISTING NEEDS OF YOUTH WORK PROFESSIONALS

Youth work challenges

Professionals report difficulties in addressing mental health issues while working and accompanying young people suffering from mental health problems. The challenges are the following:

Challenges with building positive, nonjudgmental relationships with young people with mental health issues

Youth work professionals indicate many young people have heightened reactions - passive or active aggression towards others, panic attacks, and inattention. Some became less tolerant and emphatic regarding the problems of others. Young people often face detachment from home and usual life, the impossibility of communication with relatives, even if they are nearby. Thus, young professionals emphasize the **unpredictability of what situation or exercise in their work can cause positive or negative emotions** in young people with mental health challenges. Moreover, youth professionals believe that sometimes young people don't recognize the need for help, there are difficulties in reaching them and lack of feedback, too much sensitivity to the topic and different levels of readiness of young people to tackle the problems and talk about them.

From the side of youth work professionals there is a fear of making mistakes, a feeling of powerlessness and a lack of knowledge on how to respond and help young people in these situations.

Challenges with understanding the context of young people with mental health problems

Some youth work professionals indicated the fact that they were not competent to assess the young person's situation, to see the degree of urgency or the impact of the situation on the young person's overall life. It is challenging for them to understand the scale of young people's stress, and facilitate expressing their opinions. Indeed, they are not professionals who can make diagnoses for young people. They are therefore forced to rely on their "instinct" or to contact health professionals.

"What's difficult is estimating the seriousness of the young person's mental health because he himself is not equipped to know."

Challenges with discussing young people's personal and emotional concerns about their mental health

Some youth work professionals indicated that a relationship of trust can be put to the test when discussing sensitive subjects such as mental health. Some professionals are afraid of breaking this relationship by asking questions that are too personal, or by giving hasty advice instead of listening. There is fear, sometimes shame and closedness from the side of young people, which makes them silence their problems. **The competence of effective communication in this type of situation is a priority for professionals.**

"To have the right words to help the young person".

Moreover, some youth work professionals find it difficult to **balance personal discussions and group dynamics** - group activities are not always applicable to personal and emotional problems discussions.

Not less importantly, when faced with mental health issues, some professionals indicate they sometimes **feel personally affected by a young person's situation**. Some youth work professionals indicate *"worrying about*

the situations experienced by young people", "feeling their suffering", and "frustration at not being able to do more".

Challenges with supporting young people with mental health problems, in identifying their learning needs, desires and style

It is complicated to always properly evaluate the situation due to the lack of experience and specific knowledge, and find the individual approach. Young people are often unmotivated and indifferent - it is difficult for them to think about their future and ambitions, and as a result, more difficult to create the request. Apart from that, it is difficult to make a positive impact due to the environment or parents' attitude. Finally, it is challenging to apply various methods fostering creativity or motivation of these people while working in big classes of 25-30 students.

Challenges with creating a safe, motivating and inclusive learning environment for young people experiencing mental health issues

It is more difficult to create a learning environment on the group level, where everyone feels comfortable and safe and follows the same pace of the activities, it is hard to balance time for each of the participants. The significant difference among young people, who have different states can be exclusive to each other. In particular, in depressive and pre-depressive states a motivating atmosphere for one person may be demotivating for another. Some youth work professionals admitted mobbing, and intolerance sometimes occurred. Finally, it is challenging to create a safe and inclusive environment while working in big classes of 25-30 students.

Challenges with applying different teaching methods that develop creativity and motivation to learn in groups with the participation of young people with mental health problems

The only challenge is the insufficiency of knowledge about possible methodics, applicable to work with young people experiencing mental health problems. Thus, there is fear of not finding an appropriate approach to start the conversation and introduce the topic to the young people.

Challenges with providing appropriate support and feedback to young people with mental health problems

First of all, these challenges are indifference, insufficient motivation level and closedness of young people. Secondly, there is a lack of knowledge, time, resources, experience and specialist help from the side of youth work professionals to make this experience effective. Finally, sometimes there are mistakes in the classification of the situation and mental problems of young people by their teachers, friends, or due to their self-observation which becomes a challenging point to talk through with young people for youth work professionals.

Challenges with helping young people with mental health problems to identify the role they want to play in their community

Particularly problematic are comparison with others, internal doubts, low self-esteem from the side of young people, lack of clarity regarding one's own goals and capabilities, apathy and uncertainty. In addition, it is difficult to create a safe and supportive environment to elaborate on this topic.

Challenges with helping to take active citizenship and responsibility in society and in defining their goals and developing strategies to achieve them

The main problems are passivity, chaoticity, misunderstanding of the role in society from the side of young people, and despair in their future. The other important problem is fighting the belief that their actions are not worth it and cannot change anything. In the case of Ukraine, it is difficult for young people

to think strategically about the future when it is not guaranteed because of the war situation. **Knowledge of actions of empowerment, systematic support and encouragement setting are needed.**

Challenges with development support of young people's critical thinking, confidence, and understanding of society and government

Youth work professionals observe that young people with mental health challenges are often defocused, at the moment of transition to action, they often delve into anxiety, depression or aggressive states. Other mentioned problems of lack of time, resources and personnel in the team from the side of youth work professionals.

Challenges with conflicts or confrontations of young people with mental health problems

Youth work professionals indicated that people with mental health problems may have unpredictable behavior or emotional outbursts, which makes it difficult to understand the roots of the conflict and find effective solutions. Moreover, a lack of effective communication is seen as a problem when conflicts among young people with mental health problems emerge.

Challenges with actively involving young people with mental health problems, as well as different origins, identification in activities

The biggest challenge is different views, priorities and opportunities among young people, and a possible superior attitude of some participants to others, mobbing and lack of tolerance.

In general, youth work professionals face a row of difficulties in working with youngsters who experience mental health challenges. On the one hand, it is challenging for youth professionals to find an individual approach, build and

maintain trust with young people and find proper supporting words. While speaking frankly, youth work professionals are afraid of offending or disappointing youngsters. On the other hand, it is difficult to deal with a wide variety of problems and traumas which require different approaches and methods. In particular, it is difficult when youth professionals face unpredictable reactions, low motivation, closedness and caddishness from the side of young people. Some young work professionals believe it is important first to handle their problems to be able to help others. It is challenging to accept they can't provide immediate help, whereas the process of recovery and change in mental health can be long and requires constant support. They often lack internal resources to deal with the problem, time to make a right and thorough decision about the situation or experience and specific knowledge on the topic.

Most respondents acknowledge that they feel emotionally drained from time to time and that it is important for them to find support from colleagues and family. Burnout was recognized as a significant concern, with participants emphasizing the need for proactive prevention rather than waiting until the breaking point. Youth work professionals highlighted a lack of appreciation for the work done by themselves and others. Coordinators, in turn, experience pressure to provide motivation to volunteers.

There is a need for open and honest communication, for coordinators to encourage team members to express their needs and capabilities openly, sharing the organization's mission and goals to create a shared sense of purpose. Managing tasks in a healthy manner was underscored as a crucial skill. There was a suggestion of monthly team outings which provide opportunities for bonding without discussing work-related matters. Humor is strategically incorporated into informal meetings to lighten the mood and create a relaxed atmosphere.

Needs for youth work support

Youth work professionals have specific needs when it comes to supporting young people suffering from mental health problems, as they do not feel sufficiently "equipped" either in terms of knowledge, tools or methodology to tackle the difficulties.

First of all, youth work professionals agree that **educational training** is essential for working with youth with mental health problems. **Coaching, empathy-effective communication and more experience** are competencies of specific interest for youth professionals working with young people with mental health problems. Most of the respondents admitted they need support and knowledge to effectively work with these youngsters. From their perspective, it will allow them to respond more effectively to the needs of young people and provide better psychological support.

Youth professionals believe basic knowledge in psychology, post-traumatic and psycho-emotional recovery, depression, pathologies and disabilities, addictions and the management of addictions, anxiety management, suicide prevention, stress resistance, food disorders, gender and sexuality, psychology of stress and panic are the topics of the biggest importance and actuality.

“I’m not a psychologist, but I would like to have resources in regard to this”.

Important topics are also communication, sensitivity, professional posture and listening skills, inclusion, managing conflicts and expressing emotions effectively. Youth professionals indicate the need to understand how to help youngsters with mental challenges and significant vulnerabilities, but not harm their state - how to act and what to say while interacting, how to mediate the process and what are the “warning signs”.

Moreover, to overcome challenges related to youth with mental health issues, there is a need to implement activities to **boost volunteers'**

self-confidence, training on giving and receiving feedback, and conducting regular feedback sessions. Regarding the methods of obtaining knowledge, respondents feel the importance of diverse tools of support. These are training courses, webinars, online courses, presentations, instruction booklets, mentorships, lectures and practice activities, and interactive and visual methods. Additional attention must be paid to the need for opportunities for experience exchange with colleagues from other countries, interactive methods for young professionals involving young people, camps, and remote trips, where young people can learn to work on themselves and rethink their lives.

Secondly, more informally than the educational courses, the youth work professionals would like to have time and **physical practice spaces** between professionals to be able to exchange real-life situations and concrete cases.

"Having opportunities to analyze practice with professionals facing similar situations".

Thirdly, some professionals would like to be able to **call a resource association** in a crisis situation.

"I'd like to be able to talk to other people, professionals who can be called on to discuss situations and get advice. The feeling is that we're alone with the young people, who don't always find the right structures to turn to

Moreover, youth work professionals would like to **gain a better overview of the already available resources for them** since they don't always know, first of all, what is available, secondly, how to use them, and finally, where to find these resources.

CHAPTER 3. SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

Experience in using non-formal education methods by youth work professionals

Regarding the **use of non-formal education methods** when working with young people with mental health problems, the results vary from **100%** of youth work professionals in Germany to a third of youth work professionals in Lithuania and Romania (**32%** and **32,4%** accordingly). The percentage of youth work professionals in target countries who already use non-formal education methods when working with young people who struggle with mental health are the following:

- Germany (**100%**)
- Spain (**75%**)
- France (**57,5%**)
- Ukraine (**52,8%**)
- Romania (**32,4%**)
- Lithuania (**32%**)

Among **non-formal education methods**, **youth work professionals already use** group discussions and therapeutic circles, creative artistic techniques, videos and webinars, tools from SALTO youth, interactive methods, role-plays, teamwork and debates, simulation games, watching movies, peer-to-peer learning, international cooperative projects, art therapies, activities in nature. Some respondents decide together with the students, what they would like to try and how they see the implementation of the idea. Among other non-formal education methods are forum theater, Lego Serious Play methodology, drawing fractals, program “Without depression” or methods from the book “The Backstage of a Teenage Group” (publication by Lithuanian publisher “Juoda avis”).

It was also indicated that at the beginning of any activity, introductory activities about needs, concerns and expectations can be helpful in gaining a better understanding of the group. Rules of the group (Group agreement) is another idea to improve the ownership and integration in the group, as well as agreeing on the main values in the group (respect, tolerance, etc). Having regular breaks is seen as beneficial for both young people and the youth workers. Participants seeing the activities of the whole week can be helpful for them to familiarize themselves with the structure. A box or a method for anonymous feedback offers a place for people who do not want to bring up a topic publicly and a chance for it to be addressed some other way.

It is interesting that some youth work professionals **tried learning methods which they didn't like and cannot recommend** for carrying out further youth work. Among these are the method of "Radical Honesty", public speaking without preparation, creating competition or pressure, exercises that require physical training, asking too personal questions, art therapy, and activities which force everyone present to participate. These can be perceived negatively and lead to retraumatization. Among others are the "Mindfulness" method, and ASC method, since they lead to hyperemotionality in young people while using these.

Tools for youth work professionals to assist youth's mental health

Regarding **the need for additional methods of non-formal education** when working with young people with mental health challenges, there is a big fraction of youth work professionals in each of the target countries who need these. The percentages are the following:

- Romania (**67,5%**)
- Lithuania (**67.5%**)
- Germany (**66,7%**)
- Spain (**60%**)

- France (45%)
- Ukraine (41,5%)

Youth work professionals recognized that these methods should be easily carried out and adapted, practical and modern, and adaptable in the lessons. They indicated the usefulness of such ideas as the creation of interactive games for studying stress resistance and virtual spaces for group classes, Q&A sessions with professionals, creating a guide for youth work professionals, training on methods of working with trauma, methods that explain basic terms and give tips on how young people should act differently. The other useful methods are constructive feedback sessions, creating trusting spaces for vulnerability, an annual meeting for collective vulnerability, and open communication through storytelling and games. Not less important for youth work professionals are emotions tracking, stress management sessions, emotion management techniques, prioritization of tasks using an importance pyramid, motivational methods, one-on-one sessions with leadership, supportive workflows, encouragement of a healthy lifestyle, informal outings, social evenings, and focus groups. Some of the methods they would want to discover include opening up to the participants and vice-versa, how to be flexible and how to ensure a safe space for learning.

From the perspective of youth professionals, the useful topics are emotional intelligence, psychological assistance, communication, self-regulation techniques, practical solutions, family, suicidal thoughts, depression, building patience.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the sociological research conducted among youth work professionals in target countries, several key conclusions can be drawn regarding the reality of working with young people facing mental health issues and supporting them through non-formal education:

Complexity of work experience: The professionals exhibit a varied background in terms of their experience and knowledge of mental health issues among young people. While some feel confident in their understanding of the mental state of youth, many youth work professionals struggle with a plethora of aspects, such as managing stress and uncertainty, not sufficient knowledge of mental health disorders, inability to understand the context of young people, etc.

Challenges faced: Youth work professionals encounter various challenges when working with young people with mental health issues, including difficulties in understanding and effectively communicating with them, managing personal and emotional issues, promoting their active participation in community activities, lack of internal and external sources, knowledge and experience.

Needs for support: The professionals express a need for additional support, for example professionals and educational training to enhance their skills in working with mentally challenged youth. Coaching, empathy-effective communication and experience were found to be key competences they want to obtain.

Utilization of non-formal education: A significant fraction of youth work professionals already utilize non-formal education methods in their work with young people experiencing mental health problems. However, there is also an emerging need for further exploration of effective methods and tools to support mental health education in non-formal youth work settings.

Proposed solutions: A plethora of ideas, methods, and tools were generated for facilitating mental health education in non-formal youth work settings. Basic knowledge of psychology, post-traumatic and psycho-emotional, stress resistance, etc are of particular interest. Diverse methods can be useful, including training courses, webinars, presentations, lectures, camps, remote trips, etc.

In conclusion, the research highlights the importance of addressing the mental health needs of young people through effective youth work practices and shows the significant need for additional knowledge and techniques in terms of non-formal education interventions for youth work professionals. By providing adequate support and training to youth work professionals, as well as implementing targeted strategies for mental health education, we can better equip them to support the well-being of young individuals facing mental health challenges.