Helping Adolescents Thrive Toolkit
Strategies to promote and protect adolescent mental health and reduce self-harm and other risk behaviours

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Adolescence is a period of rapid development during which individuals experience profound physical, social and psychological changes and during which the maturing brain is highly susceptible to environmental influences (1). As such, adolescence offers great potential for health promotion and preventive interventions to influence health and developmental outcomes (2), and to influence young lives positively in the short and long term, and into the next generation (3).

A renewed focus on creating a supportive environment that enables positive mental health for adolescents is urgently needed. By effectively implementing a comprehensive set of strategies to support adolescent mental health, young people will enjoy improved well-being and will be able to realize their potential and participate meaningfully in their communities (4).

Overview

Helping Adolescents Thrive

Helping Adolescents Thrive (HAT) is a joint WHO-UNICEF initiative to strengthen programming and policy responses for adolescents, to promote positive mental health, prevent mental health conditions, and prevent self-harm and other risk behaviours. The vision of HAT is a world in which all adolescents, their caregivers, civil society and communities unite with governments to protect and promote adolescent mental health. This means taking action routinely to implement and monitor evidence-informed and human rights-based strategies for improving mental health, and to prevent and reduce mental health and substance use conditions in adolescents in order to improve lifelong well-being (5). This is in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Target 3.4, namely: “to reduce by one third premature mortality from noncommunicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being” and, within this target, to reduce suicide mortality (indicator 3.4.2) by 2030. This is also in line with the Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2020 (6) and the Global accelerated action for the health of adolescents (AA-HAI): Guidance to support country implementation (7).

Approach

The HAT toolkit

This guidance document, the HAT toolkit, has been developed to improve programming for adolescent mental health promotion and prevention and to support the implementation of the WHO HAT guidelines on mental health promotive and preventive interventions for adolescents. The toolkit describes evidence-informed approaches for promoting positive mental health, preventing mental health conditions, and reducing engagement in self-harm and risk behaviours.

The HAT toolkit is informed by the social ecological model, highlighting the importance of addressing risk factors at individual, family, community and societal levels to promote and protect adolescent mental health, with due attention to sociocultural contexts and care systems. The toolkit describes core principles that should guide programming efforts – including ensuring that responses are equitable and inclusive, gender-sensitive and gender-responsive, developmentally appropriate and guided by adolescents’ evolving capacities, and that they actively involve both adolescents and their parents/caregivers in the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of programming, and not only as beneficiaries. It is critical to plan for large-scale implementation beginning from the planning phase for roll-out of the HAT strategies.
Actions
The HAT strategies and cross-cutting activities

The HAT toolkit describes four interlinked strategies and two implementation approaches. These include implementation tools to support the work of programme managers. Country implementation case examples are also provided.

Strategies

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Strategy 1
Implementation and enforcement of policies and laws

provides guidance on, and examples of, laws and policy provisions to improve adolescent mental health outcomes, embracing a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach.
Strategy 2
Environments to promote and protect adolescent mental health

focuses on actions to improve the quality of environments in schools, communities and digital spaces. This strategy seeks to enhance adolescents’ physical and social environments, where indicated, through a range of evidence-based activities such as school climate interventions, adolescent safe spaces in communities, and teacher training.
Strategy 3
Caregiver support

refers to interventions to: build caregivers’ knowledge and skills for promoting adolescents’ mental health; strengthen caregivers’ and adolescents’ relationships; and support caregivers’ own mental health and well-being.
Strategy 4

Adolescent psychosocial interventions

focuses on evidence-based psychosocial interventions for universal, targeted and indicated mental health prevention.
For each of these strategies, a rationale is provided, followed by a description of various evidence-informed approaches, considerations for implementation and relevant resources.

The two implementation approaches are:

**Activity 1**
**Multisectoral collaboration**

Describes how to develop collaboration between multiple sectors and stakeholders—public, private and civil society—at national and local levels to support the development and implementation of preventive and promotive mental health programming for adolescents.

**Activity 2**
**Monitoring and evaluation**

Provides a breakdown of how to develop a monitoring and evaluation system which can provide policy-makers and programme managers with critical information on whether programmes and policies are being implemented as intended and are having their intended impact.

For both activities, an overview section is provided, followed by specific considerations for adolescent mental health programming, a step-by-step process for implementation, and links to relevant resources.

Finally, the HAT toolkit provides an essential resource guide to support the implementation of a whole-of-society approach as a means to achieving the goal of ensuring that all adolescents, including those living in situations of vulnerability, benefit from evidence-informed strategies to promote their positive mental health, prevent suicide and the development of mental health conditions, and engagement in risk behaviours such as self-harm, substance use, and aggressive, disruptive and oppositional behaviours.
References


Contact
World Health Organization
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