MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING TOOLKIT

ENSURING PSYCHOLOGICALLY INFORMED DELIVERY

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St Basils *Works with young people*

YOUTH VOICE

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FOREWORD

We are making this toolkit and guide freely available to access. In return, we want to challenge organisations to provide their staff with the time and a safe space to develop the skills outlined here and put them into practice.

We recognise that there'll be different levels of experience, different levels of commitment within organisations, different levels of training and skill and understanding across the piece. Therefore, this guide aims to maximise the potential benefits of the content we've made available, by giving users and recipients a delivery style that mitigates harm and facilitates empowerment.

If you have any questions or would like to be directed to background reading on the information in this guide, please get in touch at **www.sprintproject.org**

Jean Templeton,
Chief Executive of St Basils

Why is this guide needed and what is it about?

Attendees at the Mental Skills Training Toolkit launch event had positive views on the toolkit content and appearance. However, a reoccurring view throughout the day was around ensuring a psychologically informed delivery style of the toolkit content (see quotes below). One suggestion on how to do this was to create an educational guide to go alongside the toolkit. This guide was designed to be read prior to and alongside implementation of the toolkit. It can be seen as part one of a two-part approach to implementing strengths-based practice.

Feedback from the launch event

> *I think maybe what's missing is guidance around the good principles of practice.*

> *What I've picked up here today is there's a lot of importance around the delivery or how you come across or how you really utilise different strategies because it can have wider ramifications with our young people, so how would you safeguard the delivery of the toolkit?*

> *I have improved my knowledge of what workshops exist now to build on mental skills development. For me personally, I would love to see the "how" behind the skills needed to deliver the content.*

This guide provides delivery style recommendations from over six years of delivering My Strengths Training for Life (MST4Life™) – our bespoke mental skills training programme is grounded in evidence-based practice and informed by psychological theory. We have summarised our key learning in the form of suggested delivery behaviours which are generally applicable to support skill development, well-being and motivation of young people.

For additional support in applying the recommended behaviours in this guide, visit our website for our delivery style 'self-reflection' tool as well as other resources to supplement the toolkit: **www.sprintproject.org**

Finally, if young people disclose any safeguarding issues when using the toolkit, we **strongly advise you follow your organisation's safeguarding procedures.**

BACKGROUND

PSYCHOLOGICALLY INFORMED DELIVERY

There are three main theories that have been used as a framework to guide the delivery of the toolkit content: Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE), and Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT). This section provides a brief overview of these theories, explaining how they interact and facilitate mental skills development and well-being.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

SDT[1] is a theory of motivation concerned with how to encourage yourself or others to act. SDT suggests that we all have three basic psychological needs: relatedness, autonomy, and competence.

Relatedness (I have support from others): A basic psychological need that reflects people's desire to belong and be connected to others.

Autonomy (I have choice): A basic psychological need that reflects people's desire to have choice, free will and/or a sense of self-driven motivation to complete tasks.

Competence (I have self-belief): A basic psychological need that reflects people's desire to be effective and develop skills or abilities.

Meeting these three basic needs results in improvements to well-being, self-determination, and quality of life[1, 2]. These needs can be both supported (pro) or frustrated (anti) through everyday interactions with others, so we have focused on providing recommendations for desired (ie, do as much as you can) and undesired (ie, try to avoid) behaviours.

Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE)

A PIE service or organisation utilises evidence-based psychological theories and models to guide practice to help ensure the emotional and psychological needs of their clients and staff are met and informs a consistent approach to behaviour, decisions, processes, and procedures[3].

The recommendations in this guide are informed by best practice for creating PIEs for young people[4]. We can also attest to their benefits from our own experience and research identifying the key behaviours that work best to support young peoples' psychological needs. These behaviours described in this guide are not exhaustive and there may be aspects that are more or less relevant to you.

Using PIE as a framework compliments SDT as it nurtures basic psychological needs by focusing on positive relationships and putting this at the heart of the approach (see Figure 2).

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT)

SFBT is a key therapeutic approach we have adopted in MST4Life™. It is distinct from other traditional approaches, which focus more on identifying what is wrong or what led to the problem. In contrast, SFBT focuses on co-construction of goals and solutions from existing strengths and resources.

Language is a deliberate and important tool in SFBT. How it is applied in conversation with a young person may be very different from your conversations with friends. It is used in a particular way to try and impact a young person's way of thinking.

SFBT assumes that positive changes in language lead to positive changes in thinking. Eventually, these changes influence their perceptions of a situation or problem and creates greater expectancy that change is possible and encourages them to take actions to make it so.

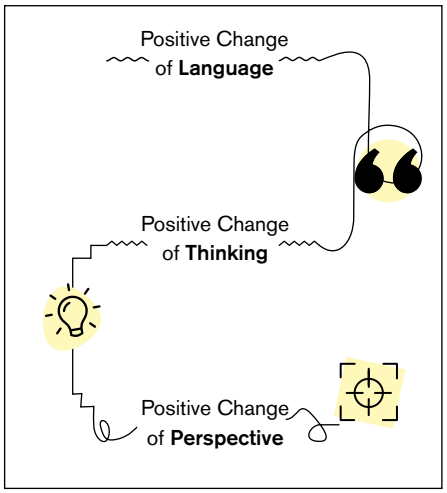


Figure 1. The change process of Solution-focused Brief Therapy

Problem-free talk

When you meet a young person for the first time (and even in later conversations) you may wish to engage them initially through problem-free talk. This can be helpful to change the tone of the conversation towards a more solution-focused outlook, which could be a conversation unrelated to their problem or situation (eg, young person's hobbies or interests).

By actively listening to the young person, you can begin to identify some of their key strengths and capacities. You may pay close attention to things that are currently going well for that young person or have done in the past. For example, a young person may talk about making music, playing sport or creating art. Here, you could acknowledge their strengths through their hobbies, such as, their commitment, their creativity or their self-belief.

Try using these six active listening skills the next time you are in conversation with someone.

Encourage:
Ask the young person to elaborate, prompt them with open-ended questions

Clarify:
Check that you have understood what the young person has said

Silence:
Be confident during times of silence, this may be a time for the young person to reflect

Summarise:
Paraphrasing helps assure the young person you are listening and interested

Reflection:
Remember to reflect on the outcomes of the conversation

Gestures:
Position your body towards the young person, softening your tone and making frequent eye contact

For more resources from Solution-focused Brief Therapy, see **www.brief.org.uk**

Reframing

Reframing is a simple tool you can use in a conversation when a young person talks about a problem or negative experience, helping to restate the problem with a new and more positive viewpoint.

Reframing helps the young person to view their situation from a different perspective, introducing doubt into old and rigid perceptions. Furthermore, it helps the young person to recognise what they may see as a negative, another person may view as positive.

Although the young person may not be able to change the concrete facts of their problem or situation, to place it in a new frame can change its meaning; therefore, the young person may think, feel and respond differently to their problem.

Try this reframing tool to reconsider these statements

Troublesome perception	Reframed statement
I am not good at…	**I would like to improve on…**
I don't like making decisions	**I am cautious and take my time when weighing things up**
I am always late	
I am lazy	
I am shy	
I am stubborn	

Top Tip
Try asking the young person to elaborate on the positively reframed statement with open-ended questions. If you can, signpost them to particular tools which they may find valuable.

What is another way of describing a stubborn person?

What are the advantages of being stubborn?

Top Tip!
*If the young person gets stuck, try asking some prompting questions such as *'What is another way of describing a shy person?'* and *'What are the advantages of being shy/quiet?'*

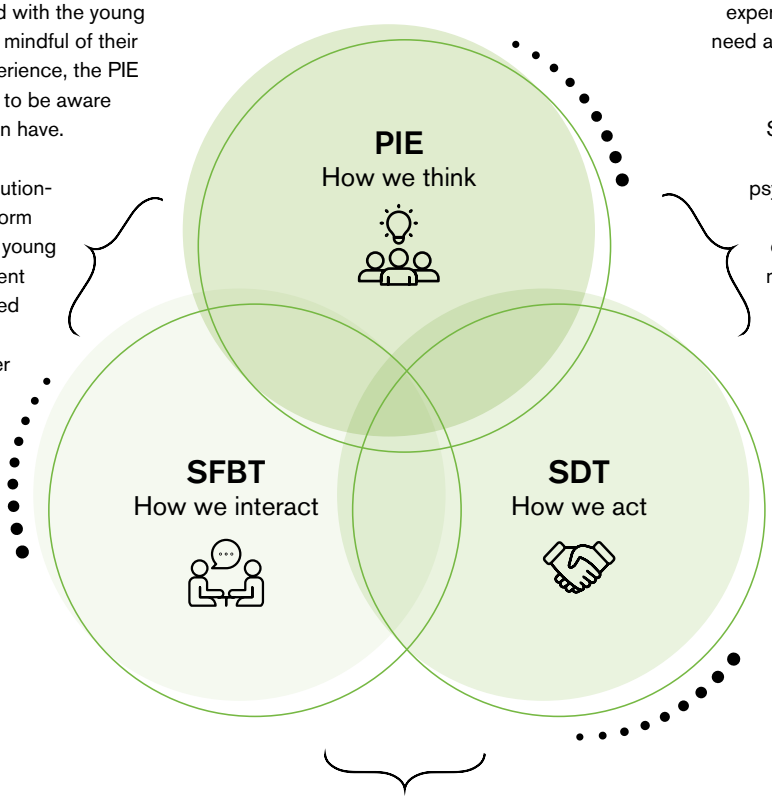
How PIE, SDT and SFBT interact to support basic psychological needs and well-being

Psychologically informed environments (PIE) show us the importance of the interactions we have with each other and with the young people we work with. Being mindful of their vulnerability or previous experience, the PIE framework encourages staff to be aware of the impact their words can have.

Therefore, when we use Solution-focused Brief Therapy to inform our conversational style with young people, we create a consistent approach which is far removed from deficit-based (what's wrong with you?), and closer to strengths-based practice (what's right with you?).

With the understanding from PIE, we recognise that young people who have experienced homelessness or trauma need an environment in which they feel physically and emotionally safe.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a framework to help support psychological safety by giving staff clear behavioural guidelines that can support basic psychological needs (competence, relatedness and autonomy) and well-being.



Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides general behavioural guidelines, but to ensure we use appropriate language for the setting and population, Solution-focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) is an additional layer to our bespoke delivery style. Through being intentional in the language we use, SFBT provides with us with a template for conversations that build rapport, find solutions and empower young people. As a result, young people's basic psychological needs are met too.

Figure 2. How PIE, SDT and SFBT interact to support basic psychological needs and well-being

SKILLS FOR CONNECTING

To support people's basic psychological need for relatedness

It may seem like common sense, but a friendly and welcoming approach can be extremely powerful for satisfying young people's basic psychological need for relatedness. Emotions are contagious, and so how you act can 'rub off' on others in both a positive and negative way. So, if you are relaxed and appear comfortable, it's more likely others around you will be too.

During our time delivering the MST4Life™ programme, we've learned these actions help to develop a good rapport with young people, which in turn lays an important foundation for their engagement with more formal types of support[5].

Developing rapport is the foundation of all the tools in the toolkit and an essential part of the process – it is important to spend the necessary time and not rush this part.

PRO-BEHAVIOURS	WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?
Coming across as friendly, welcoming and relaxed	This could be physical behaviours such as maintaining eye contact and open and positive body language. It is also important to pay your full attention to the young person. If it seems like you are preoccupied or dealing with other people/tasks then they may disengage.
Validation and active listening	Validation is showing recognition or acceptance of another person's thoughts, feelings, emotions and behaviours as understandable. It's letting the young person know that it's ok if they feel stressed or low sometimes, rather than trying to force them to be positive at a time when it is difficult to do so. For tips on active listening, see page 4.
Relatable and engaging in informal conversation	Getting to know each other better about more general things can help build rapport. Of course, it's important to maintain boundaries, but sharing a common love of music, for example, may help the young person feel more comfortable engaging.

ANTI-BEHAVIOURS	WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?
Just focused on the task	We often say that the activities or the tools themselves are not the intervention, it is the delivery style. So although the toolkit includes valuable tools, try not to sacrifice completing the tools in place of rapport development with the young person. In other words, try to avoid seeing it as a 'tick box' exercise to complete.
Restricting opportunities for interaction	We appreciate there can often be time pressures and high caseloads in this type of work, but we also believe that every interaction is an opportunity. So try to avoid rushing the end of a session and even look for times to stay for that extra cup of tea!
Unfriendly style	Try to avoid coming across unfriendly, standoffish or 'too' professional, which could inadvertently come across as not caring or not considering the young person's needs and cause the young person to disengage.

Example conversation: *supporting relatedness*

Hey Cameron, good to see you. How are you? How's your day been so far?

I'm alright.

Here the staff member is being friendly, welcoming and relaxed, and paying their full attention to the young person to gauge how they are feeling.

Yeah? How's your day going?

Not great actually, I got a low score on my college assignment, the one I tried really hard on.

Sorry to hear that, I can understand why you might be feeling disappointed. What would you like to do today? There's no pressure to do the goal-setting tool today if you'd rather just have a chat.

Yeah, I don't feel like chatting about my goals when one of my goals was to do well on this assignment.

That's understandable, let's have a catch up and a cup of tea instead for today. How's your guitar learning been going since I last saw you?

The staff member is actively listening and validating the young person and using this to help guide what they will do in this session.

Yeah quite good actually, I learned how to play a new song which was difficult but I can do it now.

Wow, that's impressive! Sounds like it took a lot of hard work and commitment to do that. What other mental skills do you think you used to learn that song?

Rather than force doing the toolkit content, the staff member engages in informal conversation, remembering interests from prior chats.

I dunno, probably motivation cos it was hard to keep going when it got difficult. But I kept going even then...

Example conversation: *frustrating relatedness*

SKILLS FOR PROMOTING OWNERSHIP

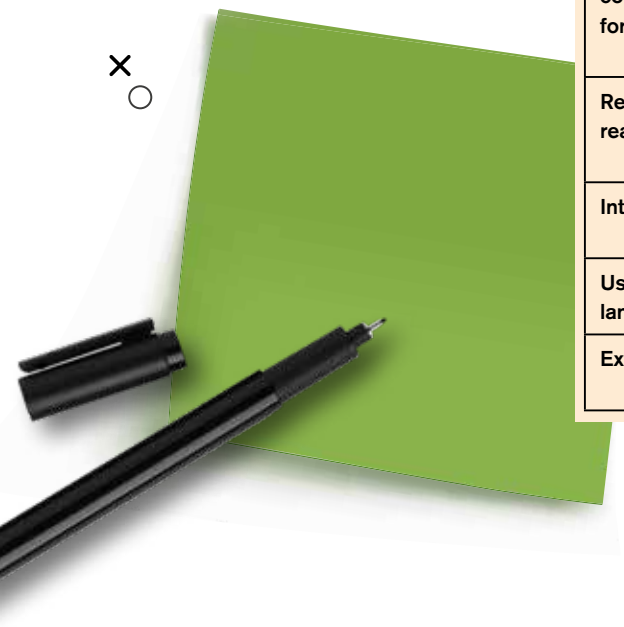
To support people's basic psychological need for autonomy

A sense of ownership or autonomy is one of the most impactful psychological needs for promoting young people's 'buy-in' for an activity. In the MST4Life™ programme, our autonomy supportive approach to activities was found to be supportive of participants engagement in self-development activities[6]. Furthermore, for young people residing in supported housing, a sense of autonomy is strongly linked with higher scores for quality of life[2].

Helping someone feel a sense of ownership ultimately stems from the way we interact and how we present activities. To the right, you'll find some examples of behaviours that can support and frustrate someone's sense of ownership.

PRO-BEHAVIOURS	WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?
Open-ended questions	Asking questions that don't have a yes or no answer. Instead, posing questions that aim to learn more about an experience or how someone is feeling.
Acceptance of feelings and perspectives	Showing a sense of understanding for why someone may be feeling a certain way, not necessarily agreeing, but understanding their reasons why.
Opportunities for input and choice	Inviting someone to share their views on how an activity could be changed or modified, or getting their views on a set of agreed upon 'ground rules'.
Don't rush the pace	Allowing someone the time they need to engage and experience an activity. Meeting the young person where they're at.

ANTI-BEHAVIOURS	WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?
Trying to fix problems, completing an activity for someone	This is an easy trap to fall into, we might be tempted to fix the young person's problem because it's quicker or easier, but this actually frustrates their sense of ownership and reduces the likelihood they'll be able to problem solve if it came up again.
Readily providing reassurance	Yes, we want to provide reassurance, but offering this too quickly can be seen as dismissive when someone is sharing their point of view.
Interrupting	Speaking over someone mid-sentence can give the impression you're not fully listening to what they have say.
Using controlling language	This reflects the kind of talk that gives someone little or no option for how to act during an activity (eg, you should, you must).
Extrinsic rewards	Offering materialistic or tangible rewards for completing a task limits their motivation to persist with the task in future or in their own time.



Example conversation: *supporting autonomy*

Hi Omar, how do you feel about doing the support seeking activity today?

I'm a little nervous about it actually, I don't really like talking about my support network.

Here the staff member has posed two open-ended questions to understand the young person's point of view better.

I understand why that might be the case, what about the activity is making you feel nervous?

I don't know, I just don't feel like I have anyone in my life.

I see. Well there's two variations of this activity, maybe we could look through them together and choose which one sounds best for today?

I'm not keen on doing the main activity but I'd be okay with having a more chilled chat about it.

Sure, but I might take some notes as we go if that's okay with you? Just so we've got something to come back to if we do the activity in the future.

Okay, but I want to see what you've written at the end, this stuff is personal to me.

Here the staff member has given the young person a choice of how he wants to complete the activity.

Of course, you can take some notes too if you like.

The staff member is still getting some paper work completed but ensuring the young person has some ownership over the process. Inviting them to take notes is a relaxed way of inviting them to engage in the activity.

Example conversation: *frustrating autonomy*

Hi Omar, we're doing the support seeking activity.

I'm a little nervous about it actually, I don't really like talking about my support network.

In the opening exchanges, the staff member has not given Omar any choice in if or how, he completes the activity.

Okay, but you have to do it for your tenancy.

I don't know, I just don't feel like I have anyone in my life.

Yeah you do, of course you do! You have me, you have your friends, you have the local doctor.

I guess... But I fell out with my friend recently so I'm not sure I'd put her down right now.

Whilst the staff member seems to be upbeat and positive, they're actually dismissing how Omar is feeling – example of too readily offering reassurance.

Sure, I get that, but that's only short term, right? You'll be friends again soon, put her down and let's get started.

I don't really feel like writing today.

In an effort to get the activity done, the staff member has thwarted Omar's sense of autonomy by completing the activity for him, with little input from Omar himself.

Okay, I'll write it down. So we've got your friend, your brother, your doctor, me, other staff, your aunt... Anyone else?

No that's everyone.

SKILLS FOR PROMOTING SELF-BELIEF

To support people's basic psychological need for competence

Feeling that we're competent in any task boosts our self-belief, and if we believe in ourselves, we're likely to show greater persistence through tough or challenging times. However, it's not an easy skill to identify our own competencies and we often require support from others to help us see what we've achieved or what our strengths are.

When we consider this in the context of young people who may have experienced exclusion from school or may have been labelled a 'failure', building a sense of competence and self-belief is such an important process in how we deliver. Failure to do so, can cause harm by affirming negative self-beliefs they may harbour.

PRO-BEHAVIOURS	WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?
Focus on solutions	This is not to be confused with 'fixing' the young person's problem, but concerns how we approach conversations. That is, to look for opportunities for change, be future-focused and not dwelling on the issue/s.
Problem-free talk	Problem-free talk is an approach to conversation where the focus is on something completely far removed from 'the' problem, maybe discussing what's going well or has gone well in the past, their hobbies and passions. This change of tone can build rapport and help identify some personal strengths of the young person.
Recognising effort	Recognising effort helps build competence by praising hard work and focus during the process of an activity, and not just looking at the outcome.
Focus on mental skills/strengths	This helps acknowledge some key personal skills like decision-making, problem-solving and teamwork, that help achieve the desired outcome but sometimes go unnoticed.
Encourage practice outside of sessions	Encouraging participants to practise in different settings helps build their sense of competence through the transfer of their skills and strengths.

ANTI-BEHAVIOURS	WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?
Focusing on what's not gone well	By simply looking at what may have not gone well, we thwart the young person's feeling of competence.
Uses punishment	Warning people of negative consequences if they do something wrong or undesirable.

Example conversation: *supporting competence*

I didn't like doing that strengths profile, I could only think of three strengths. It was a total waste of time.

okay sure, we only named three, but you were on task for the entire hour and I saw you helping others too.

By recognising the effort of the young person, the staff has taken away the focus of 'completing' the activity. They've also praised how the young person helped others.

Yeah, I guess, but there's no mental skills in just having a chat.

What if whilst you were chatting, you were just on your phone, not engaging with the other person...

Well that's just rude, no one should do that.

okay, so how did that person know you were listening?

I don't know... I asked questions, I wasn't on my phone, I guess I was just giving them my attention.

Here the staff member is probing for mental skills or strengths, before asking more directly. Questioning like this helps the young person identify their own abilities and builds a stronger sense of competence.

And would you say there's a mental skill or strength to describe that?

Maybe communication?

Absolutely, maybe you could add that to your list of strengths. Any others come to mind too?

By continuing to ask about more strengths the staff member is continuing with the session without being too obvious. They then implicitly suggest a strength whilst also praising the young person.

Well, they were telling me about issues at work, so I tried to offer some advice. But I'm not sure what mental skill that is.

Sounds like you were quite supportive.

Example conversation: *frustrating competence*

I didn't like doing that strengths profile, I could only think of three strengths. It was a total waste of time.

Yeah, that's not great, why do you think that was?

Whilst the staff member is being supportive, they're actually focusing on problems rather than trying to look for solutions. There's no acknowledgement of effort or asking what they could do differently next time.

I'm just not good at anything, I don't have any mental strengths.

okay, that doesn't sound great, why do you feel that way?

I don't know... I just do anything so I never use any skills.

Yeah, that is a bit of problem, so why is it you're not doing anything?

There's nothing that I want to do and I just don't have the motivation right now.

okay, I understand. When you come next week, you should try and focus on yourself more rather than chatting to others.

Here was a good opportunity for the staff member to explore the young person's interests or goals; instead, they've continued to be problem focused.

I guess I could try that.

Because otherwise I don't think you can keep attending, you really need to finish the tasks on time.

I just get distracted by others sometimes.

The staff member has now gone down the route of punishing the young person, threatening their future attendance. In doing so, they overlooked a chance to make an action plan with the young person for how they could engage differently next time.

Well, next week you need to be more focused otherwise you can't come to any more sessions.

SKILLS FOR AN EFFECTIVE FACILITATOR

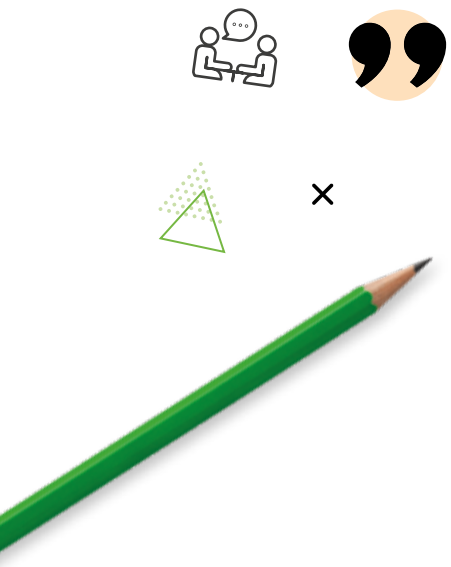
Practical behaviours for supporting basic psychological needs and well-being

Many of the skills in this section will be applied by an effective facilitator, but the skills included here focus more on the practical elements of delivery. For example, you may expect an effective facilitator to be mindful of the physical space in which they deliver to accommodate for the number of young people or particular needs they may have.

Aside from just the location of the session, an effective facilitator is thought to have good communication skills; for example, being able to clearly and concisely explain what an activity is and feel comfortable answering questions.

PRO-BEHAVIOURS	WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?
Meeting young people where they are at	Simply, this is being aware that not all young people will respond to an activity in the same way and adjusting the activity accordingly to ensure the person you're working with can get the most out of it.
Checking in	Taking a moment before a session to see how someone is feeling, getting an idea for how their day has been, their mood, their energy.
Clear explanations	It's important you can describe an activity in a way that the young person can understand.
Being prepared and organised	By simply having the materials ready before a session and arriving early, you show your investment in the person you're working with.
Maintain group order and focus	When working in groups it's the role of the facilitator to guide conversation back to the focus of the session. It can be helpful to have off topic breakout discussions, however, it's a facilitator's role to manage to ensure focus of the group isn't lost entirely.

ANTI-BEHAVIOURS	WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?
Asking intrusive questions	It's important to be curious and inquisitive, however, asking for more detail than is required or delving further into a problem isn't helpful.
Telling someone how they should feel	If someone's having an off day its unlikely to be helpful to tell them to 'cheer up' or 'be positive', instead it might be more constructive to validate how they're feeling and be more future-focused in conversations.
Getting distracted	Looking at your phone, focusing on a separate unrelated issue or going off topic for a sustained period of time.
Inappropriate language	Using obscenities or foul language unnecessarily.
Over-reliance on session plan	Reading word-for-word from activity sheet, instead of just using it for prompts.



Example conversation with an effective facilitator

Hey Tamara, thanks for coming, how you doing today?

Not bad, been kind of a bad day.

By initially checking in with the young person, the staff member can get an idea of how enthusiastic or subdued they may be feeling. Offering Tamara the option to talk about her day shows the staff member cares without being overbearing.

Sorry to hear that, do you want to talk about it?

No, I'd rather do something to take my mind off it, what are we doing today?

Today we're going to use the strengths profile, this is basically a tool to help us become a bit more aware of our personal strengths in different areas.

What's a strengths profile?

Here the staff member offers two slightly different explanations for what the strengths profile is. Importantly, the staff member doesn't over complicate the explanation, making it easier to understand and less intimidating to complete.

It's basically just a more structured way of looking at what we're good at and setting goals to improve in the future.

Can I see the sheet?

Sure, I've got a few copies here, maybe we could do the first couple together?

okay, but I don't want to talk about myself...

The staff member is well prepared with copies of the strengths profile to hand and has an idea to get the conversation started when the young person is reluctant to self-reflect (ie, brainstorm strengths of others).

That's fine, maybe we'll start by brainstorming strengths in other people. Can you think of any successful people you look up to or have good mental strengths?

Example conversation with a less effective facilitator

Hey Tamara, sorry for running late, I just need to find the sheets for today's activity!

No worries, I've actually had kind of bad day today though.

Sometimes staff may be running late, it happens, but not being prepared with the right paperwork for an activity implicitly says to the young person they're not a priority or you don't care.

Come on, cheer up, it can't be all bad! What happened?

Well I lost my bus pass which meant I couldn't go see my boyfriend so we got into an argument. I don't want to talk about it.

Sorry to hear that, but there's no need to be upset about it. You'll make up and it'll all be fine tomorrow!

Yeah, I guess, I just feel a bit rubbish now.

Without asking if Tamara wants to talk about it, the staff member immediately dives into the problem. The staff member then goes on to be dismissive of the problem and tells Tamara how to feel.

Don't worry about it, you'll be fine. Today we're doing the strengths profile.

What's a strengths profile?

It's like a form. Like a sheet, you know? And you'll fill in your strengths, and then we'll rate you for each one.

Can I see the sheet?

Without the proper preparation and organisation, the staff member cannot offer a clear explanation of the activity nor show Tamara what the strengths profile looks like.

Yeah one minute, I just need to find it, it's around here somewhere...

CONCLUSION

Thank you for taking the time to read this accompanying guide to go with the Mental Skills Training toolkit. For clarity, we've provided a checklist of all 'pro' behaviours on the next page. To put these behaviours into practice, it is important that staff members are given time and a safe space to develop these skills. Best practice would include reflective sessions with a clinical psychologist; however, where this is not possible, taking time to have a structured reflection with fellow staff members is still a helpful and strongly advised process.

Get in touch

We'd be really interested to hear your experiences if you decide to use the toolkit and this guide. To share your thoughts and for additional toolkit resources, please visit our website **www.sprintproject.org**

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Pro-behaviours checklist

- [ ] Coming across as friendly, welcoming and relaxed
- [ ] Validation and active listening
- [ ] Relatable and engaging in informal conversation
- [ ] open-ended questions
- [ ] Acceptance of feelings and perspectives
- [ ] opportunities for input and choice
- [ ] Don't rush the pace
- [ ] Focus on solutions
- [ ] Problem-free talk
- [ ] Recognising effort
- [ ] Focus on mental skills/strengths
- [ ] Encourage practice outside of sessions
- [ ] Meeting young people where they are at
- [ ] Checking in
- [ ] Clear explanations
- [ ] Being prepared and organised
- [ ] Maintain group order and focus

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