

Supporting The Mental Health of Youth with Neurodevelopmental Disabilities

Clinician Toolkit



POND NETWORK

Province of Ontario Neurodevelopmental Disorders



Background

Youth with neurodevelopmental disorders face higher rates of mental health challenges and barriers to care (Augustine et al., 2022). Many clinicians feel underprepared or lack confidence in supporting neurodivergent youth (Maddox et al., 2020).

To address this gap, the **POND Youth Digital Stories** project gave nine youth (aged 16–21) a platform to share their lived experiences and how they want to be engaged in mental health care.

Their stories revealed five major themes, forming the foundation of this Clinician Toolkit.

References

Augustine, L., Lygnegård, F., & Granlund, M. (2022). Trajectories of participation, mental health, and mental health problems in adolescents with self-reported neurodevelopmental disorders. *Disability and rehabilitation*, 44(9), 1595–1608.

Maddox, B. B., Crabbe, S., Beidas, R. S., Brookman-Frazee, L., Cannuscio, C. C., Miller, J. S., ... & Mandell, D. S. (2020). "I wouldn't know where to start": Perspectives from clinicians, agency leaders, and autistic adults on improving community mental health services for autistic adults. *Autism*, 24(4), 919–930.

Click to access
all Digital Stories on
the Ontario Brain
Institute website



About this Toolkit

Co-developed with youth, parents and clinicians, the toolkit provides healthcare providers with practical tools and insights to better support the mental health of neurodiverse youth.

Inside, you'll find **five major themes** from youth perspectives, along with evidence-based resources to enhance clinical practice.

Use this toolkit to build confidence, strengthen your approach, and create more inclusive spaces for youth with neurodevelopmental disabilities.

Mental health is everyone's business!



From *Digital Story. OK Cool.* by Lucas

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5 Major Themes from the Digital Stories

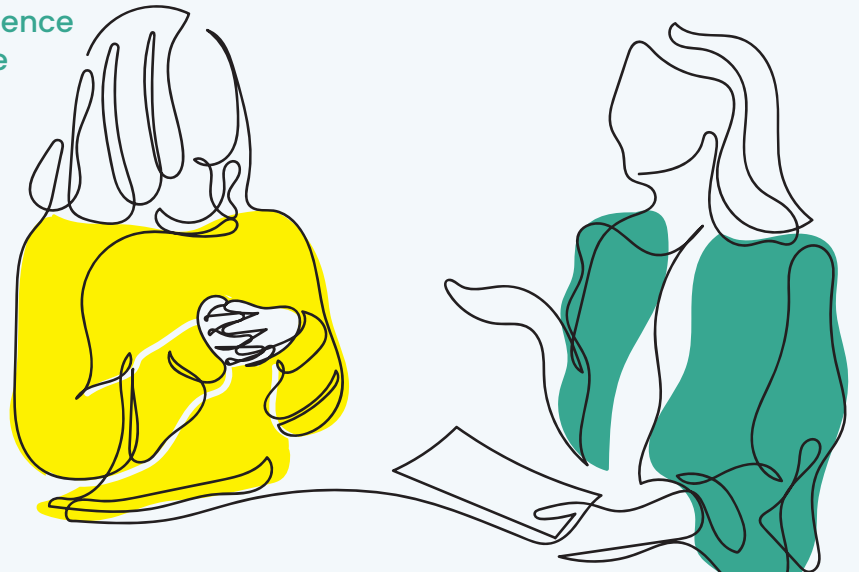
1. Validate youth experiences
2. Your approach matters
3. Foster a safe space for disclosure
4. “We need tools, not frameworks”
5. Support youth in building their care team

1. Validate youth experiences

- “honor my thoughts”, “listen with respect”, “pay attention”, “active listening”
- Accept the experience of the youth as true; that it makes sense to them; and that you understand their distress and point of view
- Accepting and validating their experience doesn’t mean you operationalize “the situation” the same way, or that you approve of the behaviour

“You only cry for help if you believe there’s help to cry for.” - *Just Breathe* by Serena

“We were expecting to be taken seriously. They made me scared to seek medical help.” - *Harm and Healing* by Austin



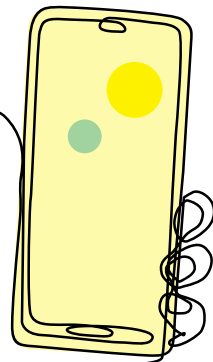
2. Your approach matters

- Don't assume
- Don't judge
- Be patient and don't rush
- Facilitate conversations and match the communication style of the youth
- Respect the autonomy of the youth and involve them in the conversation irrespectively of their language or cognitive abilities (i.e. do not just speak to the parent/caregiver)
- Develop a relationship: Get to know your patient as a person, and build trust by learning about their interests

More Resources

[Advice from Service Providers](#)

[Promoting optimal mental health outcomes for children and youth](#)



“[The doctor] encouraged me to use my phone to communicate with him instead of just talking to my parents...He was the first person who asked me what I thought I needed.”

My Journey In the Healthcare System by Jonathan



3. Foster a safe space for disclosure

- Develop an inclusive physical environment: This might include considering sensory modifications, flexibility with the use of technology
- Use appropriate language in order to accommodate language, speech, and cognitive skills
- Be aware of and avoid ableist language
- Consider other modalities of communication such as art, visuals, or story telling
- Be accommodating of neurodiverse perspectives



More Resources

[Sensory strategies for self regulation, stress and calming](#)

[18 Recommendations for trauma informed approaches](#)

“She never rushes me and really listens to me and she doesn’t talk to me like I’m a little kid. This makes me feel important and wanted.” - A Long Way by Liam



4. “We need tools, not frameworks”

- Problem solve together
- Provide coping thoughts or strategies in the short term
- Offer concrete tools in multiple formats (e.g. written materials, visual aids)
- Talk about strengths
- Be clear and concise with recommendations and plans
- Consider cultural background and family’s point of view to individualize recommendations

More Resources

[Patient Communication Tool](#)

[Toward Cultural Competence](#)

[Guide for youth](#)

“He encouraged Wormy [me] to draw out his feelings and emotions.”

– *The Night Before the Final Exam* by Joshua



5. Support youth in building their care team

- Partner with youth to understand who they want as part of their team and how they should be engaged
- Family is important, consider “person centered” and “family centered” care. For instance, don’t forget that the intervention may need to address both the youth and their family, or that family may be crucial to implement an intervention
- Be flexible, the team may include more than traditional mental health providers



“My helpers taught me how to be self-confident in my abilities...”
– *Fighting my Inner Battles* by Noah



More Resources

[Family-centred approach](#)

[Youth-to-youth guide to coping and getting help](#)

Additional Resources for Learning

- [As I Am Ireland](#)
- [Depression and Autism](#)
- [Anxiety Related Absence](#)
- [Autism Mental Health Literacy Project](#)
- [Neurodiversity and Mental Health](#)
- [ADHD and Mental Health](#)
- [Treating Mental Health Conditions in Autistic Individuals](#)
- [Mental Health and Autism Project](#)
- [Building Integrated Capacity in Autism & Mental Health](#)
- ["Psychology Works" Fact Sheet: Tourette Syndrome](#)
- [CADDAC ADHD and Mental Health](#)
- [Dual Diagnosis: An Information Guide](#)
- [ADHD and mental health](#)
- [Towards Inclusion](#)
- [Simon Fraser University Research Report](#)
- [CAMH Cundill Centre Online Tool](#)
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