Minds, Voices & Stories:

A Girl Up Toolkit on Emotional Literacy and Mental Health

A Girl Up toolkit designed for youth to explore and connect mental health through science, expression, and lived experience.



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About this Toolkit

This toolkit is designed for global Girl Up community members who are excited by deep reflection, critical thinking and exploring emotional complexity in the mental health context.

This toolkit was created in response to the growing interest from Girl Up leaders for accessible and engaging mental health and well-being resources that could be used within Girl Up Clubs. This toolkit was developed by Girl Up leaders to provide ready-to-use activities, discussion guides, and vetted educational resources that will encourage meaningful conversations about mental health while cultivating a safe and inclusive environment. Designed for Girl Up leaders, this toolkit reflects Girl Up's values by sharing mental health information through storytelling, music, and reflection to help participants explore topics such as anxiety, stress, emotional well-being, and empathy.

This toolkit was created by the Girl Up Mental Health and Wellness Committee. Please note that activities, discussion prompts, and educational content were developed through a combination of academic research, evidence-informed mental health resources, and educational best practices. Artificial intelligence was used to support brainstorming and editing the activity materials and printable resources. All content was reviewed, adapted, and finalized by the authors to ensure accuracy, appropriateness, and alignment with the goals of the toolkit.

Purpose

Many mental health trainings are statistics-heavy, and while that is absolutely needed for certification and for professionals, sometimes it is not emotionally resonant. It's important that alongside learning what mental health is, we also learn how to take care of our own mental well-being and how to interpret emotions, as well as recognizing ourselves in the material. This toolkit aims to fill that gap by offering an approach that is experiential, relatable, and rooted in real stories and perspectives.

Toolkit Goals

This toolkit was created from the belief that learning through storytelling, music, discussion, and other forms of creative media can make mental health education more engaging and personally meaningful. These approaches encourage participants to connect ideas to their own experiences, helping them develop greater self-awareness, empathy, and coping strategies that are more likely to be remembered and applied over time.

Rather than focusing solely on statistics and information that can feel overwhelming, the activities encourage participants to connect concepts to their own experiences, explore different perspectives, and build empathy through discussion, music, and lived experiences.

The goal of this toolkit is to help participants:

- Understand how stress can impact the body leading to anxiety and other forms of distress.
- Develop awareness of emotional and physiological responses
- Explore how music can support emotional expression and regulation
- Reflect on identity, emotion, and lived experience through music and storytelling
- Build empathy by engaging with real-world narratives and perspectives
- Strengthen communication and reflection skills through guided discussion

Disclaimer

This toolkit was developed by youth for educational purposes. It is intended to encourage learning, reflection, discussion, and mental health awareness, but it is NOT a substitute for therapy, medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment from a qualified mental health professional.

If someone is experiencing a mental health crisis or requires immediate support, they should contact local emergency services or access an appropriate crisis support service in their country. An international directory of crisis resources can be found here:

Find a Helpline Near You

Toolkit Structure

This toolkit is organized into three interconnected modules:

Module 1: Decode Your Mind: Understanding Anxiety & Emotional Regulation

- Module Overview
- Section A: Anxiety & Mental Health Primer
- Section B: The Science of Anxiety
- Module Activity: Creating Your Stress Blueprint

Module 2: Sound & Self: Music and Emotional Literacy

- Module Overview
- Section A: Emotional Reflection through Music
- Section B: Music as Social Commentary
- Module Activity: Playlist as an Emotional Map
- Module Activity: More than a Melody

Module 3: Stories of Mental Health: Exploring Experiences Through Film

- Module Overview
- Section A: Why Storytelling Matters
- Section B: Film Viewing & Reflection
- Section C: Personal Stories & Lived Experiences, Documentary Viewing
- Module Activity: Stories We Carry

Conversation with Girl Up Mental Health Expert Kate Keisel:

A Conversation on Mental Health & Community

A conversation between a Girl Up Mental Health and Wellness Committee member and Girl Up Mental Health and Well-being Consultant Kate Keisel exploring the connection between mental health, youth leadership, and community support. Together, they discuss the importance of creating supportive spaces, the role of peer connection, how culture shapes conversations around mental health, and how storytelling and creative expression can make mental health education more meaningful and accessible.

Further Exploration: Extra Resources

- Further Exploration: Be There Certificate
- Further Exploration: Girl Up Leadership Resources

How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to be flexible, adaptable, and easy to implement in a variety of learning environments, including Girl Up Clubs, classrooms, workshops, after-school programs, and youth leadership initiatives. Rather than following a rigid curriculum, users are encouraged to use the resources in ways that best meet the needs, interests, and experiences of their participants.

Mental health discussions can sometimes bring up difficult emotions or personal experiences. Let participants know that sharing is always optional, and never pressure anyone to disclose personal experiences. If a participant becomes distressed, pause to check in privately, offer them the option to step away, and follow your organization's support procedures. If someone discloses a serious concern about their safety or the safety of another person, seek appropriate support from a trusted adult or designated safeguarding lead.

Before starting a session, review the lesson materials in advance to become familiar with the content, activities, and discussion questions. Consider your group's age, maturity, cultural context, prior knowledge of mental health topics, and the amount of time available when deciding which components to include.

The modules are designed to complement one another but can also be used independently. You may choose to complete the toolkit over several meetings, incorporate individual activities into existing programming, or use specific lessons to support discussions around relevant events or initiatives throughout the year.

Many lessons include optional extension resources, discussion prompts, videos, and reflection activities. These are intended to provide flexibility rather than requirements. Users are encouraged to adapt activities, adjust discussion questions, or omit components that may not be appropriate for their audience.
This is not a clinical training and does not require mental health expertise to facilitate.

Legend

This toolkit uses color-coding to clearly organize and separate the three modules of learning for easy navigation.

About / Introduction

Module 1

Module 2

Module 3

Conversation with Girl Up Mental Health Expert Kate Keisel

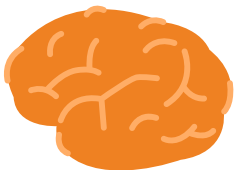


Workshop Leader Notes

Module 1

Decode Your Mind: Understanding Anxiety & Emotional Regulation

Understanding your brain, body, and the biology behind stress.



Module Overview

Understanding Anxiety & Emotional Regulation

About This Module

The human stress response is intended to protect us from danger, but can sometimes become activated even when there is no immediate threat. Understanding what happens in the brain and body during these moments can make these experiences feel less confusing and more manageable.

This module introduces participants to the science behind anxiety in an engaging and accessible way. Through multimedia resources, guided discussion, and interactive activities, participants will explore how the brain responds to stress, why physical symptoms occur, and how simple regulation strategies can help calm the nervous system.

Rather than asking, *"What's wrong with me?"* participants are encouraged to ask, *"What's happening inside my brain and body?"*

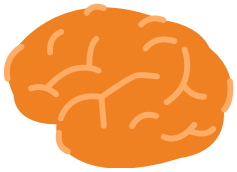
Why Learn the Science?

Understanding the neurobiology of anxiety helps reduce self-blame and replace fear with curiosity. Many of us experience anxiety without fully understanding why our bodies are reacting so strongly. When we recognize that anxiety is a natural survival response and not a personal weakness, we are better equipped to recognize our own stress patterns, respond with self-compassion, and develop healthy coping strategies.

Knowledge doesn't eliminate the impacts of stress, including anxiety, but it helps make it understandable, predictable, and manageable.

Guiding Questions

- **What happens in my brain and body when I feel stressed or anxious?**
- **Why does my body react so strongly, even when there isn't immediate danger?**
- **What physical, emotional, or mental signs tell me I'm becoming stressed?**
- **How do my thoughts influence the way my body responds to stress?**
- **How can understanding the science of the human stress response help me respond with more self-compassion?**
- **What strategies can help regulate my nervous system and bring my brain and body back to a calmer state?**
- **How can understanding the biology of stress help us better support the people around us?**



Section A

Anxiety & Mental Health Primer

What is Anxiety?

Understanding anxiety is a process that involves learning about the brain, the body, and personal experiences. The resources in this section provide additional perspectives on anxiety, stress, and emotional regulation.

The resources in this section include a variety of videos, explainers, interviews, and educational content that explore topics such as the science behind anxiety, the stress response, coping strategies, and mental well-being. I found these personally insightful , and they helped me better understand my body's reactions to stress. These videos are done by experts who not only break down the science but also provide science-backed coping mechanisms to regulate your body's responses, which I've also found to be extremely applicable to my daily life. Look through the videos and share the ones that you find the most helpful or align with your group's wants and needs.

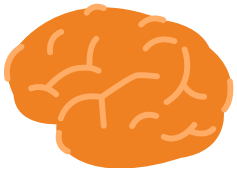
Resource Bank

How to Calm Your Anxiety, From a Neuroscientist | The Way We Work, a TED series
Neuroscientist Wendy Suzuki explains that deep breathing and physical movement are two quick, science-backed ways to soothe your nervous system. By adopting these habits, you can shift from a stressed state to a calm one and learn to use your worries to fuel creativity.

Stop fighting your anxiety and start using it | Jesse Eisenberg for Big Think+
Actor and writer Jesse Eisenberg suggests that instead of fighting your nerves, you should accept them as a normal part of wanting to do a good job. You can then take that nervous energy and redirect it into positive focus and authentic self-motivation.

What's Normal Anxiety — and What's an Anxiety Disorder?
Dr. Jen Gunter breaks down how your brain's threat-detection system (the amygdala) uses normal anxiety to keep you safe from real danger. She explains that an anxiety disorder happens when this system fires false alarms too often and makes it hard to live your daily life.

Why You Feel Anxious Socializing (and What to Do about It) | Fallon Goodman | TED
Dr. Fallon Goodman shows that social anxiety is often your brain's way of trying to protect you from the pain of being rejected. To overcome this fear, you should focus on building "social courage".



Section B

The Science of Anxiety

Understanding Your Anxiety

Anxiety is often experienced through physical sensations, thoughts, and emotions, but many people do not understand what is actually happening inside their brain and body during these moments. This section introduces participants to the science behind stress and anxiety, helping them understand why the body reacts the way it does and how these responses are designed to protect us.

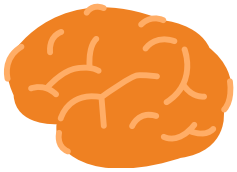
Through an accessible exploration of the brain's alarm system, stress responses, hormones, and nervous system regulation, participants will learn how the brain and body communicate during stressful situations. By understanding the biology behind anxiety, participants can begin to view their reactions with greater curiosity and self-compassion rather than frustration or judgment.

The goal of this section is not to eliminate anxiety, but to help participants understand their stress responses, recognize their own patterns, and learn that their brains and bodies have built-in systems that can be supported and regulated.

Click here for slideshow

The slideshow provides a visual guide to explain the science behind anxiety, including key concepts, diagrams, and discussion prompts. Users can use it to guide the conversation and encourage participants to connect the science to their own experiences.

The Science of Anxiety Slideshow



Module Activity

Creating Your Stress Blueprint

Activity Overview + Purpose

This activity helps participants apply their understanding of the science of anxiety to their own experiences. Through guided reflection, discussion, and regulation practice, participants will explore how stress appears in their thoughts, emotions, and bodies.

Rather than viewing stress responses as something negative or something to eliminate, this activity encourages participants to understand their reactions as biological signals that provide information about their needs. Participants will create a personalized Stress Blueprint that identifies their common triggers, stress responses, and strategies that help them regulate. The goal of this activity is to help participants build self-awareness, develop emotional regulation skills, and recognize that understanding their own stress patterns is an important part of mental well-being.

Learning Goals

By the end of this activity, participants will:

- **Identify** how stress and anxiety can appear through physical sensations, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.
- **Connect** their personal experiences of stress to biological concepts discussed in the session, including the nervous system and stress response.
- **Recognize** their own stress patterns, including common triggers and automatic reactions.
- **Explore** different regulation strategies and identify techniques that feel effective and comfortable for them.
- **Develop** greater self-awareness and self-compassion when experiencing stress or anxiety.

I believe a stress blueprint is helpful because having to answer explicit questions that break down all the parts of a stress response: the physical, emotional, and mental, is really helpful so you recognize your usual practices in each section. I did a worksheet similar to this one when I was in a mandated leadership and well-being course I took in high school, and it really helped me change my immediate response to stressful situations. I tried to recreate it with the additional focus on the science of understanding the biological responses behind stress.

By outlining my triggers, I could eliminate the trigger or remove an issue before it became big enough to cause a panic attack or anxiety for me, and I was able to change my mental response. I was always someone who shut down and had a time of self-doubt and negative emotions, but once laying it out and understanding how that response did not help me or the problem at hand, I've switched to proactive thinking and problem-solving instead of unhelpful thoughts first.

Module Activity

Workshop Leader Guide

Step 1: Recognizing My Stress Response

Users introduce a short reflection activity to help participants notice how stress appears in their own lives.

Participants reflect individually or through discussion:

- Think of a recent moment when you felt stressed, overwhelmed, or under pressure.
- What was happening around you?
- What thoughts came up?
- What did you notice happening in your body?
- How did you respond?

Step 2: Connecting Experiences to Learned Science

Users guide a discussion connecting participants' reflections to concepts from the anxiety science slideshow.

Discussion prompts:

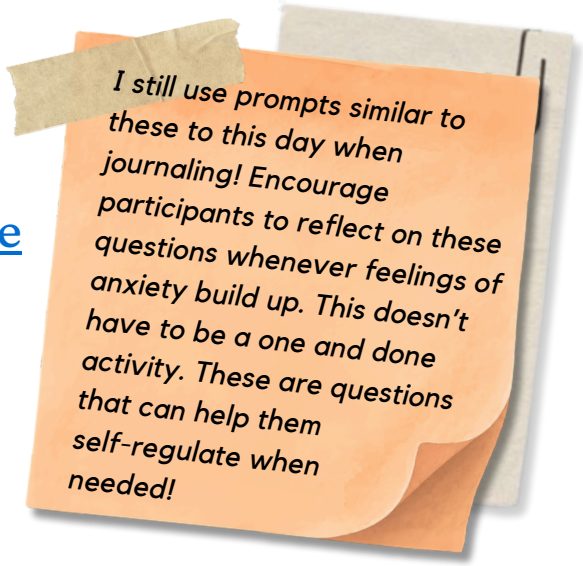
- Why do you think stress affects both the mind and the body?
- What stress responses did you notice? (fight, flight, fawn, freeze)
- How might the amygdala and nervous system be involved in these reactions?
- Why might your brain activate a stress response even when there is no physical danger?
- How does understanding the science behind stress change the way you view your reactions?

Step 3: Create Your Stress Blueprint

Participants complete a personal Stress Blueprint worksheet to organize what they have learned.

Get Activity Printable Here:

[Creating Your Stress Blueprint Printable]



Module 2

Sound & Self: Music and Emotional Literacy

Exploring how music shapes emotion, identity, and mental well-being

Module Overview

Sound & Self: Music and Emotional Literacy

Why Music?

Music is more than entertainment; it's a bridge between emotion, memory, and cognition.[1] This module guides participants to explore how music impacts mood, stress, and self-perception. We encourage authentic reflection and non-judgmental sharing, emphasizing that there are no "right" emotions or musical choices.

Overview

This module explores how music affects the brain and body on a neurological level. Participants learn how listening to music activates the brain's reward system through dopamine release, helping explain why music can feel motivating, comforting, or emotionally powerful.[2] The module also introduces cortisol, the stress hormone, and examines how music can physically reduce stress by lowering cortisol levels. Finally, it looks at how music can influence the autonomic nervous system, affecting heart rate and physiological stress responses.[3] By understanding these mechanisms, participants begin to see music not just as entertainment, but as a tool that can support emotional regulation, focus, and well-being.

Guiding Questions

- **Can you think of a time when music changed how your body felt, not just your mood?**
- **Why do you think the brain releases dopamine in response to music, even when there are no words?**
- **How might slower rhythms physically help someone calm down during stress or anxiety?**
- **Why do fast-paced songs often feel motivating or energizing, even when you're tired?**
- **How could understanding how music affects the brain be useful in everyday life (studying, sports, sleep, emotional regulation)?**

Start With This...

Begin by inviting participants to think about the role music plays in their everyday lives. Rather than introducing the science immediately, encourage them to reflect on their own experiences first. Ask a few opening questions and allow participants to share examples before connecting their observations to the neuroscience behind music and emotion. Once participants have explored their own experiences, introduce the science behind why music influences mood, motivation, and stress.

Depending on your group's age and interests, you may choose to explain these concepts yourself using the summary provided below, use one of the recommended videos as a visual aid, or combine both approaches.

Section A:

Emotional Reflection through Music

Using Music for Self-Reflection

This section focuses on music as a tool for emotional awareness and self-reflection. Participants will explore how different types of music connect to personal experiences, moods, and emotional states. Through playlist creation and reflection, they will begin to identify patterns in how they use music to regulate, understand, or express emotions in everyday life.

Big Questions

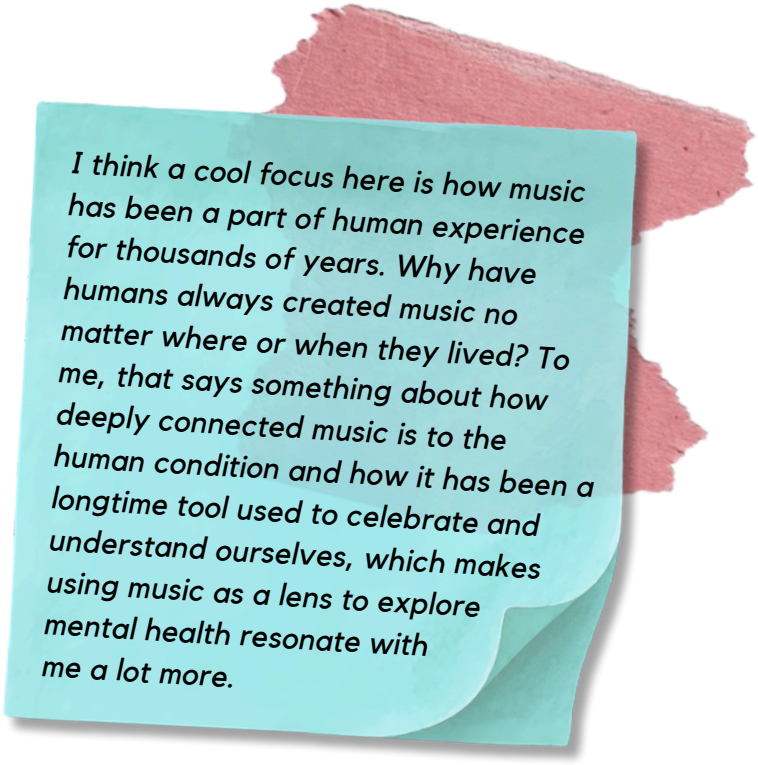
Use the discussion prompts below to encourage meaningful reflection and conversation about music, emotions, and mental well-being.

1. **Why do you think humans have created music in every known culture throughout history?**
2. **If music can influence our emotions, does that mean we should be more intentional about what we listen to?**
3. **Is there a difference between using music to process emotions and using it to avoid them?**
4. **Why do you think two people can hear the exact same song and have completely different emotional reactions?**

Click here for slideshow

The slideshow includes Big Questions above for easy projection of questions for participants.

[Big Questions Slide]





Section B:

Music as Social Commentary

Music as a Reflection of Society

This section examines music as a form of communication about society, identity, and lived experience. Participants will explore how artists use music to express cultural narratives, highlight social issues, and reflect collective emotions or movements. The goal is to understand music not only as personal expression, but also as a tool for representation, storytelling, and social influence.

Module Activity:

Playlist as an Emotional Map

Activity Overview + Purpose

Music often acts as a soundtrack to our lives, helping us process emotions, navigate challenges, and express feelings that are difficult to put into words. In this activity, participants explore how music influences emotion, thoughts, and physical responses, and how it can be used as a tool for emotional awareness and regulation.

Participants will create three personal playlists: Stress Relief/Calm, Motivation/Energy, and Comfort/Reflection, while completing a reflection worksheet on why they chose each song and how it affects them emotionally and physically. Encourage optional sharing in pairs or small groups, focusing on respectful and non-judgmental discussion.

To close, bring the group together to build a shared playlist that reflects the collective mood, identity, or experience of the group.

Learning Goals

By the end of this activity, participants will:

- **Recognize** personal patterns in how they use music throughout daily life.
- **Explain** why certain songs feel calming, motivating, or comforting.
- **Connect** music to emotional regulation and overall well-being.
- **Reflect** on how music can be used as one tool within a broader mental health toolkit.

Workshop Leader Note: Using Music Platforms

Facilitators can choose the platform that best suits their group (Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube, or any shared music platform). If possible, create a shared collaborative playlist so participants can add songs in real time.

How to set it up:

1. *Open your chosen music platform.*
2. *Create a new playlist titled with the group name or activity theme.*
3. *Turn on the "collaborative" or "share/edit" setting (depending on the platform).*
4. *Copy the shareable link.*
5. *Share the link with participants so they can add songs directly during or after the activity.*

If a collaborative playlist is not possible, facilitators can instead collect song suggestions from participants and add them manually in real time.

Click Here for Activity:

Playlist as an Emotional Map Printable

Module Activity

More Than a Melody

Activity Overview

Music has long been used to express experiences that are difficult to explain through conversation alone. Many artists write about identity, resilience, discrimination, trauma, healing, belonging, and hope— topics that are closely connected to mental health and well-being. By exploring these stories, participants are encouraged to think about how music can build empathy, reduce stigma, and start important conversations within their own communities.

Before You Begin

Play the selected song clips/music videos and encourage participants to focus on the message, visuals, and purpose of the song rather than personal preference. Ask: "What is this song trying to do or say in society?" (Inform, protest, heal, unite, represent, or challenge something?)

After each clip, invite participants to share their thoughts and use the slideshow prompts to guide discussion. Encourage multiple interpretations and critical thinking about music as a form of storytelling and social influence. Below are some discussion questions to use throughout this activity.

- What message do you think the artist is trying to communicate?
- Who might this song be speaking to or representing?
- Why do you think music was chosen as the medium for this message?
- How might different people interpret this song differently?
- Could this song influence the way people think or feel about an issue? Why or why not?

Workshop Leader Note: Music Used in this Activity

As a leader based in Canada, these are songs and artists that I am familiar with and enjoy that use music as a way to express themes of mental health and activism that have been meaningful and inspiring to me. It is important to note that these are North American artists and might not be recognizable or meaningful to our global audience. The slideshow below includes the songs I have connected with. Please go through the slideshow, and if these songs and artists do not align with your group, reframe the activity.

When leading this activity, ask your participants what songs and artists they love and discuss how and why those artists use music for expression or social commentary. Do not feel obligated to use this slideshow or these songs to lead this activity.

Click here for slideshow

The slideshow includes the songs and discussion prompts needed to guide the activity. If projection is unavailable, play the clips separately and facilitate the discussion orally.

[More Than a Melody Activity Slideshow]

Module 3

Stories of Mental Health: Exploring Experiences Through Film

Understanding mental health through lived experiences, perspectives, and stories

Module Overview

Stories of Mental Health: Exploring Experiences Through Film

Why Storytelling and Film?

Stories have the ability to make complex emotions and experiences feel more understandable, relatable, and human. While mental health concepts can be explained through facts and research, storytelling allows people to see how these experiences appear in real life— through thoughts, relationships, challenges, and everyday moments.

Film can act as a mirror, allowing participants to recognize parts of their own experiences, or as a window, helping them understand perspectives different from their own. Short films and documentaries provide an accessible way to explore topics such as anxiety, stress, burnout, identity, expectations, and asking for support.

By analyzing characters' experiences and choices, participants can begin identifying patterns, challenging assumptions, and reflecting on their own relationship with mental health and well-being.

Guiding Questions

- **How can stories help us understand mental health experiences?**
- **Why might people connect with a character or story more than with facts alone?**
- **What can we learn about mental health by seeing different perspectives?**
- **How do stories help reduce stigma and encourage conversations?**
- **How can sharing our own stories become a form of connection, advocacy, and change?**

Start With This...

Introduce the module by explaining that mental health experiences are not always visible from the outside. People may carry stress, pressure, anxiety, or challenges that others do not immediately notice.

Explain that this activity uses short films as a way to explore mental health through storytelling. Participants are not being asked to diagnose characters or identify "the right answer," but instead to reflect on emotions, experiences, choices, and the messages behind each story.

Encourage participants to approach each film with curiosity and empathy by considering:

- What is this person experiencing?
- What factors may be influencing their emotions or actions?
- What support, understanding, or change could make a difference?

Section A

Why Storytelling Matters

Building Empathy Through Storytelling

Stories allow people to communicate experiences, emotions, and perspectives that may be difficult to express directly. This section encourages participants to explore how storytelling can create connection, build empathy, and challenge the way we understand mental health experiences. By recognizing the purpose behind stories, participants can approach the films in this module with curiosity, reflection, and compassion.

The resources below explore why stories have such a powerful impact, including how storytelling influences the brain, builds empathy, shapes identity, and helps people connect with experiences different from their own. After viewing a resource, encourage participants to reflect on how stories influence the way we understand ourselves, others, and the world around us.

Resource Bank

How film transforms the way we see the world | Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy (TED Talk)
This talk examines how films with meaningful messages can raise awareness, shape conversations, and encourage social change. It explores the role storytelling plays in connecting audiences with ideas, experiences, and causes beyond their own.

Why Storytelling Is Important (Explainer Video)
This resource explores the importance of storytelling as a way to communicate ideas, share experiences, and create emotional connections. It encourages reflection on why stories are such an important part of how people understand themselves and others.

The power of storytelling for health impact (Article)
This resource examines how personal stories can make health topics more relatable, humanize experiences, and support greater awareness, understanding, and connection around health issues.

Do You Know How To Turn Off The Lights? with Mitch Francis (Interview)
This interview explores how storytelling and filmmaking can raise awareness about mental health, challenge misconceptions, and help people better understand experiences different from their own. Mitch Francis demonstrates how creative media can foster empathy, encourage open conversations, and help individuals feel seen.

The pride and power of representation in film | Jon M. Chu (TED Talk)
This talk explores how representation in film can influence belonging, identity, and the way people understand different communities. Jon M. Chu discusses how stories can help people feel seen while also allowing audiences to connect with experiences different from their own.

This one is my favourite! I love Jon M. Chu's films and really resonated with the message of his talk. Getting a director's perspective on the conversation around storytelling was really insightful.

Section B

Film Viewing & Reflection

About This Viewing

The Spider Within: A Spider-Verse Story

This film viewing invites participants to explore mental health through storytelling by examining how anxiety can appear in everyday life. Through the experiences of Miles Morales, participants will reflect on stress, pressure, emotional responses, and the importance of seeking support.

Rather than focusing only on the storyline, participants are encouraged to analyze how the film communicates internal experiences through visuals, emotions, and character development. This viewing highlights how storytelling can make invisible mental health experiences more visible and create opportunities for empathy and conversation.

Before You Begin

Before viewing the film, introduce the idea that mental health experiences are not always visible from the outside. Someone may appear successful, capable, or "fine" while still experiencing stress, pressure, or emotional challenges internally.

Explain that while this film features a fictional superhero, the emotions and experiences it explores are very real. Participants should focus on how the film represents anxiety, stress responses, and support systems.

Encourage participants to use the Film Reflection Guide while watching.
The guide includes space to record:

- observations about the character's emotions and experiences
- examples of stress or anxiety shown in the film
- storytelling choices that communicate mental health experiences
- personal reflections and connections

I love the idea of using a well-loved superhero and franchise to explore themes of mental health! This is a trend I see forming in the entertainment industry, where mental health is becoming a part of the plot and main character storylines, which is so powerful!

Click for Short Film Here:
[The Spider Within: A Spider-Verse Story]

Click for Film Guide Printable Here:
[The Spider Within: A Spider-Verse Story Film Guide]

Click Here for Slideshow:
[The Spider Within: A Spider-Verse Story Slideshow]

Section B

Film Viewing & Reflection

Discussion Guide

After participants have shared their initial thoughts and reflections, use the questions below to guide a deeper discussion. Encourage participants to build on each other's ideas, consider different perspectives, and connect the film's themes to their own understanding of mental health, support, and storytelling. Remind participants that they can refer back to the notes and reflections they recorded during the viewing.

Understanding the Story & Storytelling Choices

- Why do you think the creators chose a superhero character to tell a story about anxiety? How might using a familiar and powerful character change the way audiences understand mental health?
  - **FOLLOW UP**: Why is it meaningful when superheroes or other powerful characters are shown experiencing vulnerability, struggles, or moments of uncertainty? What message does this send to viewers about strength, asking for help, and being human?
- The film shows that someone can appear successful, capable, and strong while still experiencing internal struggles. Why is this an important idea to represent in stories?
- What storytelling choices (visuals, sounds, emotions, pacing, or symbolism) helped communicate Miles' experience of anxiety? How did these choices make his internal experience visible to the audience?
- What if the protagonist was a woman? Are these feelings universal? Would the storytelling or portrayal of mental health differ? If so, how?

Connecting to Mental Health

- The film shows anxiety as more than just a feeling: it affects thoughts, physical reactions, and behaviour. Why is it important to understand mental health as a whole-body experience?
- How did Miles' relationship with support change throughout the film? What does this suggest about the importance of connection and reaching out?
- What misconceptions about anxiety or mental health does this film challenge?

Section C

Personal Stories & Lived Experiences

The Value of Personal Narratives

Personal stories allow people to share the experiences, emotions, and moments that shape who they are. Documentaries and autobiographical films provide a unique way to explore real experiences by showing not only what happened, but how those experiences were felt and understood by the person living them.

This section encourages participants to look beyond what is immediately visible and recognize that everyone carries experiences, challenges, memories, and emotions that may not always be seen by others. Through personal storytelling, participants will explore themes of identity, vulnerability, resilience, and the importance of creating spaces where people feel safe sharing their stories.

By reflecting on lived experiences, participants will develop empathy and a deeper understanding of how storytelling can help people feel seen, understood, and connected.

In this section, we've provided 2 different films, but don't feel pressured to use them! I found these personally interesting, but if you can find short films that are more local, center a female protagonist, or fit your regional context, please feel free to use them instead! If other kinds of media are more accessible or enjoyable to you, like podcasts, vlogs, etc., please substitute them in for a short film!

Section C

Personal Stories & Lived Experiences

Film Synopsis: *Rat Tail*

Rat Tail is a personal documentary that follows filmmaker Chad Sogas as he reflects on the unexpected meaning behind his childhood rat tail haircut. What begins as a lighthearted story gradually uncovers themes of identity, mental health, vulnerability, and self-understanding, encouraging viewers to look beyond appearances and recognize the hidden experiences people may carry.

Documentary Viewing: Rat Tail

Facilitator Introduction

Before watching the documentary, introduce the idea that people are often more complex than what others see on the outside. A person's habits, appearance, personality, or choices may hold deeper meanings connected to their experiences, emotions, and identity.

Explain that Rat Tail is a personal documentary that explores the filmmaker's childhood experience and how something that appeared simple on the surface was connected to deeper emotions and struggles.

Encourage participants to watch for:

- how the filmmaker tells his story
- moments where the meaning of experiences changes over time
- how vulnerability and honesty shape the story
- how the documentary creates understanding and connection

Provide participants with the Documentary Reflection Guide to record observations and thoughts while watching.

Click for Short Film Here:

Rat Tail

Click here for slideshow

The slideshow includes the documentary as well as the discussion questions.

Rat Tail Slideshow

Module Activity

Stories We Carry

Activity Overview + Purpose

After exploring Chad's story in Rat Tail, participants will reflect on the idea that everyone carries experiences, emotions, memories, and challenges that may not always be visible to others.

Using the metaphor of an invisible backpack, participants will consider the different parts of their identity and experiences that shape who they are. This activity encourages self-reflection and empathy while recognizing that everyone has a story beyond what others see.

The purpose of this activity is to help participants understand the connection between identity, lived experience, and storytelling. By reflecting on what people carry beneath the surface, participants will recognize the importance of empathy, vulnerability, and supportive communities.

Learning Goals

By the end of this activity, participants will:

- **Recognize** that people's experiences are often invisible.
- **Reflect** on how experiences shape identity.
- **Develop** empathy for the unseen stories others may carry.
- **Understand** storytelling as a tool for connection and understanding.

Click Here for Activity Printable:

[Stories We Carry Activity Printable]

Facilitators can substitute locally relevant media and adapt the reflection activities to fit their chosen content. The Spider Within activity explores anxiety and physical signs of stress, while The Stories We Carry focuses on how personal experiences and memories shape identity and responses to challenges. These activities can also be adapted to other films or media that use personal stories to explore broader mental health themes.

Conversation with Girl Up Mental Health Expert Kate Keisel

A Conversation on Mental Health & Community

A conversation exploring mental well-being, youth leadership, and advocacy within the Girl Up movement.

Real Conversations: Mental Health, Leadership, and Community

Mental health is a topic that continues to evolve, and one of the best ways to learn is through conversation. In this section, you'll hear from Kate Keisel, Girl Up's Mental Health and Well-being Consultant, as we explore topics such as leadership, advocacy, stigma, self-care, and building supportive communities. Rather than offering all the answers, this conversation is meant to spark reflection, encourage curiosity, and invite you to think about how these ideas apply to your own experiences and your Girl Up community.

We encourage you to play this video for your group (or watch it by yourself!) and pause it throughout to answer some of the questions being asked or have a discussion surrounding some of the topics. Reflect on Kate's and my perspectives, then share your own. Are they similar? Do you have a different opinion? What is it? These are exactly the kinds of discussions this conversation is intended to spark.

Click here for the Video:

[In Conversation with Mental Health Expert Kate Keisel]

Further Exploration

Extra Girl Up resources to support learning and encourage action

Further Exploration

Be There Certificate (Girl Up x Born This Way Foundation)

About this Certification

The Be There Certificate is a free online learning resource developed by Girl Up in partnership with the Born This Way Foundation. It is designed to build mental health awareness, emotional literacy, and practical skills for supporting friends and peers.

Facilitators are encouraged to introduce the Be There Certificate after the playlist reflection activity as a next step in developing emotional awareness and peer support skills. This resource builds on the ideas in this module by helping participants understand how to recognize emotional distress in others and respond in supportive, informed ways.

Click Here to learn More:

Share this video with your participants to introduce this certification:

Introducing the Be There Certificate

Click Here For the Certificate

Complete the Be There Certificate

Further Exploration

Building Changemakers

Girl Up Leadership Resources

The activities throughout this toolkit connect mental wellbeing to resilience, identity, belonging, storytelling, and using your voice to create change.

Girl Up believes that young people can be powerful changemakers who use their voices to advocate for issues they care about and create positive change in their communities. To support young leaders, Girl Up provides resources, tools, and opportunities that help participants develop advocacy, leadership, and storytelling skills.

Below are additional Girl Up resources that participants may explore to continue learning about using their voices, sharing stories, and taking action on issues that matter to them.

Recommended Girl Up Resources

Storytelling 101
Storytelling for Social Change Video Series WITH EXPERTS
Storytelling for Social Change Video Series WITH ACTIVISTS

Advocacy 101
Organizing 101

Footnotes

[1] Andrew E. Budson, MD (Harvard Health Publishing)
Why is music good for the brain? - Harvard Health

[2] Lata, F. & Kourtesis, I. (NIH)
Listening to music as a stress management tool - PMC

[3] Zaatar et al., (NIH)
The transformative power of music: Insights into neuroplasticity, health, and disease - PMC

Sources

How the media can combat mental health stigma and discrimination
Mental health in media and the power of positive portrayals
The Transformative Power of Music in Mental Well-Being
Exploring Music's Influence on Society and Culture


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MENTAL
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