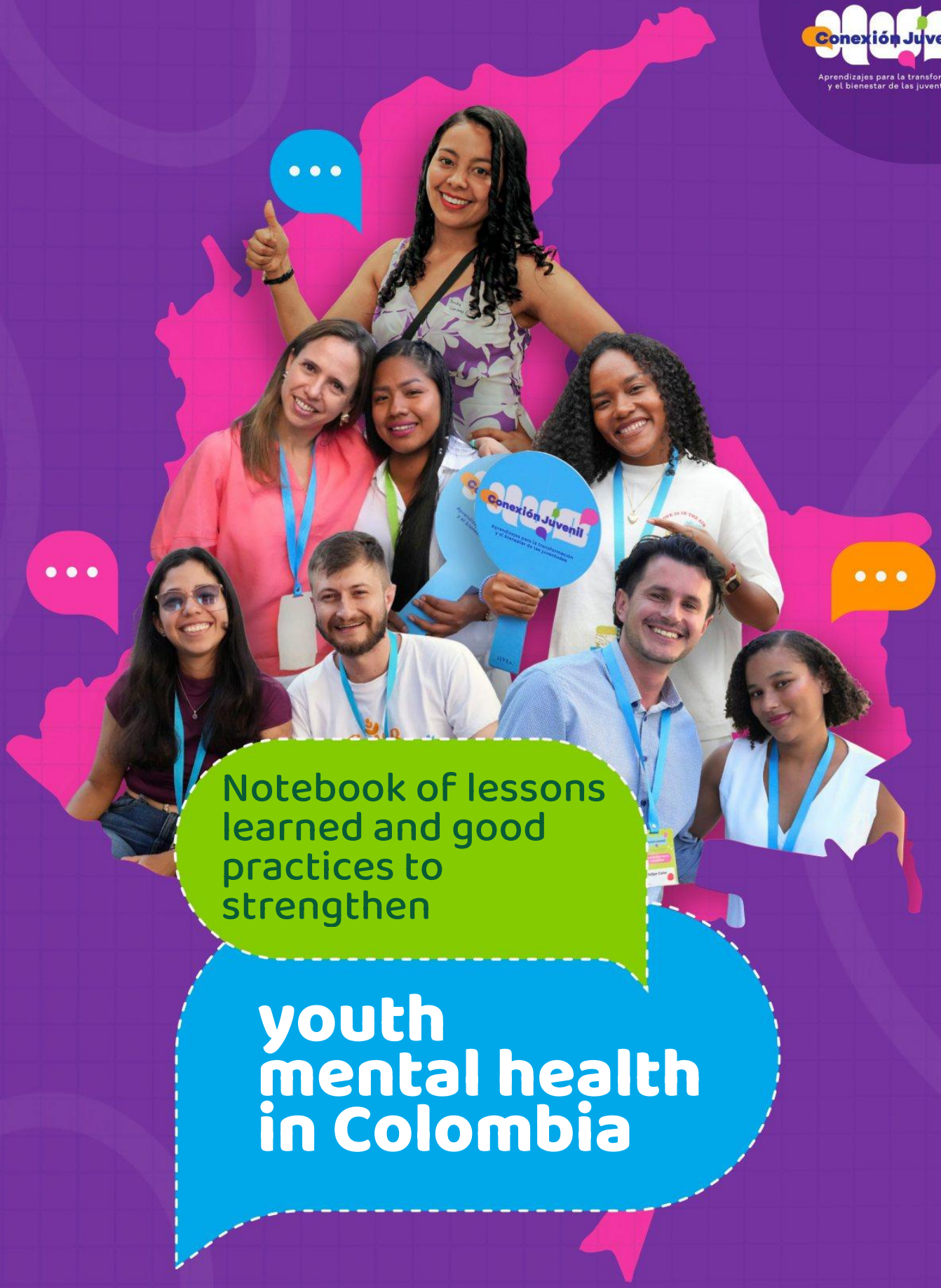
Conexión Juvenil

Aprendizajes para la transformación y el bienestar de las juventudes



Notebook of lessons learned and good practices to strengthen

youth mental health in Colombia

fondation BOTNAR

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CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS AND INITIATIVES



Hello!

The **Mental Health Working Group of the Hub Conexión Juvenil** is delighted to present its Notebook of Lessons Learned. In these pages, you will discover how our initiatives are supporting the well-being and mental health of young people in **regions across Colombia,** through a **holistic, community-based approach.**

This notebook is the result of a ***collaborative process,*** and there is still much to think about, discuss and do. We invite you to take note, reflect on the challenges we have faced, and explore the many ways we can strengthen youth mental health in our country.

The *Notebook* has three sections. **What do we mean when we talk about community mental health?** presents the definitions developed by the working group and a brief overview of youth mental health (YMH) in Colombia. **Good practices and lessons learned** is divided into two parts: "Protective environments", which shows how different communities have built processes that support youth well-being, and "Evidence for decision-making", which describes two ways of building evidence for advocacy. Finally, **Recommendations to remember** offers some general suggestions for projects that aim to support YMH.

Who should **read this notebook?**

We hope these lessons will reach a wide and diverse audience: youth leaders, government and non-governmental implementing organizations, formal platforms, collectives, and anyone who works with and for young people.

Let's bring together all of us who, from many different backgrounds, work for the mental health of young people in Colombia.

Grab a pen and a highlighter, and let's share what we've learned!



This collection of lessons and experiences aims to **inspire and guide you** so that you, too, can help (or keep helping) to **build a country that cares for its young people**.

How **did we write** this notebook?

Over several months, the Mental Health Working Group went through a series of stages to put together the lessons you are now reading. Here is the path we followed:

1. **Joint discussion** to define youth mental health.
2. **Collection of lessons,** perspectives and recommendations on an online collaborative board.
3. **Discussion to define** the thematic categories.
4. **Semi-structured interviews** to better understand each initiative's work.
5. **Analysis of the information** and refinement of categories.
6. **First draft** of the document.
7. **Discussion of general** recommendations and review of the draft.
8. **Revision of the draft** based on feedback from Working Group members (we made more than 70 changes!).
9. **Design and layout of the *Notebook*,** to give it style and make it our own.

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Conexión Juvenil

Aprendizajes para la transformación y el bienestar de las juventudes

What do we mean when we talk about community mental health?

in Colombia



Key facts to understand the issue

In 2024 and 2025, people aged **18 to 28** were the group most at risk of **attempting suicide**[1].

A multisectoral study funded by **Being**[2], a global initiative working for youth well-being in twelve countries, found that the main YMH problems in Colombia are **anxiety, depression, suicidal behavior and substance abuse.** Key contributing factors include **family dysfunction, low self-esteem and urban violence.**

A meta-analysis by Colombia's **National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE)** concluded that mental health in the country "is influenced by social and territorial factors such as illiteracy, long-term unemployment, violence (mainly gender-based violence) and psychoactive substance use"[3(p. 280)]. The study shows that young people face **specific challenges** linked to the transition to **adulthood** and to **academic and social pressures**. DANE also found a **correlation** between rising rates of anxiety and mood disorders among young people and rising unemployment[3(p. 73)].

However, there are still **major gaps in the data** on young people's mental health in Colombia. The main national data source, the **National Mental Health Survey**, was carried out in 2015, so it does not capture the new realities young people face since the pandemic or the growing impact of digital media[4]. Moreover, 94.4% of suicide records contain no information on **ethnicity**, which makes it harder to understand differences between population groups and to design suitable policies for Indigenous, Afro-descendant and rural young people[5]. The situation of LGBTIQ+ young people is particularly worrying: independent studies show that 55% have experienced suicidal thoughts and 25% have attempted suicide at least once[6], yet **there is no official national data on their mental health.**

1. Ministerio de Salud, Dirección de Promoción y Prevención. Boletín Salud Mental: datos y cifras 2024-2025 [Internet]. Bogotá, Colombia: Gobierno de Colombia; 2025. Bulletin No. 1. Available at: https://www.minsalud.gov.co/sites/rid/Lists/BibliotecaDigital/RIDE/VS/PP/ENT/boletin-salud-mental-datos-cifras-2024-2025.pdf

2. Being Initiative. Mapping Youth Mental Health Landscapes: local insights from 13 countries [Internet]. Being Initiative; 2024. Available at: https://being-initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Mapping-Youth-Mental-Health-Landscapes_April-18-2024.pdf

3. Ministerio de Salud, Subdirección de enfermedades no transmisibles. Análisis de Situación de la Salud Mental con Énfasis en Determinantes Sociales [Internet]. Colombia: Gobierno de Colombia; 2024. Available at: https://www.minsalud.gov.co/sites/rid/Lists/BibliotecaDigital/RIDE/VS/PP/ENT/asis-salud-mental-determinantes-sociales-colombia.pdf

4. Gómez-Restrepo C, Escudero C, Matallana D, González LM, Rodríguez V. Encuesta Nacional de Salud Mental Colombia 2015. Protocolo del estudio. Rev Colomb Psiquiatr. 2016;45(Supl 1):2-8.

5. Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social. Boletín de Salud Mental: datos y cifras 2024-2025. Bogotá: Minsalud; 2025. Available at: https://www.minsalud.gov.co/sites/rid/Lists/BibliotecaDigital/RIDE/VS/PP/ENT/boletin-salud-mental-datos-cifras-2024-2025.pdf

6. The Williams Institute, Colombia Diversa, Caribe Afirmativo. Estrés, salud y bienestar de las personas LGBT en Colombia: resultados de una encuesta nacional. Los Ángeles: The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law; 2019.

The biopsychosocial approach of the 2025 Mental Health Law

Law 2460 of 2025, which amends Law 1616 of 2013, calls for comprehensive mental health care and is the **legal framework** on which the Working Group based its definition of mental health. Its approach rests on the following principles:

- Priority for child and youth mental health
- Multisectoral, interdisciplinary work
- Promotion and prevention in family, school, workplace and community settings
- Prevention of all forms of violence
- Ongoing training of the workforce
- Strengthening family and community ties through culture, the arts and sport
- A scientific basis for all interventions

The law strengthens the existing legal framework, which also includes **CONPES 3992 and the 2024–2033 Mental Health Policy.**

How do we view mental health?

Although many authorities offer definitions, the World Health Organization has been a key international reference. The WHO defines mental health as **"a state of well-being** in which an individual realizes his or her own **abilities, can cope with the** normal **stresses** of life, can work **productively and fruitfully**, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community"7.

We should also bear in mind that, in Latin America, understandings of mental health have moved beyond seeing it as a purely individual matter. **The Caracas Declaration (1990)**, for example, called for **a community-based model of care** that would reduce reliance on psychiatric hospitals by including "the **promotion of self-care**, informal care and the integration of mental health into primary care"8. These principles are in line with the **biopsychosocial approach** of Colombia's mental health law described above.

Drawing on both of these perspectives, the Mental Health Working Group of the Hub Conexión Juvenil9 set out to **build a shared definition** of mental health based on conversations about our experiences on the ground, recognizing that different communities and cultural groups understand it in different ways. Together, we arrived at the following definition:

7. Organización Mundial de la Salud. Plan de acción integral sobre salud mental (2013-2030). Ginebra: Organización Mundial de la Salud; 2022. Available at: https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/8899edda-64fb-4c2d-b857-f81c7104374c/content

8. Córdoba-Castro E, Hernández-Holguín DM. Recorrido histórico, enfoques y tendencias de la salud mental comunitaria en Latinoamérica: revisión integrativa de la literatura. Rev Cienc Salud [Internet]. 2024;22(3):1-28. Available at: https://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1692-72732024000300011

9. Hereafter referred to as the Working Group.

> A holistic, relational process of well-being (emotional, social, environmental and community) rooted in dignity and territory*. It is a right and a public good, not just an individual concern.

Our understanding goes beyond the purely clinical. YMH is strengthened through collective and territory-based action that embraces diversity and participation.

Territory is not just a physical space, but a historical, social, cultural and political construct, shaped by social relationships and collective practices. It takes form through memory, identity and work, and is central to collective action and social transformation.

References: Fals Borda O. Conocimiento y poder popular. Ciudad de México: Siglo XXI Editores; 1986. Fals Borda O. Acción y espacio: autonomía en la nueva república. Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores; 1991. Fals Borda O. Una sociología sentipensante para América Latina. CLACSO; 2009.

What can we do?

The state of YMH in Colombia and the provisions of Law 2460 of 2025 call on us to **design programs** that take an integrated approach to the many **sociocultural, political and economic processes** linked **to quality of life**, complementing the conventional health care system. At the Hub, we have therefore discussed how the work of the Working Group's member organizations can help to **build social interventions** and **support community processes** that are **more effective and replicable** and that start from local realities.

After in-depth discussion, our interests converged on one question, which we believed could point the way to a brighter future for young people's well-being in Colombia: **"Which lessons and good practices with potential for replication have successfully improved youth mental health at the local and community level?"**

In the pages that follow, each initiative shares its response to this challenge, **backed by documented evidence of success** and by its potential to be replicated**10** across Colombia's highly diverse social, political, economic and cultural contexts. The good practices we invite you to adopt, and the lessons we have learned together along the way, are organized into two sections.

Protective environments

This section presents practices that build youth well-being: safe spaces where young people look after their mental health, build self-esteem and develop psychosocial skills.

Evidence for decision-making

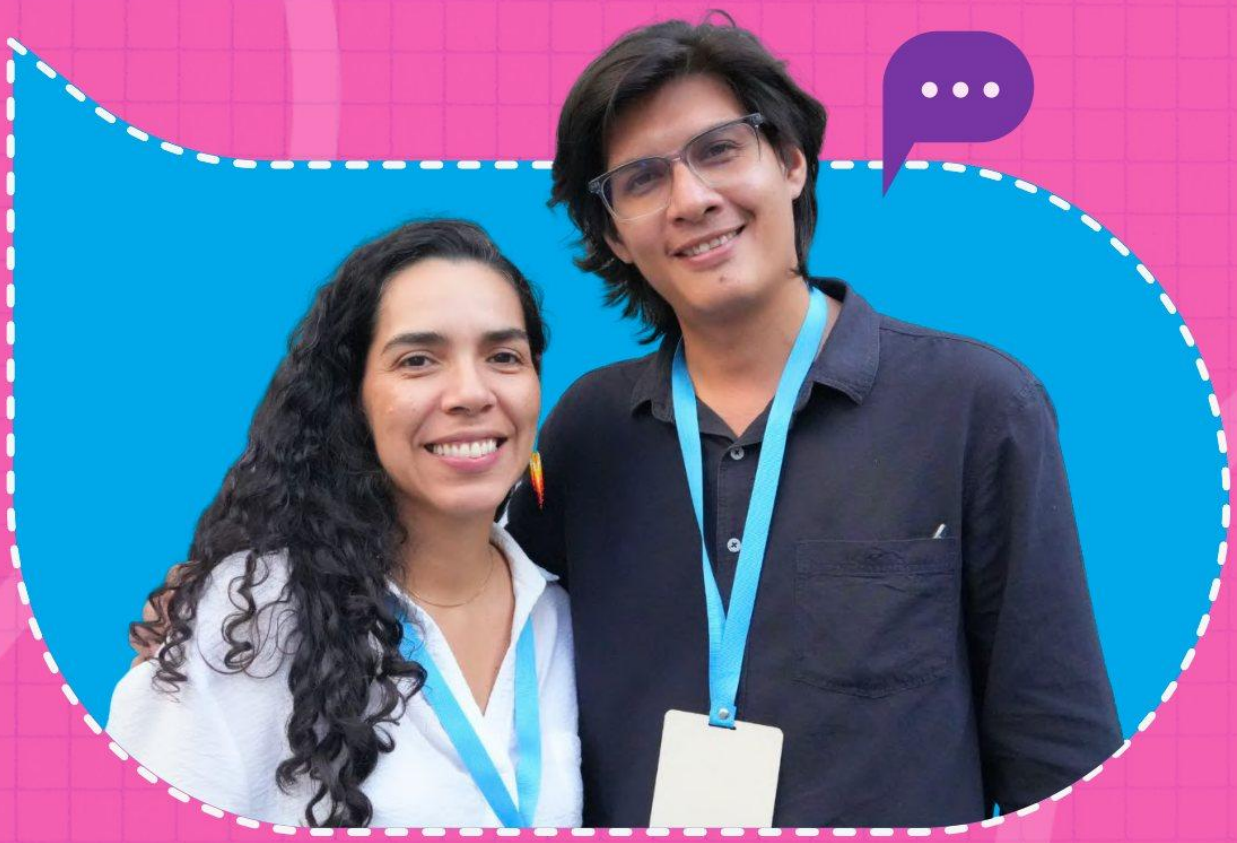
This section presents systematized information that provides concrete input for institutional, program and public policy decisions on youth mental health and well-being, based on an understanding of local conditions.

10. We consider a practice to have potential for replication if it is documented, its methodology is easy to adapt, and/or it does not require large financial investment.

Conexión Juvenil

Aprendizajes para la transformación y el bienestar de las juventudes

Good practices and learnings



The Kamaleón Route (Mixera Fund)

This is a creative self-expression methodology that can be adapted for the classroom and has been used in rural schools across Colombia. It gives young people the chance to embark on a journey of self-discovery, develop their creativity, care for one another, build self-esteem and strengthen family bonds.

The practice has already reached Turbo (Antioquia), Carmen de Carupa (Cundinamarca), Tumaco (Nariño), Santuario (Risaralda), Tuta (Boyacá) and Dibulla (La Guajira)!



Social media graphic about The Kamaleón Route – Instagram: @mixerafund

Key lesson

Teachers need to be directly involved in the route through a train-the-trainers component, so that the project can be flexibly integrated into their classes.

Want to learn more about this initiative, which improved socio-emotional skills (SSES 2.0 pre/post) — young people reported a 3.1-point gain in just five months — and bring it to schools in your community? **Click here!**

Contact: lamixerafund@gmail.com

Did you know...?

La Mixera Fund created Colombia's first Rural School for Socio-emotional Well-being and Access to Culture.

Listening circle for youth leaders

Recognizing that youth leaders need spaces where they can be cared for, youth collectives working on mental health in Barranquilla co-designed this listening circle. It was part of a project by Nuestra Barranquilla, an initiative that brings together young people committed to their city every month to discuss a range of topics.

The session invited participants to reflect on city issues related to mental health and on the importance of self-care. It was open to all, with limited places to ensure a safe space to talk about worries, the challenges of youth leadership and the need to look after one's mental health. Psychologists from Raíces de Bienestar and Fundación Cuidemos Nuestro Cerebro facilitated the session, with Victu professionals on hand to provide *crisis response and emotional support*.

It is essential to set care agreements and adapt the questions so as to protect those who work for the well-being of others. Although the session was not meant to be therapeutic, we recommend *establishing emotional support and referral pathways with qualified professionals before replicating similar activities.*

> If your life were a movie, what genre would it be?

Key lesson

The care agreements, proposed by the leaders themselves, focused on creativity, being fully present, active listening and a no-camera rule. The result was strong participation and a space **where those who usually support others allowed themselves to be supported.**

Click here to learn more about this practice and how the exercise went.

Contact:
Raíces de Bienestar initiative
fuenmayorangie@hotmail.com



Young people from NuestraBarranquilla gathered for dialogue and participation, just before a Listening Circle.

Mentes Colectivas (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana)

Mentes Colectivas was a program launched in 2020 that offered remote guidance sessions as a good practice for mental health promotion and prevention for people over the age of 14. Staffed by final-year students, psychiatry residents and a team of professional psychologists, it provided around 7,000 sessions between 2020 and 2026.

The sessions covered topics such as education for emotional well-being, stress management, warning signs of mental health problems and self-care practices. The aim was to encourage users to seek timely treatment when needed and to strengthen their own resources for looking after their mental health.

Key lesson

Before each appointment, users completed a sociodemographic questionnaire, stated whether they preferred a male or female counselor, and were screened for possible anxiety and depression symptoms using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6). This allowed each user to be matched with a counselor who had the right skills to help them.

To learn more, read the article describing the service's full protocol. **Click here!**

Contact: laura.ospina@javeriana.edu.co

> Mentes Colectivas was a psychological guidance service — not therapy — created to give people a first space where they could be heard about issues affecting their mental health. By chat, phone or video call, users could choose whichever format felt most comfortable to talk, get guidance and feel supported, without fear of judgment, from anywhere in Colombia or abroad with an internet connection.

Natalia Betancourt
Leader, Mentes Colectivas



The Happiness Class (Center for Well-being Studies – POLIS, Universidad Icesi)

This is an elective course for undergraduate students in their final semester. It offers a safe space to reflect on one central theme: individual and collective well-being. Through lectures, students learn what scientific research says about mental health, different ways of relating to family and friends, how emotions work, and much more. The class is an oasis in an often arid academic world — a break to talk about their concerns and practice self-care.

Key lesson

To break the ice and get the group ready to reflect, each class begins with an introspection exercise, such as meditation, conversations in pairs or writing. The activities change from session to session, keeping the course engaging.

The Happiness Class is taught in person to enrolled students, but you can also access the online version in *masterclass* format. Explore a wide range of lessons on well-being and care by **clicking here!**

Here is one of the questions used to open the class and get students thinking about well-being:

> **Do you ever take quiet moments for yourselves?**



Universidad Icesi students during a Happiness Class session, working on creative exercises and group reflections.

Contact: maria.zafra1@u.icesi.edu.co

Community gardens (Fundación Sidoc)

Did you know...?

Not being able to see green spaces from our windows at home may increase the risk of anxiety and depression.

Braçe O, Garrido-Cumbrera M, Foley R, Correa-Fernández J, Suárez-Cáceres G, Lafortezza R. Is a view of green spaces from home associated with a lower risk of anxiety and depression? Inter Jour Envir Res Pub Heal. 2020;17(19):7014. Available at: https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/17/19/7014

As part of the Futuros Urbanos initiative and its Ideas and Policy Advocacy Lab, Cali's network of gardens gives young people a space to reconnect with the land and sow hope in the face of socioeconomic hardship. These school and community gardens support mental well-being not only by reducing stress, but also by strengthening the city's food system and helping young people who face food insecurity. The practice has even led to young people coming together around community kitchens and starting small businesses selling their produce. You can't have mental health on an empty stomach!

Key lesson

Because some of the young people in the garden network have jobs that limit their free time, bringing in retired older adults has proved a great success. This way, the gardens get the constant care they need, while building bonds between generations.

To find out how well-being is taking root in Cali, click here for more information about the city's garden network and Futuros Urbanos.

Contact:
futurosurbanoscali@fundacionsidoc.org



Futuros Urbanos participants during a learning day at a community garden in Cali.

Bailemos Juntos (Timbalé)

This practice takes place in Medellín over 20 sessions spread across five months. Young participants attend mental health workshops and carry out arts and culture advocacy activities in their communities, while developing their body awareness and expression through salsa classes.

Did you know...?

Dance and song are powerful social catalysts for cooperation, communication and resilience, and they also strengthen identity.

Key lesson

Combining dance with emotional well-being workshops and community activities boosts participation, as young people become more aware of how dance, art and culture help protect their mental health.

Want to learn more about this practice, which brings together 100 young people aged 14 to 24 to hit the dance floor and build well-being? **Click here.**

Contact: gerencia@timbale.com.co



Members of the Bailemos Juntos project during a training and group expression session in Medellín.

Me la juego por Baranoa (Fútbol con Corazón)

Did you know...?

Playing team sports such as soccer boosts self-esteem and a sense of belonging in the community.

Alexander T, Edwards EJ. Examining the Association between Sports Participation and Mental Health of Adolescents. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2022;19(24):17078. Available at: https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/19/24/17078

Run in partnership with the Baranoa Mayor's Office (Atlántico) and delivered in schools, this program champions sport as a protective environment for mental health that fosters social cohesion. By creating soccer teams open to all adolescents regardless of gender, it has helped young people develop socio-emotional and cognitive skills, and nearly 100% of participants have stayed in school.

Key lesson

Involving parents in their children's psychosocial development is essential: it encourages young people to stay in school and strengthens bonds of care.

Find out more about this practice, which uses soccer to strengthen young people's life plans and mental health. **Click here!**

Contact: angieroa@fcc.futbol.



Children taking part in Me la Juego por Baranoa during a community day in Baranoa, Atlántico.

Reflection circles with Indigenous communities (Fundación Kindred)

Reflection circles are well-being spaces co-designed with young people. They bring together young people, traditional knowledge keepers, health professionals and members of Indigenous and non-governmental organizations to support the well-being of Indigenous youth in Vaupés. Each circle begins with a harmonization of the space according to the community's cultural practices, followed by a reflection on what mental health means within their worldview. The conversation looks for ways in which Indigenous practices and worldviews can complement the approaches and knowledge of other cultures.

Key lesson

Out of respect for these traditions and to safeguard them, the information and content shared in the reflection circles must be handled with special care and disseminated in a way that protects the community's knowledge and cultural practices[11].

Want to explore this practice, where Indigenous communities' traditional values meet Western perspectives? **Click here.**

Contact: carolina@kindredglobal.org.

> One example of how the community view and Western perspectives come together is the discussion of how traditional practices (such as visiting a traditional healer) can be combined with Western ones (such as institutional YMH care pathways).



Harmonization at the start of a reflection circle.

11. Sinergias. Construcción de un modelo con enfoque diferencial para las intervenciones de salud mental [Internet]. Colombia; 2025. [Accessed January 18, 2025] Available at: https://www.sinergiasong.org/post/construcción-de-un-modelo-con-enfoque-diferencial-para-las-intervenciones-de-salud-mental.

Redesigning public spaces for youth well-being and health (Young Gamechangers Initiative – YGCI – Armenia)

In the heart of Quindío, between 2023 and 2025, more than 200 young people completed a training program in digital skills, youth governance, urban health, territorial planning and participatory design. Through 12 workshops and field trips, adolescents and young people from across the city assessed the condition of some 140 public spaces in terms of health and well-being, accessibility, comfort, safety and the environment. Using UN-Habitat methodologies such as the *City-wide Public Space Assessment*, the *Public Space Site-specific Assessment* and *Block by Block*, and digital tools such as *KoboToolbox, Inhabit Place and Minecraft,* the young people of Armenia selected two sites in the north and southwest of the city to redesign according to their own vision.

Driven by the Municipal Youth Council and several local partner organizations, YGCI promotes the redesign of public spaces as a path to youth empowerment and leadership. In one bootcamp, for example, 40 children, adolescents and young people came up with innovative ideas for more welcoming and accessible spaces, using a video game that required no advanced knowledge of architecture. There is no doubt that improving urban environments contributes to youth mental health and well-being.

Key lesson

Learning how to plan a city's public spaces is no easy task and can feel overwhelming. That's why it helps to use accessible digital tools that match young people's experience. Young Gamechangers Initiative chose to use the video game Minecraft to help participants develop their ideas — and the results for motivation and creativity were very positive!

To see how leadership and well-being are being built in Armenia through urban interventions, **click here** to follow them on Instagram, and **here** to visit the Data-Hub, which holds most of the results of the citywide public space assessment.

Contact:
Instagram: @ygi_colombia and @onuhabitatpaisesandinos



Young people from the Young Gamechangers project during a public space redesign day in the city of Armenia

Evidence for **decision-making**



Below are two examples of how ***evidence*** can be built to influence local decision-making. Although only two initiatives are featured here, generating evidence has been a guiding principle for all of the Working Group's member organizations.

But first, **what exactly do we mean by *evidence* when it comes to advocating for youth well-being?**

Evidence is any systematized information that provides concrete input for decision-making — information that helps us understand local contexts and guide institutional, program and public policy decisions on youth mental health and well-being.

Now, let's see how it's done. »

The CaliBRANDO Survey (Center for Well-being Studies – POLIS, Universidad Icesi)

This is the only Subjective Well-being Monitoring and Evaluation System for a city in Colombia or Latin America (Cali). It is a questionnaire of just over 100 questions that explores how people experience and assess their own lives[12], covering every individual and collective area of life (mental and physical health, relationships, work, interpersonal and institutional trust, mobility, finances and education, among others). For mental health, it uses scientifically validated self-report scales (GAD-7, PHQ-9, PSS-10 and the CDC-5 index), which have shown that mental health is a direct, cross-cutting and significant determinant of subjective well-being, especially among young people aged 18 to 28[13]

CaliBRANDO found that in 2023, more than 50% of people aged 18 to 25 living in Cali had symptoms of anxiety[14].

Key lesson

To avoid inaccurate measurement of self-reported symptoms, CaliBRANDO does not ask questions that require any knowledge of mental health. So instead of asking "Do you suffer from depression?", it uses questions such as: "On a scale of 0 to 3, where 0 is 'not at all', 1 is 'several days', 2 is 'more than half the days' and 3 is 'nearly every day', how often have you had little interest or pleasure in doing things?"

For the survey's full methodology, which helps address the factors behind YMH problems, read one of its bulletins. **Click here!**

Contact: maria.zafra1@u.icesi.edu.co



Collecting data for the CaliBRANDO survey during a community participation day in Cali

12. OECD. OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being (2025 Update). Paris: OECD Publishing; 2025. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/10/oecd-guidelines-on-measuring-subjective-well-being-2025-update_b957f42e/9203632a-en.pdf

13. Datos en breve 35 – Los jóvenes de Cali: https://www.icesi.edu.co/polis/publicaciones/polis-db35-jovenes

14. Datos en breve 63 – Obesidad y salud mental: https://www.icesi.edu.co/polis/publicaciones/polis-db63-encalipedia

Participant testimonials (GOYN Bogotá)

While statistics offer a scientifically rigorous picture of the results of YMH initiatives, testimonials are also an excellent way to assess a strategy's progress, thanks to the valuable input of the young people who take part in it. They capture a more qualitative, contextual dimension of the issue, and they give young people a chance to be heard and for their views to resonate.

Including young people's voices as a primary source of evidence for social change not only enriches research, but also serves as a call to action and helps shift narratives[16].

Key lesson

Professionals and young people need to engage in an equal, two-way dialogue so that young people's contributions and testimonials are genuine and candid. Group conversations built around games, as well as one-on-one chats, are good ways to gather authentic testimonials.

Can't wait to hear from GOYN's young people? **Click here** to read about Valeria Riaño's experience!

Contact: ecastillo@goynbogota.org



Gathering testimonials from young participants at a GOYN Bogotá event in Bogotá.

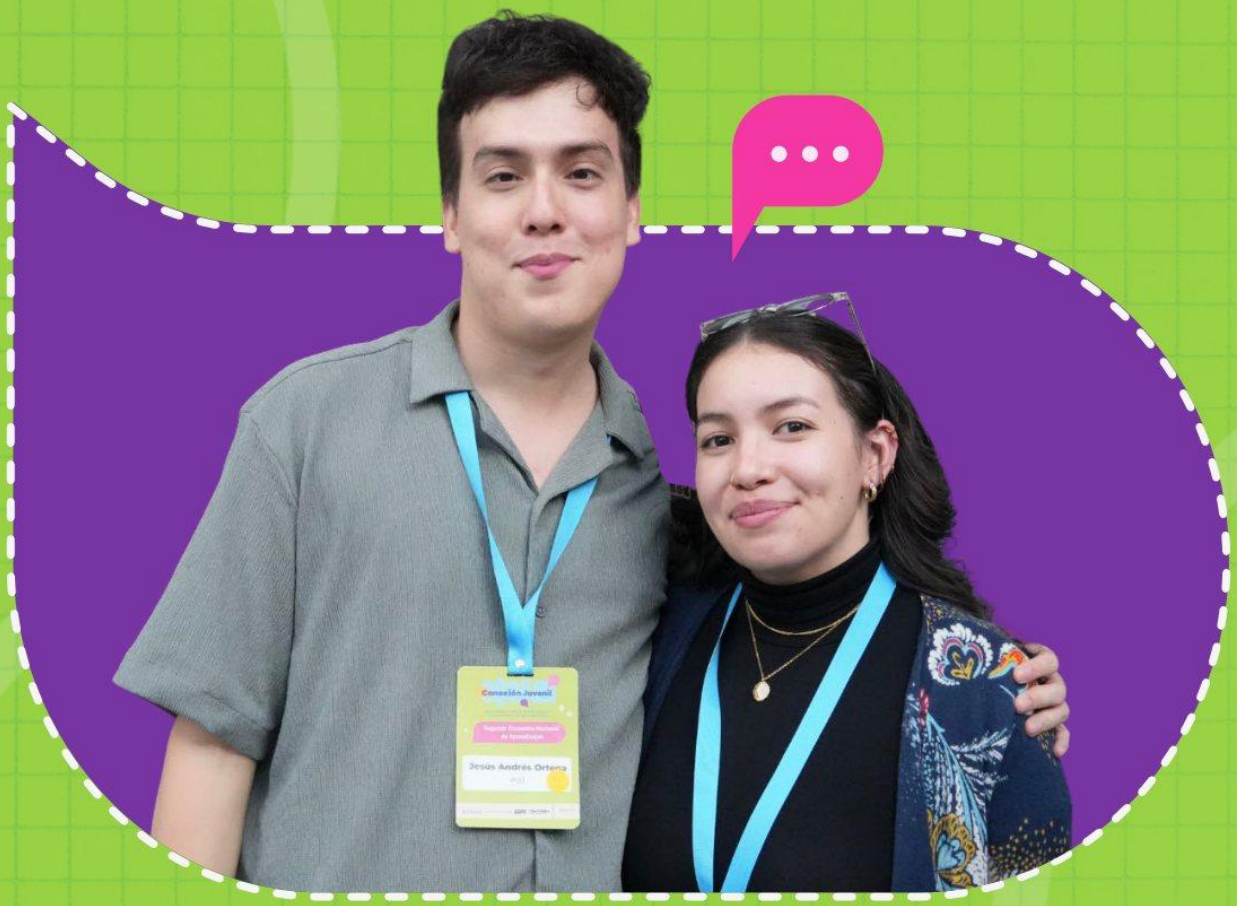
16 Global Opportunity Youth Network Bogotá. Informe Jóvenes con Potencial 2024: tendencias y barreras en las trayectorias hacia oportunidades de la población joven en Bogotá [Internet]. Bogotá (COL): GOYN Bogotá; Aug 15, 2024. Available at: https://goynbogota.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Informe-Completo-GOYN_2024.pdf

Conexión Juvenil

Aprendizajes para la transformación y el bienestar de las juventudes

Recommendations

to keep in mind



Before we close this notebook, we would like to share some general recommendations for anyone working on YMH. They grew out of collective reflection within the Working Group, through which we identified common ground and lessons shared across our initiatives. They are not meant to be taken as absolute truths, but as a source of inspiration that can grow, evolve and be updated. This notebook is always open to new practices and ideas. If you would like to contribute your own experiences to these lessons, write to us at **comunicaciones@hubconexionjuvenil.com.**

Each recommendation ends with two examples: one from a Working Group initiative and one from outside the group, to give a more complete picture.



Co-design
with, by and for young people

Co-creating community research, intervention and support initiatives for YMH brings us closer to the real needs and concerns of local communities, which is fully in line with our definition of mental health. Involving young people as decision-makers at every stage of a project is essential if we want to improve youth well-being, because their community perspective helps us respond to real needs with innovative solutions, strengthen engagement and find longer-lasting answers.

> Although co-design may sometimes require greater financial investment, this is more than offset by the long-term effectiveness of co-designed projects: they are far less likely to need reworking or entirely new methodologies, making them more sustainable than projects that are not co-designed. To achieve this, we must build on our differences and welcome a diversity of voices and stakeholders.

Cumbula SD, Sabiescu AG, Cantoni L. Co-design with communities. A reflection on the literature. In: Proceedings of the 7th International Development Informatics Association Conference (IDIA); 2013 Nov; Bangkok. 2013:152–166. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.1.2309.9365.

Note!

Young people are not a design tool!

Co-designing with young people means involving them fully and jointly defining roles, responsibilities and recognition. Participatory methods are key. Here are some suggestions for responsible and successful co-design with young people.

- **Offer different ways to get involved,** suited to young people's availability and level of commitment. Roles might include collaborator (ongoing or occasional), adviser or co-author.
- **Work in partnership** with youth-led organizations.
- **Formally engage** young people through volunteer roles or contracts.
- **Make room** for young people to be fully involved in governing bodies.
- **Keep young co-designers informed** and involved at every stage of the project.
- **Include a diverse range of young people,** with a variety of identities, viewpoints and social backgrounds.
- **Certify** participation.
- **Offer well-rounded training** that meets not only the project's needs but also young people's own interests.
- **Regularly assess** how satisfied co-designers are.
- When addressing sensitive YMH topics, **make sure a team of mental health professionals is available** to support any participant who needs it.
- **Create channels** for ongoing communication.
- **Recognize, strengthen and encourage the creativity** and ideas of young people.
- **Set up suggestion boxes or spaces** for feedback.

Following these recommendations helps avoid tokenizing youth leaders and *builds trust in young people's agency*.

This article presents a complete model for co-design with young people developed by Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. Click here.

Discover "Alza tu voz", a project to co-design youth-friendly urban spaces. Click here.

Work together with diverse partners

We believe that every initiative should integrate interventions and processes that address YMH since, as this notebook has shown, mental health depends on many complex factors. Such a holistic, integrated vision can only be achieved through synergy among diverse partners. We therefore recommend forming alliances with organizations that share common goals, while mapping the support pathways that already exist locally. To do this, it helps to agree on a common language at the start of any collaboration, one that brings concepts, approaches and methods into line.

> Collaboration should aim to reach families directly, as they are the first environment in which young people are cared for and socialized. By involving them in projects, we can break down the stigma around mental health and build stronger support networks.

Our work should aim to create pathways for cooperation by identifying gaps in how different sectors address the factors behind YMH. We should always ask ourselves: "Who's missing?" and "Who else could we work with?". Once we have identified potential allies, we can develop a step-by-step dialogue plan to recognize the causes that drive us, understand the contexts in which each network member works and, finally, agree on how we will work together on advocacy. These experiences will yield many valuable lessons, which we encourage you to document and share (as we explain later).

The Working Group's initiatives agree that multi-stakeholder work — based on a clear plan of activities, well-defined roles and equal relationships — made their projects possible and increased their impact. They also recognize that working in networks can provide multidimensional support with greater reach and quality, contributing to youth well-being. Here are two examples of multi-stakeholder work.

Discover the Ideas Lab of Fundación Sidoc's Futuros Urbanos program. Click here.

Learn about the collaborative work of Young Gamechangers in Armenia, promoted by local organizations such as the Municipal Youth Council, Colombian consulting firm Hill, audiovisual production company Quindulab and the Ecos de Montaña corporation, and implemented by UN-Habitat, the Pan American Health Organization and Universidad del Quindío. Click here.



Evaluate
again and again

The Working Group believes that any initiative aiming for real impact in local communities should have an ongoing evaluation protocol. The key is to use a variety of tools, such as pre- and post-intervention measurements, comparisons between people who took part in a project and those who did not, internal records so that evaluation is not always outsourced, interviews, co-evaluation with young people (ideally including the voices of Municipal Youth Councils), community monitoring, tracking objectives against indicators, focus group discussions, and even testimonials.

One technique that works well for evaluating projects is the After-Action Review. Its purpose is to document good practices, identify mistakes and draw lessons that can improve decision-making, either during the intervention or in future work. Rather than judging "success" or "failure" in the abstract, it seeks to understand what worked, what didn't, why, and what could be done differently. In reflection circles, we can ask these simple but powerful questions:

- **What did we expect** to achieve?
- **What actually** happened?
- **What worked** well, and why?
- **What didn't work**, and how should we adjust it?

> We recommend framing your key questions at the start of the project. That way, you can revisit them at different stages and track how close you are to answering them. Participatory workshops or story circles can help with this.

To better understand this cross-cutting approach, **here are two examples:**

Learn about GOYN Bogotá's evaluation model, based on a mixed-methods, retrospective approach. Click here.

Discover the Skoll Centre's *Meaningful Measurement Playbook* and see how *storytelling* can help us approach evaluation in a more dynamic and holistic way. Click here.

Learn to influence and share what we learn

Interventions and community processes for youth well-being should be grounded in reflection that draws out both internal and external lessons (for example, by reviewing scientific literature on YMH in Colombia, analyzing co-creation models or consulting documented past experiences). This allows projects to be designed and redesigned with greater relevance and rigor at every stage, **leading to new lessons and the consolidation of good practices.**

Recognizing how far we have come, and staying eager to learn while we support others, opens up new perspectives and helps us move toward comprehensive, prevention-based mental well-being for young people in Colombia. That is why **each project's findings should be documented and shared widely, not just presented as supporting material in management reports** for funders. This information should take forms of evidence that recognize non-Western knowledge systems, in line with the ethnic and cultural approach discussed earlier, depending on the communities we work with.

> **Advocacy** means influencing decision-making, public agendas, social imaginaries and/or individual or collective power structures in order to change realities. It is not limited to institutions: it also shapes narratives, beliefs, practices and priorities across different spaces (community, political, media, etc.) and with diverse audiences. It can be carried out by collectives, organizations or individuals, and it seeks to bring about concrete and lasting change.

Definition developed jointly by all members of the Hub Conexión Juvenil.

By organizing and presenting what we have learned in ways that are accessible to communities, we can create a cycle of continuous improvement, influence decision-making, and help youth leaders and social organizations better understand the realities they want to change, so **that what has worked in our projects can serve as a starting point or a compass for future initiatives.**

Learn to influence and share what we learn



Ideally, our learning should follow an iterative model — a process that constantly restarts and feeds back into itself — so that we can consolidate our findings and confirm their relevance. This cycle could look like this:

Action → **Reflection** → **Experimentation and verification** → **Adjusted action** → **Conceptualization and systematization**

Here are two examples of this recommendation in practice.

Creating platforms to connect lessons and share good practices can make our initiatives' impact on local communities more relevant and longer-lasting. Discover the Johns Hopkins University Center for Global Mental Health project to build a network of partners working for youth mental well-being in the Americas. Click here.

See how Pontificia Universidad Javeriana shared the findings of its YMH research in three Colombian cities. The reports were co-designed with young people! Click here.

Trust
to drive change



Building trust with young people is no small matter. It should run through every initiative, not only for ethical reasons, but also because the success of any YMH project — in terms of rigor, advocacy and innovation — depends on equal, transparent and caring relationships.

> Building trust takes time. Don't rush the process!

This trust must be built between young participants and the professionals who work with them, as well as within the youth group itself. It is essential for young people to believe in their own abilities and recognize the potential of working as a team with their peers.

Many young people provide emotional support to their peers, which is valuable but exhausting work. **Caring for young caregivers should be a core part of every YMH initiative.** Recognizing the need for self-care does not weaken advocacy; it makes it sustainable.

Strategies such as self-care workshops or support groups can therefore help, offering safe spaces where young people can recognize their own limits and strengths. This, in turn, allows them to build more empathetic and lasting relationships of trust with their peers, their communities and the teams that support them.

To achieve this, we need to innovate in our methods by including games and regular opportunities for dialogue (both among young people alone and together with professionals and decision-makers), and by communicating openly and assertively, leaving no room for misinformation, false expectations or stigma. **We encourage you to keep things informal, avoid rigid hierarchies, speak young people's language, and recognize and respect the many ways they express themselves.** Art, sport and culture are ideal ways for young people to share their emotions, ideas and experiences, helping them strengthen their identity and their ties to the community.

This way, young people can speak their minds more freely, give free rein to their creativity, contribute their knowledge and experience fully and, above all, know that they are at the heart of our work.

Here are two examples of trust-building:

"Charla con La Juanpis", a space for sharing feelings, grounded in diversity and equality. Click here.

Sport can help us build trust and empathy. Discover Luis's story, a Fútbol con Corazón participant. Click here.

This brings us to the end
of our notebook of lessons learned

Let's keep studying and **learning together!**

Created from and for local communities, this document is the collaborative work of the Mental Health Working Group and the Hub Conexión Juvenil, a network of initiatives that share lessons to transform and strengthen the well-being of young people in Colombia, with the support of Fondation Botnar and facilitated by Fundación Corona and the Center for Public Value at Universidad EAFIT.

Conexión Juvenil

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