

The Mind is Most Important

A practical handbook for
mental health champions



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mental health champions**

Translated and adapted from 'Nemmadi Nirala' Manassu Athi Mukhya' (Kannada),
a publication of Children of India Foundation
developed and edited by Dr Vasudeva Sharma NV, PhD

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This publication has been developed in close consultation
with 40 married adolescent girls under Terre des Hommes Netherlands'
Initiative for Married Adolescent Girls' Empowerment (IMAGE) programme.

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Introduction and Background

Building Resilience: A Community-Led Mental Health Initiative for Early Married Girls in India

The Initiatives for Married Adolescent Girls' Empowerment (IMAGE) programme in India empowers married adolescent girls in accessing socio-economic development, coupled with building them in a movement where they advocate for their rights. Mental health care forms a crucial component in the programme.

India has the largest number of early married girls in the world, and the state of Karnataka accounts for nearly 23% of child marriages in India. Poverty, harmful traditional beliefs and gender-based discrimination are the main contributing factors to child marriages. Early married girls are a neglected group who are often excluded from development interventions, as most programmes tackling child marriage are prevention-focused. The girls are forced to discontinue their education and remain financially dependent, which forces them to stay in marriages despite gender-based violence. These factors lead to several mental health problems, which are a crucial area of concern.

The Community-Led Mental Health Initiative under IMAGE was piloted with 2018 early married girls in Karnataka,

India. It focuses on strengthening their ability to cope with emotional struggles, stress, and relationship challenges. Key activities include peer group sessions, counselling support, and family/community engagement.

Approaches used

- Mental health support was not only given individually but also in collective spaces (peer groups, family workshops, awareness drives).
- Community resource persons such as teachers, anganwadi workers, and health workers were involved.
- Special focus was placed on reducing stigma around mental health and building positive communication between young married girls and their families.

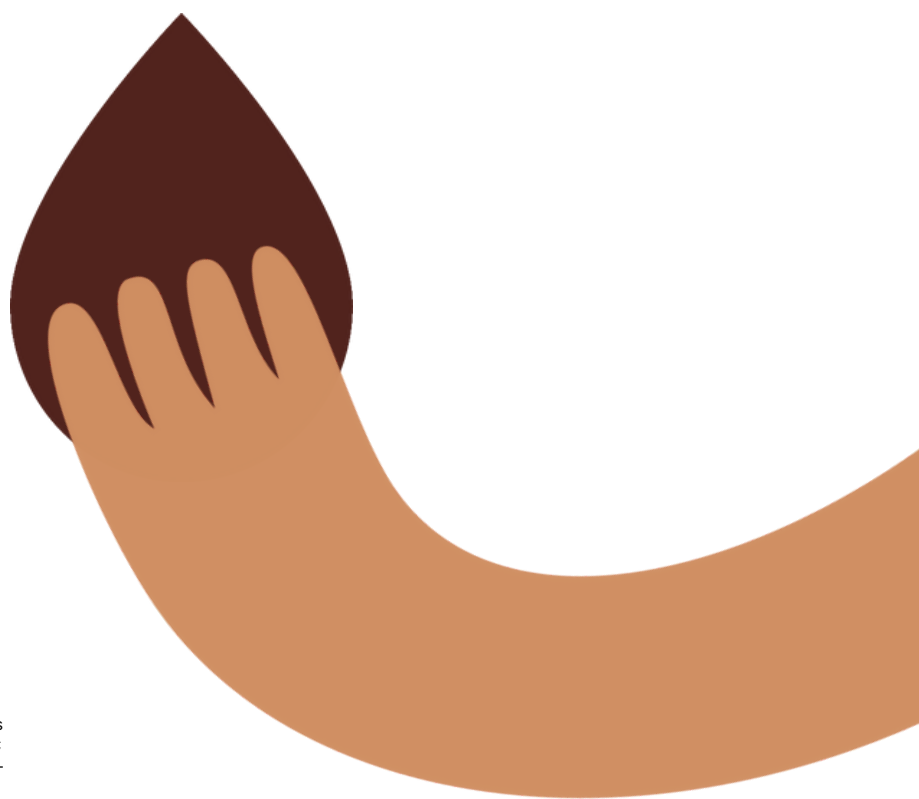
This handbook has been prepared in line with the above approaches, with a key objective to bring forward mental health as a foundation for resilience. It aims to empower not only early married girls but also adolescents globally with knowledge, skills and coping mechanisms.

Partners and Experts

The following individuals and organisations have been instrumental in developing this handbook:

- 40 early married girls from the IMAGE project who function as mental health champions, raising mental health awareness in their communities.
- Dr. Vasudeva Sharma, with support from IMAGE teams.
- Local facilitators, women leaders, and community-based organisations.
- Terre des Hommes Netherlands and its lead implementing partner in India, Children of India Foundation.
- Local grassroots-level implementing partner organisations comprising Society for Empowerment through Voluntary Action in Karnataka (SEVAK),

People's Movement for Self-Reliance (PMSR), Arpanam Trust, Vidyanikethan, REACH and Child Rights Trust (CRT).



Key concepts

Global Understanding of Mental Health

- According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is not just the absence of illness but a state of complete well-being.
- The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (2016–2030), especially Goal 3.4, emphasise reducing premature mortality through prevention and promotion of mental health.

Community-Based Programmes

The Initiatives for Married Adolescent Girls' Empowerment (IMAGE) programme in Karnataka reached over 17,500 early married girls emphasising building resilience, communication skills, and family/community awareness about mental health.

Children's Rights

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognises mental health as essential to children's development and wellbeing.
- Nations are urged to integrate child mental health into their health systems and ensure protection.

Situation in India

- Reports from the WHO and the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) highlight that India faces high levels of stress, depression, and suicide.
- In 2022, about 171,000 people died by suicide in India, showing the urgent need for interventions.
- Laws like the Child Marriage Prohibition Act (2006) and POCSO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012) aim to protect children and adolescents. However, more support systems are needed to ensure mental health care for victims.

Unit 1

Self-care and Stress Management

Mental health is not just an individual issue but a community concern. Working together helps reduce stigma and builds collective resilience.



Things to remember

- 💧 Mental health is strengthened when individuals are given supportive spaces to share their feelings and experiences.
- 💧 Self-care is a collective responsibility — families, peers, and communities all play a role.
- 💧 Activities like group discussions, peer counseling, and stress-relief exercises are recommended.



Examples of Practices from IMAGE

- Peer groups discussed personal challenges like early marriage, family pressure, and role conflicts.
- Through workshops, they identified coping strategies such as breathing exercises, open conversations, problem-sharing, and relaxation practices.
- The programme emphasised positive outlets for stress instead of isolation or silence.

Field Evidence from IMAGE

- In one pilot with 15 adolescent groups, girls shared experiences of stress related to family responsibilities, lack of education, and financial burdens.
- Facilitators helped them learn self-expression techniques, role plays, and storytelling as tools for resilience.
- Community members also recognised that early marriage contributes significantly to stress.

10 Steps for Mental Health and Wellbeing

Here are ten practical steps that young people and communities can follow to build resilience and manage stress.



Step 1 Share Your Feelings

- Talk about your emotions with someone you trust — a friend, family member, or facilitator.
- Expressing emotions helps reduce inner stress and prevents isolation.



Step 2 Eat Healthy, Stay Active

- Regular meals and balanced nutrition improve physical and mental health.
- Activities like walking, playing games, or simple exercise release stress.



Step 3 Take Rest and Sleep Well

- Adequate rest restores the mind and body.
- Maintaining a regular sleep routine helps prevent fatigue and irritability.



Step 4 Learn Relaxation Techniques

- Practice deep breathing, meditation, or mindfulness activities.
- Even a few minutes daily mindful pauses can improve focus and calmness.



Step 5 Keep Yourself Engaged

- Pursue hobbies, creative activities, or group work.
- Engagement helps avoid negative thinking and builds confidence.



Step 6

Build Healthy Relationships

- Spend time with people who respect and support you and avoid those who constantly criticise or put you down.
- Strong relationships create a protective circle for your mental health.



Step 7

Say 'No' When Needed

- Learn to refuse tasks or demands that overwhelm you.
- Setting boundaries is not selfish — it's a way to protect your energy.



Step 8

Avoid Harmful Habits

- Stay away from alcohol, tobacco, or substance use.
- Such habits may seem to reduce stress but actually harm physical and mental health.



Step 9

Seek Help When Stressed

- If problems feel too heavy, reach out to a counsellor, health worker, or trusted elder.
- Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.



Step 10

Stay Positive and Hopeful

- Focus on your strengths and achievements.
- Even during challenges, remind yourself that difficulties can be overcome with support.

Check out the **START** course on the [TdH NL website](#) to learn more about trauma-informed approaches.



Summary of Unit 1 : Self-Care and Stress Management

- ✓ Taking care of yourself is the first step in maintaining mental health.
- ✓ Everyday practices like good sleep, healthy food, positive relationships, and relaxation help prevent stress from becoming overwhelming.
- ✓ Saying “no” and setting boundaries protect energy and reduce pressure.
- ✓ Harmful coping (like substance use) should be avoided; instead, seek help when needed.
- ✓ A hopeful and positive outlook gives strength to face challenges.

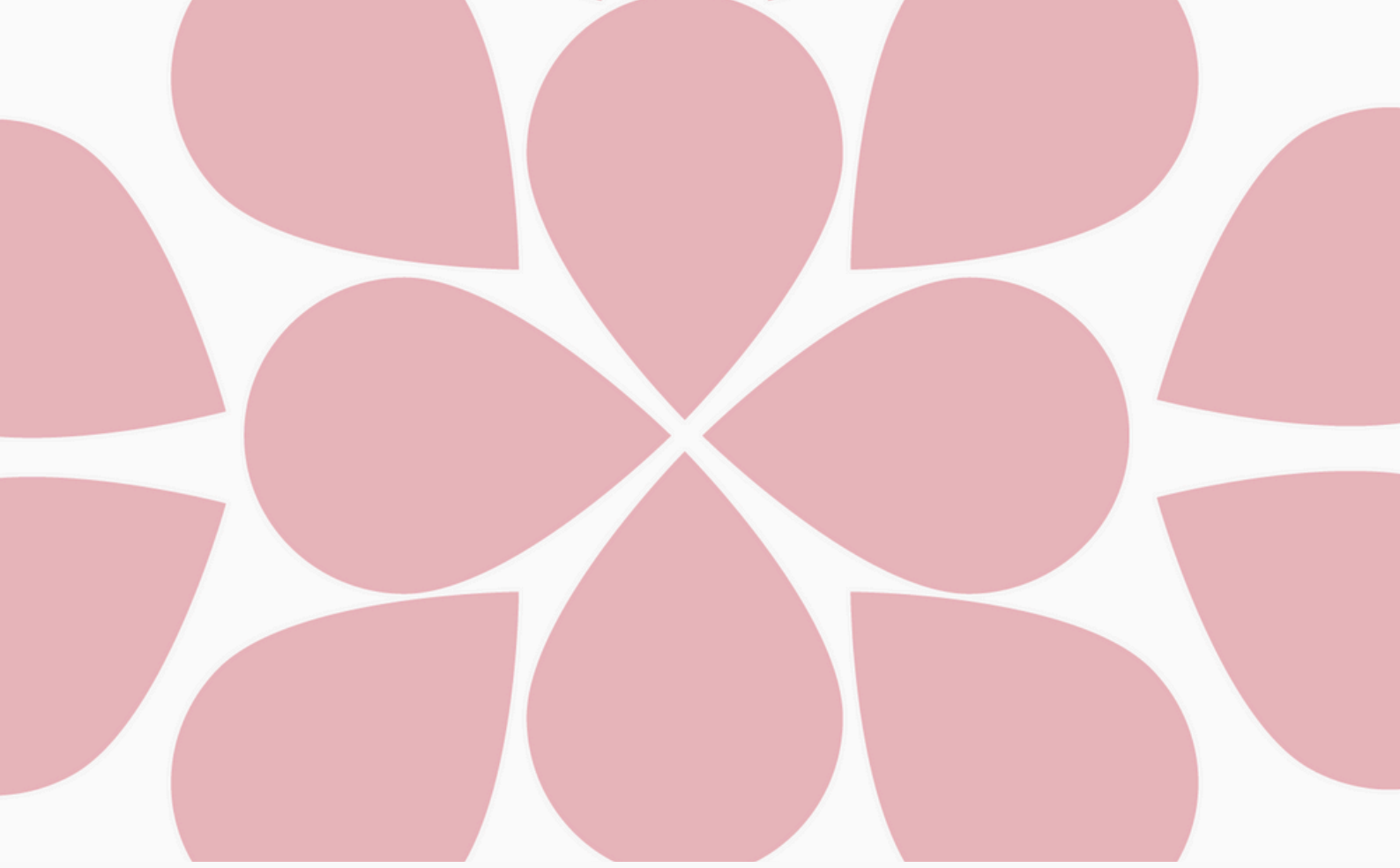
Reflection Activity

1. Write down three personal practices you already use to stay healthy.

2. Write down two new practices from the “Ten Steps” that you will try in the coming week.

3. Discuss in small groups how these practices can be supported by family and community.





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**The mind is like a garden –
if we nurture it with care,
it blossoms; if neglected,
it withers.**

Collective voice of early married girls
trained as mental health champions

Unit 2

Mental Health : An Introduction

Mental health is not only the absence of illness but a state of well-being where a person can use their abilities cope with stress, work productively, and contribute to the community.



Understanding Mental Health

Balance of Mind and Body

Good mental health helps in maintaining physical health, relationships, and overall happiness.

Mental Health across Life Stages

Everyone - children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly - needs mental wellbeing.

Stigma and Misconceptions

Many people hide their struggles because of fear, shame, or social stigma. This silence worsens the situation.

Supportive Environments

Families, schools, and communities can either promote or harm mental health depending on how supportive they are.



Mental Health is influenced by multiple factors

What affects mental health?

Biological Factors

Factors influencing the body's physiology

Psychological Factors

Factors related to internal mental and emotional thinking patterns and processes

Social and Environmental Factors

Factors that shape the external environment

Protective vs Risk Factors

- Protective factors are conditions that **support and improve mental health**.
- Risk factors are conditions that increase the likelihood of **developing mental health problems or make them worse**.

Biological Factors

Protective Factors

- Stable hormonal balance
- Strong immune system
- Genetic resilience
- Proper nutrition
- Regular physical activity
- Healthy sleep patterns
- Good reproductive health
- Healthy brain development
- Strong energy metabolism

Risk Factors

- Genetic vulnerability
- Hormonal imbalance
- Chronic illnesses
- Early pregnancy or birth complications
- Substance abuse
- Nutritional deficiency
- Neuro-development disorders
- Severe injuries
- Sleep disturbances

Psychological Factors

Protective Factors

- High self-esteem
- Optimism
- Resilience
- Strong emotional regulation
- Self-efficacy
- Self-awareness
- Motivation and persistence
- Adaptability
- Drive and focus
- Effective coping skills
- Humour
- Gratitude
- Creative expression
- Hopefulness

Risk Factors

- Negative thinking patterns
- Low self-esteem
- Past traumatic experiences of abuse, neglect, violence
- Stress response
- Pessimism
- Perfectionism
- Poor problem-solving skills
- Learned helplessness
- Loss and grief
- Self-isolation
- Social comparison

Social and Environmental Factors

Protective Factors

- Strong family relationships and support
- Strong peer-network
- Active social participation
- Positive role models or mentors
- Safe neighbourhood and living conditions
- Access to quality education
- Access to quality health care and social protection
- Economic empowerment

Risk Factors

- Dysfunctional family system
- Peer pressure or bullying
- Stigma and discrimination
- Social isolation
- Abusive relationships
- Poverty
- Natural disasters, wars and conflicts
- Systemic inequalities
- Unemployment
- Homelessness



Common Mental Health Concerns

Stress

A normal response to pressure, but prolonged stress can cause headaches, irritability, poor sleep, and lack of focus.

Anxiety

Excessive worry, restlessness, rapid heartbeat, panic attacks, and difficulty concentrating.

Depression

Persistent sadness, loss of interest in daily activities, fatigue, and withdrawal from others.

Post-traumatic response

After experiencing violence, abuse, or accidents, people may have flashbacks, nightmares, or avoidance behaviours.

Substance abuse

Using alcohol, tobacco, or drugs to cope with stress or sadness. Provides temporary relief but worsens health and relationships in the long run.



Note to Facilitators

- Encourage participants to share which of these issues they see in their community.
- Clarify that experiencing these problems is not a weakness, but a signal to seek support.



Warning Signs of Poor Mental Health



Withdrawal from family, friends, or group activities.



Sudden drop in school performance or work productivity.



Loss of interest in hobbies or daily routines.



Frequent headaches, body aches, or unexplained physical problems.



Changes in eating or sleeping patterns.



Irritability, anger outbursts, or crying easily.



Talking negatively about self
("I am useless," "Nobody cares for me").



Expressing hopelessness or thoughts of ending life.

If you see these signs..

- Offer a safe space to talk.
- Listen without judgment.
- Encourage professional help if symptoms persist.
- In case of suicidal thoughts, seek immediate help from a counselor, helpline, or health center.

Note to Facilitators : Encourage participants to observe and find ways to recognise early signs

Positive Mental Health Practices



Express Emotions Freely

Share happiness, sadness, and worries openly with trusted people.

Develop Problem-Solving Skills

Break problems into smaller steps and look for realistic solutions.

Maintain Healthy Routines

Regular sleep, nutritious meals, and physical activity.

Strengthen Social Support

Spend time with family, friends, and peer groups.

Engage in Relaxation Activities

Breathing exercises, storytelling, art, or music.

Seek Professional Help

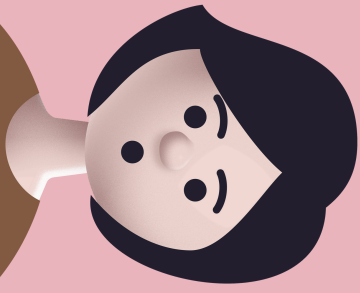
When stress or sadness continues for weeks, reach out to trained health workers or counsellors.

Note to facilitators

- Encourage group members to identify which practices they already follow.
- Ask them to share what new practices they would like to try.



Role of Family and Community in Health

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- Families can provide love, safety, and encouragement, which strengthen resilience.
 - Open communication within the family helps children and adolescents express their struggles.
 - Negative behaviors like constant criticism, neglect, or violence damage mental wellbeing.
 - When family members share responsibilities and respect each other, it reduces stress and creates harmony.
 - A supportive community reduces stigma and offers resources like schools, health centers, and safe spaces.
 - Community leaders, teachers, and health workers play a vital role in identifying and guiding people who struggle.
 - Peer support groups, especially for young married girls, provide emotional strength and reduce isolation.



Check out the **START** course on the [TdH NL website](#) to learn more about trauma-informed approaches.

Summary of Unit 2 : Mental Health - An Introduction

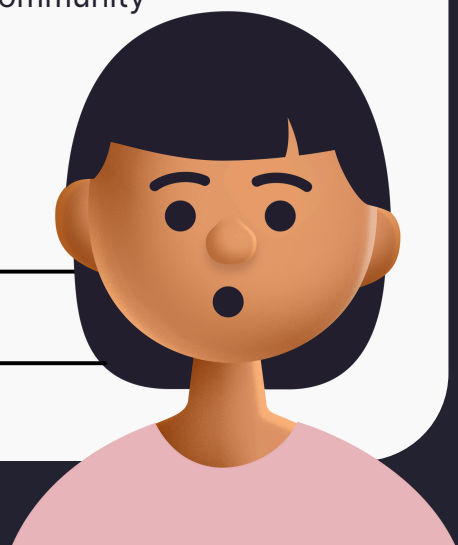
- ✓ Mental health is an essential part of overall wellbeing — it affects how we think, feel, and act.
- ✓ Biological, psychological, and social factors all influence mental health.
- ✓ Common concerns include stress, anxiety, depression, trauma reactions, and substance misuse.
- ✓ Warning signs such as withdrawal, hopelessness, or loss of interest must be taken seriously.
- ✓ Families and communities play a critical role in supporting mental health.
- ✓ Positive practices — healthy routines, open communication, problem-solving, and seeking help — promote resilience.

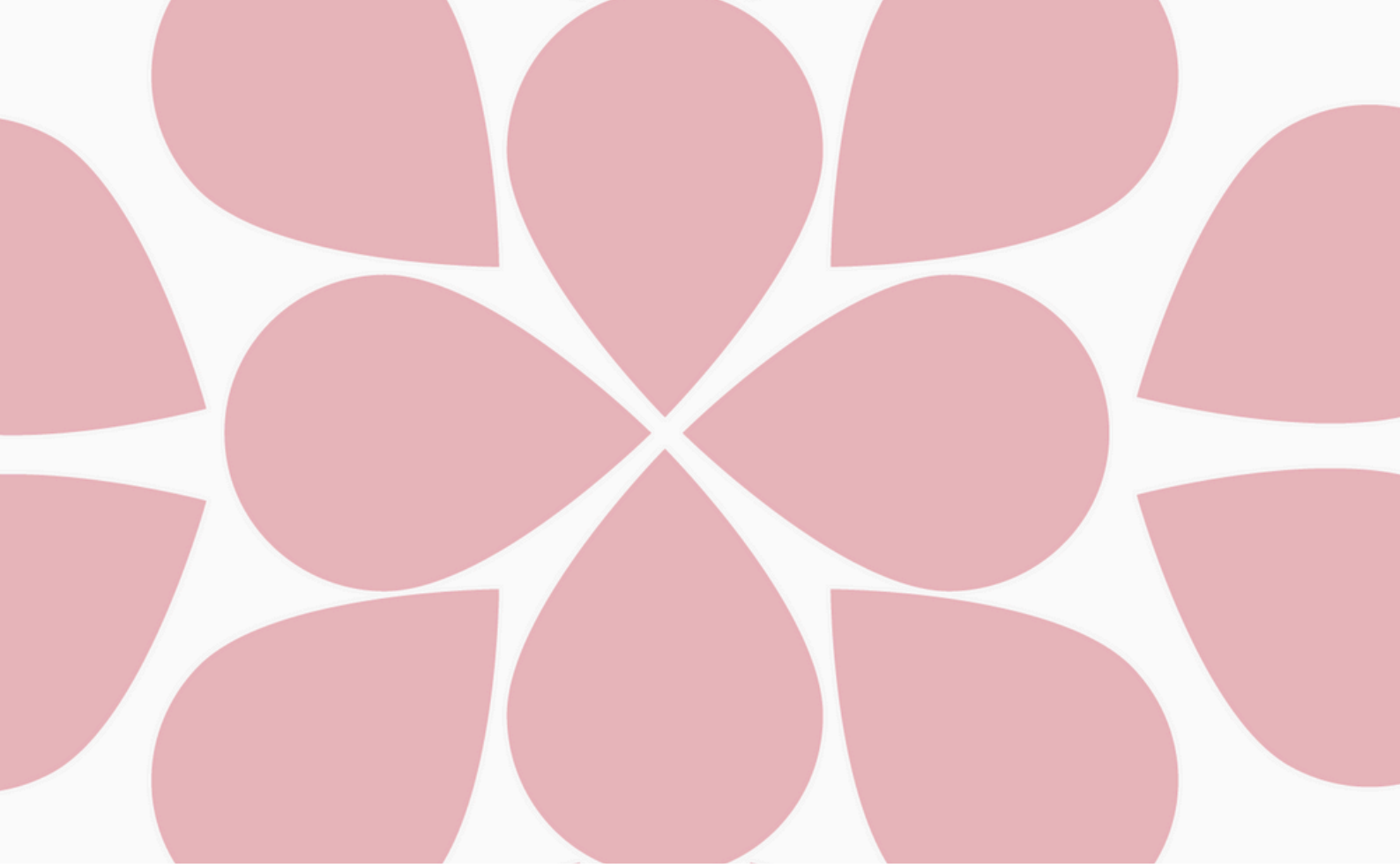
Reflection Activity

1. Share one example of a mental health challenge you have observed in your community

2. Discuss in groups: How did the family and community respond?

3. Identify two practices from Unit 2 that can help in such situations.





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Just as the body needs food to survive, the mind needs care and support to thrive.

Collective voice of early married girls
trained as mental health champions

Unit 3

Communication and Relationships

Strong communication builds trust and well-being in families, friendships, and communities. Most conflicts stem not from big issues but from how people speak and listen. Improving these skills reduces misunderstandings and strengthens relationships.



Types of Communication



Verbal Communication

Use clear, respectful words.
Avoid hurtful language, shouting, or constant criticism.



Non-Verbal Communication

Be mindful of your body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice.



Active Listening

Pay full attention when someone speaks.
Show interest with nods, short affirmations ("yes," "I see"), and avoid interruptions.

Barriers to Good Communication

- **Interrupting** while the other person is speaking.
- **Judging or blaming** instead of listening.
- **Not paying attention** (distracted, using phone, thinking of something else).
- **Speaking in a harsh tone** or shouting, which creates fear instead of trust.
- **Making assumptions** — thinking we already know what the other person feels, without asking.



Building Healthy Communication

Respect

- Speak politely, even during disagreements.
- Avoid insulting or dismissive words.

Empathy

- Try to understand the other person's feelings.
- Put yourself in their situation before responding.

Clarity

- Be simple and clear in your words.
- Avoid giving mixed or confusing messages.

Feedback

After listening, summarise what you heard:
"So you are saying you feel upset because..."

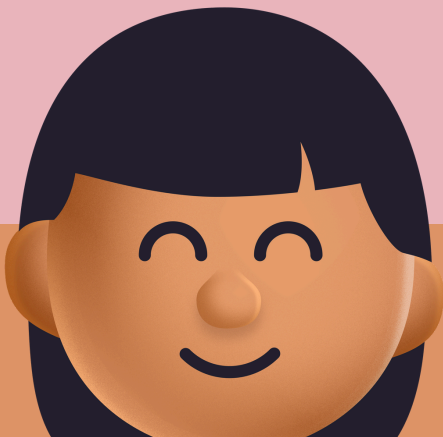
Note to facilitators

Encourage participants to role-play scenarios where poor communication causes conflict, and then show how improved communication can resolve it.

Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships

Healthy Relationships

- Built on trust, respect, and equality.
- Encourage open sharing of feelings without fear.
- Support each other in times of stress and celebrate achievements together.
- Allow space for individual growth — not controlling or restricting.



Unhealthy Relationships

- Based on control, fear, or disrespect.
- Signs include constant criticism, lack of trust, ignoring needs, or using violence.
- Such relationships increase stress, lower self-esteem, and harm mental health.



Check out the **START** course on the [TdH NL website](#) to learn more about trauma-informed approaches.



Note to facilitators

- Ask participants to share examples from daily life of healthy and unhealthy communication.
- Highlight that *respect and equality* are non-negotiable in all relationships.

Summary of Unit 3 : Communication and Relationships

- ✓ Good communication builds trust, reduces conflicts, and strengthens relationships.
- ✓ Listening with patience is as important as speaking clearly.
- ✓ Respect, empathy, and clarity are the foundations of healthy interaction.
- ✓ Healthy relationships are based on equality and mutual support, while unhealthy ones are marked by control, disrespect, and fear.

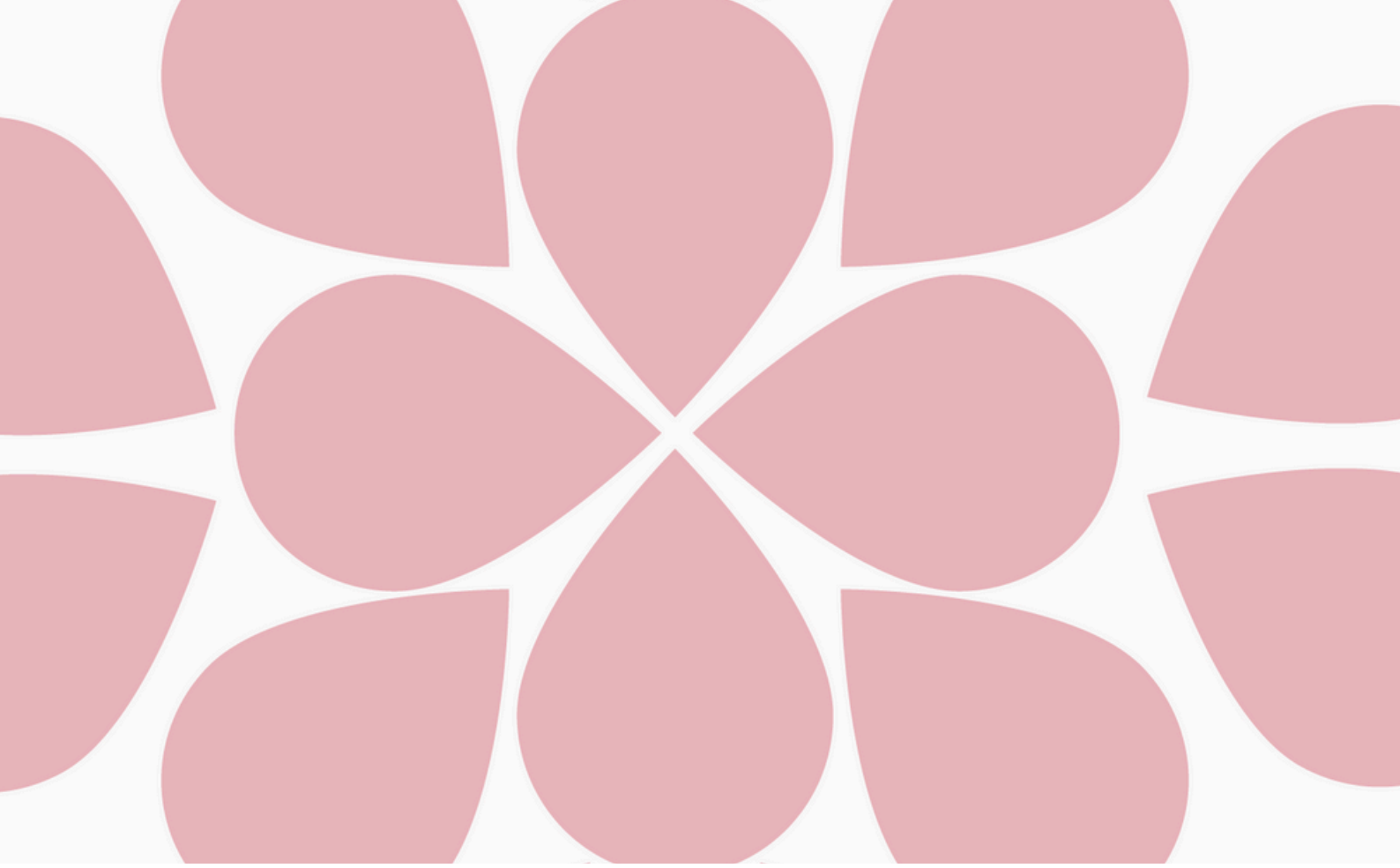
Reflection Activity

1. Share one example of a healthy communication experience you had recently.

2. Share one example of a difficult communication experience.

3. Discuss in groups: What could have been done differently in the difficult case?





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**When words are kind,
they heal the mind.**

Collective voice of early married girls
trained as mental health champions

Unit 4

Family & Community Engagement

Mental health is not only an individual matter — it is shaped by the family and community environment.



Supportive families and communities reduce stress and help individuals cope better.



On the other hand, neglect, stigma, and lack of communication make mental health challenges worse.



Family Engagement



Families play the first role in providing care and understanding.



Positive parenting — showing love, giving attention, guiding without controlling — strengthens children's and adolescents' wellbeing.



Involving all family members (not just women or mothers) ensures shared responsibility for mental health.

Community Engagement



Communities can create safe spaces where young people feel valued.



Local leaders, teachers, and health workers can raise awareness and reduce stigma.



Peer groups and self-help groups are important platforms for sharing experiences.

How Families Can Support Mental Health



Listen with Care

- Allow children and adolescents to share their feelings without interruption.
- Avoid judgment and criticism.



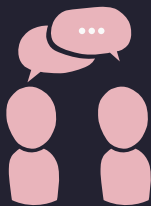
Encourage and Appreciate

- Recognise efforts and achievements, even small ones.
- Appreciation builds confidence and self-worth.



Share Responsibilities

- Household work should not fall only on girls or women.
- Equal sharing reduces stress and promotes fairness.

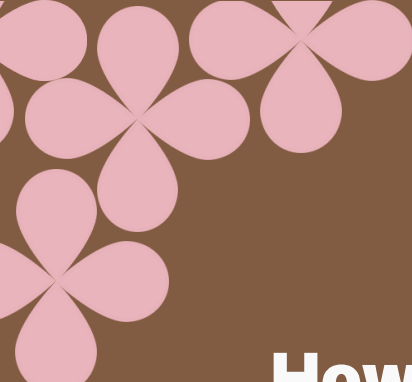


Resolve Conflicts Peacefully

- Disagreements are natural, but shouting or violence damages relationships.
- Calm discussions and compromise build harmony.

Note to facilitators

Encourage group discussions on “What changes can families make to reduce stress among adolescents?”



How Communities Can Support Mental Health



Awareness Programs

- Organise community meetings, street plays, or poster campaigns to reduce stigma around mental health.
- Share messages that seeking help is normal and necessary.



Safe Spaces

- Create youth clubs, peer groups, or community centers where adolescents can share freely.
- Ensure these spaces are inclusive and respectful of all.



Involve Local Leaders

- Village leaders, religious heads, teachers, and health workers can influence attitudes.
- Their positive support encourages acceptance and care.



Early Identification & Referral

- Communities should recognise signs of distress and connect individuals to health services quickly.

Note to facilitators

Ask participants: "What community resources exist here that can be used for mental health support?"

Collective Actions for Better Mental Health

Peer Support Groups

Encourage adolescents, especially married girls, to join peer groups where they can share challenges and learn coping strategies.

School Involvement

Teachers and school management committees can provide early support, identify stress, and guide children to resources.

Partnerships

Collaboration between NGOs, local government, and community organisations strengthens outreach and sustainability.

Community Health Workers

Social workers, nurses, and local health staff should be trained to recognise mental health issues and provide first-level counseling.

Check out the **START** course on the [TdH NL website](#) to learn more about trauma-informed approaches.

Note to facilitators

Ask participants to map local resources in their community (schools, clinics, leaders, NGOs) and plan how to connect them.

Summary of Unit 4 :

Family and Community Engagement

- ✓ Families and communities are central to mental wellbeing.
- ✓ Listening, encouragement, and shared responsibilities reduce stress at home.
- ✓ Communities can fight stigma, create safe spaces, and promote positive attitudes toward mental health.
- ✓ Working together — families, schools, health workers, NGOs, and leaders — creates a strong support system.

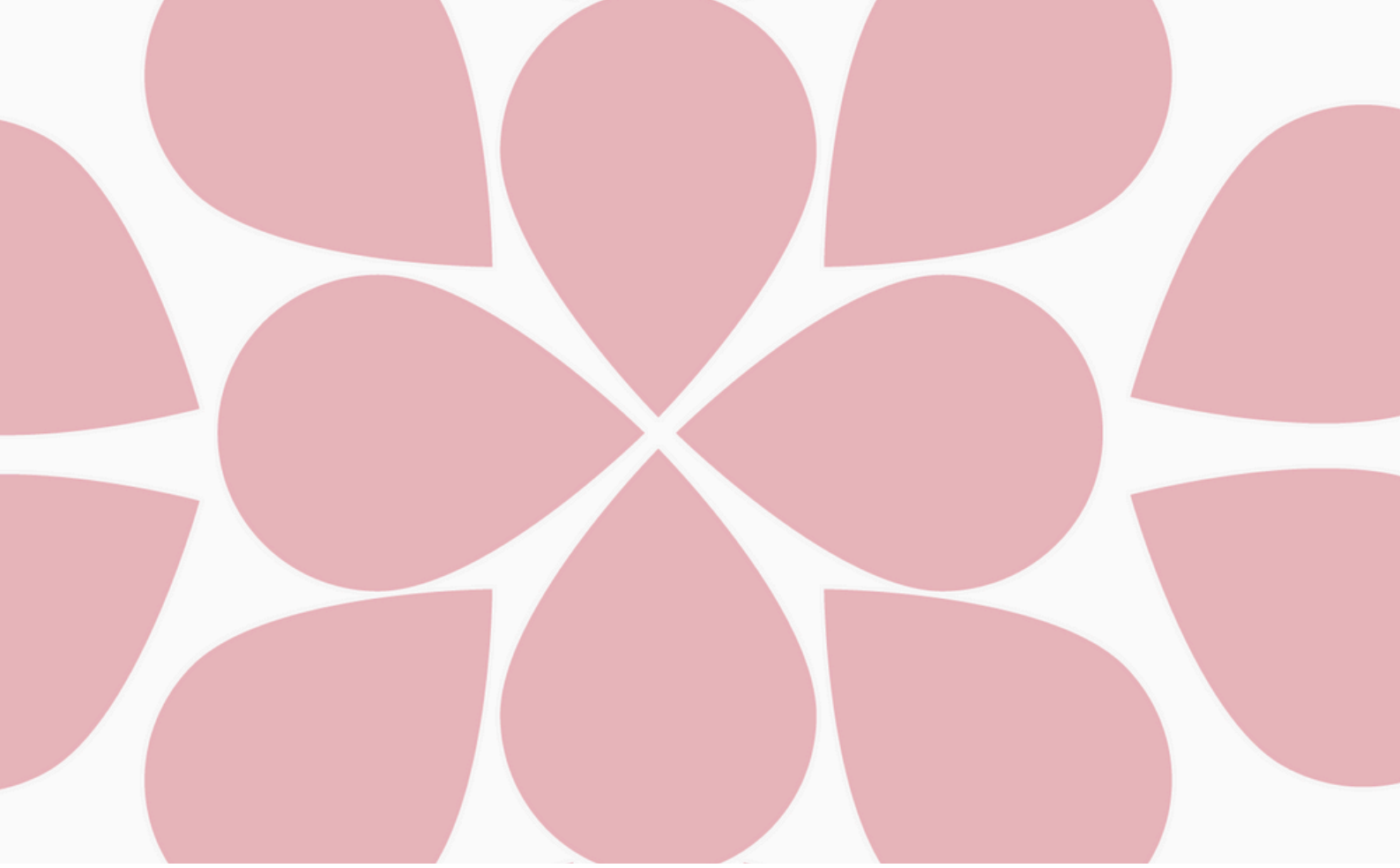
Reflection Activity

1. Identify one positive change families can make to support adolescents.

2. Identify one action the community can take to reduce stigma.

3. Plan a small group activity (street play, poster, or discussion) to spread awareness about mental health.





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**When the family and
community join hands,
the mind becomes a
place of peace.**

Collective voice of early married girls
trained as mental health champions

**Let children
Flourish!**



Acknowledgements

40 married adolescent girls under the Initiatives for Married Adolescent Girls' Empowerment (IMAGE) programme, Dr Vasudeva Sharma NV, PhD, SEVAK, Vidyanikethan, REACH, Arpanam Trust, Child Rights Trust, PMSR

Terre des Hommes Netherlands is a global child rights organisation working in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe. We protect children and prevent child exploitation, and empower children to make their voices count. We work as a catalyst for systemic change with the support of grassroots level implementing partners.

Children of India Foundation (CIF) is a grassroots level organisation and the lead implementing partner of Terre des Hommes Netherlands in India. CIF reaches out to children and families living in vulnerable socio-economic conditions and empowers children to develop to the best of their capabilities.