

Centring Young People in Mental Health Research

McPin
Foundation

Transforming
mental health
research



Creating Safe Spaces

The University of Birmingham Institute for Mental Health Youth Advisory Group, The McPin Young People's Advisory Group, The Supporting Adolescents with Self-Harm Young People's Advisory Group, Katrina Brooks, James Brown, Rowmell Hunter, Lizzie Mitchell, Chris Sims, Annabel Walsh, Lucienne Spencer, Niyah Campbell, Charlotte Saunders, Rachel Kimberley Temple and Emma Garavini

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About this resource

This resource has been produced through a partnership between The University of Birmingham (UoB), its Institute for Mental Health (IMH) and their Youth Advisory Group (YAG), and the McPin Foundation's own Young People's Advisory Group (YPAG), and the Supporting Adolescents with Self-Harm (SASH) YPAG.


Our aim is to put young people at the centre of mental health research that directly affects them through promotion of **best practice** and **shared learning** in youth involvement. Through scoping work, 1-1 consultations, surveys, joint meetings between the UoB IMH YAG & McPin YPAG, youth-led presentations/discussions and smaller working group meetings, we have reviewed current practices in youth involvement in mental health research. We've put those learnings into practice ourselves, and now we're sharing what we have learnt in the form of **three resources**.

The purpose of this resource is to share our learnings and act as a talking point for the **creation of safe spaces** when involving young people in mental health research. This resource could be useful for other youth involvement leads, those planning on setting up their own YPAG, those already running a YPAG, researchers planning on working with YPAG members, as well as young people interested in involvement work. We note that this resource should not be used as definitive guidelines, with youth involvement in mental health research continually evolving and ultimately highly context-dependent.



What have we learnt?

A 'safe space' is an environment in which young people feel comfortable disclosing their lived experience without fear of discrimination, breach of confidentiality, or risk to their wellbeing.



What does 'safe space' mean to you?
Maybe it's the comfort of your own bed,
Perhaps it's that feeling of protection,
Freedom to discuss what's in your head,
Having a safe place is important,
Because no matter the weather,
Tough times may hit like rain, sleet and snow,
But we can handle them better together,
Being able to speak out, write,
And express how we truly feel,
Allows us to explore our emotions,
It grounds you, makes you feel real,
When people share, we don't judge,
And when we disagree, we don't frown,
Our space is like a safety ring,
For those who are emotionally about to drown,
I believe in you, I'm proud of you,
Just a couple of powerful words,
They may be simple to you,
But someone, they're the best they've ever heard,
So, a safe place is what should be offered,
That's what this meeting gave me.

“

Everyone needs a space to be themselves, free from worrying about what others might think and potential harm. Sometimes your home and family, may not be that space, or school in fear of judgement and ridicule from other students, or even public transport, where I know I don't feel very safe even with the cameras and plenty of other people there always this nagging question in my mind not to be too loud, not put on my lipgloss, tone myself down be passive and don't look at anyone. With countless stories and news articles, it can be difficult to feel safe anywhere, but I always feel safe with my friends, being anywhere with them is my safe haven, so whenever it's possible I travel with them. Working with Mcpin I have never had to second guess myself, “Do I belong?”, with so many friendly faces and everyone being accommodating, I don't think I have ever had a negative experience.

”

The following pages cover the **3 key messages** young people highlighted as important for creating a safe space when involving young people in mental health research:

What helps you to feel safe during involvement in mental health research?



genuine understanding
ability to leave
we're supporting every1
being given opportunities
friendly people
being listened to
youth leads
atmosphere
inclusivity
anonymity
an open environment
openness
supportive
bringing people in
mutual respect
collaboration
like-minded people
good headspace
welcoming
diversity
creativity
acceptance
clear intentions
understanding
relatability
allyship
supportive staff
options
approachability
transparency
personable facilitators
relaxed informal
good facilitation
trust
why not
reciprocity
unique
good facilitators

1. Fostering Trust

Young people stressed the importance of fostering trust with everyone in the room in order to form a safe space.

Develop ground rules

Ground rules on **how to act, behave, speak, and what to do when things get difficult** are agreed on by everyone beforehand so that everyone knows what is expected from each other and feels comfortable and supported to contribute during activities. They may include things like:

- **Everyone is equal** - respect and listen to each other's contributions.
- **Avoid jargon or overly scientific language.**
- **Disclosure of lived experience is voluntary** – share as much or as little as you'd like, whilst being mindful of the impact it may have on others, and keep the lived experiences of others confidential.
- **What to do if need to take a break or support** during the activity.
- Specific ground rules depending on whether the involvement activity is in-person or online.

What skills do youth involvement leads / research teams need in order to create safe spaces for young people involved in mental health research?



1. Fostering Trust

Additional considerations for maintaining a safe space online

Background environment

- All attendees must consider the environment they are based in during an online meeting and its suitability.
- In the interest of confidentiality, it's best if the online meeting is not audible to anyone outside the group.
- However, whether young people have access to an appropriate space for an online meeting should also be considered – family members may be home, some young people may not be comfortable expressing their views at home or they don't have internet access, so they may need to go to a public setting.
- Young people should be asked, if they can, to find a private space, wear headphones and make use of the background blur feature to help limit the chances of disturbance, distractions and overhearing others' personal / sensitive information.

Cameras: on or off?

- Some encourage all attendees to keep their cameras on during an online meeting to create a community atmosphere and for safeguarding reasons.
- However, young people felt that having permission to turn their camera off was overall beneficial to a feeling of safety with mentions of worries over body image, generally feeling more comfortable sharing their lived experience with the camera off, or in meetings after school time, younger family members being present in the background.
- Young people acknowledged how cameras on during online meetings can play a role in safeguarding, but they felt safeguarding could still be done successfully via other processes already in place that aren't reliant on the camera.
- E.g. Traffic light system / emoji check-ins every so often during the online meeting, private message, separate breakout room for a 1-to-1 chat.



1. Fostering Trust

Develop a rapport

- The **quality of the relationship** between young people and the youth involvement lead and/or researchers was considered very important, with young people emphasising certain qualities that foster trust and contribute to forming a safe space:
 - Friendly, able to create a relaxed and inclusive atmosphere.
 - Feel like part of the group even though they are facilitating.
 - Show up for you, show they care, with the wellbeing of the young person always at the forefront.
 - Diverse, from marginalised communities themselves.
- The opportunity to have a **1-to-1 chat** with youth involvement leads beforehand – phone, video call, in-person.
- The opportunity to **meet the researchers** beforehand.
- Time dedicated to **introductions and icebreakers**, including the youth involvement leads and researchers divulging a little about themselves, thus reducing the authority gap.
- **Consistency** of youth involvement leads and researchers attending each involvement activity for stability so young people don't have to adapt to new faces each time, and so a stronger rapport can be built over time.
- **Additional optional activities** outside of the involvement work to allow young people to get to know each other, and become more confident in participation in group discussions.

“ Having a [youth-involvement lead / researcher] who understands the challenges that those who come from an underrepresented background may face: e.g. ‘I am talking to a room of white faces’.”

“ As a young person, you feel safer in a stable place, working with a team of people you see often.”

“ Young people form trust with researchers if it is clear they want to work with the young people and value the opinion of young people. It helps young people to feel like they are making a difference, rather than as a type of tick box exercise.”

1. Fostering Trust

Consider group size and power dynamics

- Large groups may be overwhelming, with smaller groups feeling less intimidating, but too small and the young people may feel put on the spot and less confident to contribute.
- Make use of breakout rooms for discussions, followed by whole group feedback.
- Consider who else is present and whether it is necessary - the presence of too many staff members can prevent the development of a rapport and impact the atmosphere and discussions.
- Staff members should never outnumber young people

Additional considerations for ensuring a safe space for all:

- All young people, no matter their background or lived experience, should feel safe.
- It is important to acknowledge that whilst a space may feel safe for some young people with lived experience of mental health issues, it may not for those from intersecting marginalised groups, subject to greater discrimination.
- Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches and **be flexible** to accommodate the needs of young people from all walks of life.
- Young people also expressed there may sometimes be a need to **manage anxieties** around this e.g. if there is a larger age range including younger ages, or skewed gender / ethnicity ratios and want to disclose honestly but worry about saying something inappropriate, triggering, sensitive, or controversial.
- They emphasised the importance of ground rules and icebreakers in this, as well as the role of the facilitator in reassuring that what is said doesn't have to be a perfectly established point, and **“as long as everyone is willing to learn, it's ok to talk about uncomfortable or sensitive topics”**.



2. Confidentiality and Consent

Create an environment in which young people feel their privacy is respected from the offset.

Assure confidentiality

- Through the **creation of Terms of Engagement (ToE)** prior to any involvement activity, which should include:
 - Personal / sensitive information will not be shared without permission.
 - Young people will not be described in a way that might identify the individuals.
 - Individuals should only disclose their own lived experience, without sharing the experiences of, or identifying anyone else, in the group.
 - Specific ToE for if the involvement activity is in-person or online e.g. not to take screenshots during an online meeting, whether the meeting is being photographed/recorded, and the reason why.
- **The ground rules & ToE apply to everyone who attends the involvement activity, including youth involvement leads, researchers, and any other attendees.**

Ask for consent

- Young people must consent to any involvement activity they may participate in.
- If a youth involvement lead and/or researcher wishes to create an output (whether big or small) using insights from young people, they must **gain the consent of all those involved**, and check whether each individual wishes to be named or remain anonymous – this is particularly important for photos and audio or video recordings that may include identifiable features.



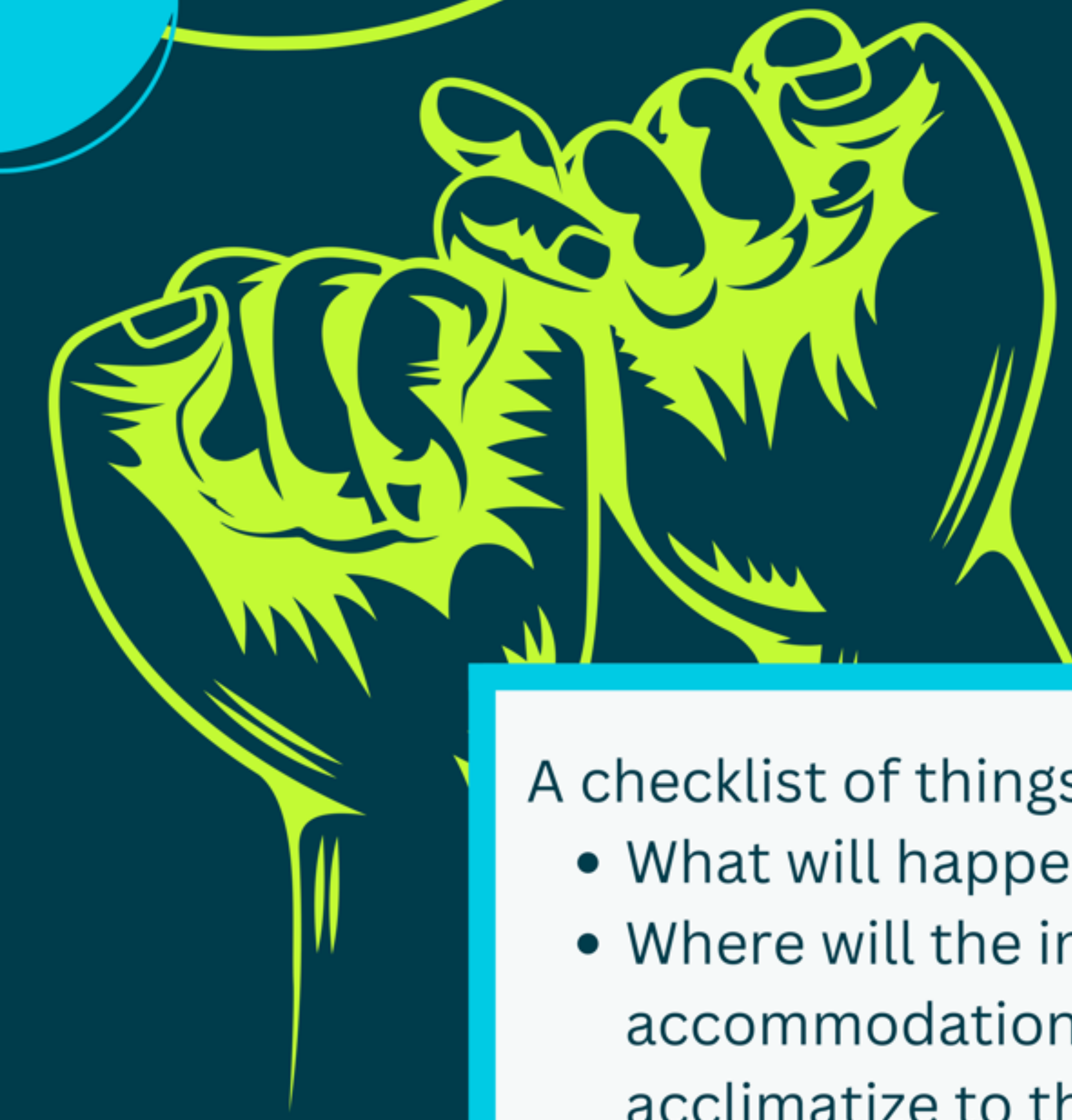
2. Confidentiality and Consent

Ensure it is informed consent

- Youth involvement leads and researchers need to **provide as much information as possible, in as clear as way as possible**, about the involvement activity / output so young people can fully understand what it is they are consenting to.
- Providing this information **as far in advance** of the involvement activity / output as possible can also help to eliminate unknowns, allow young people to mentally prepare, set expectations and overall contribute to the feeling of a safe space.

A checklist of things young people should know before an involvement activity:

- What will happen to personal / sensitive information?
- Where will the involvement activity be? If in-person – travel expenses / accommodation, option to travel with someone, option to arrive early to acclimatize to the environment, assigned seats etc.
- What is the involvement activity for – provision of research project summary.
- Who else will be present during the involvement activity - provision of attendance list & information on researchers.
- What will happen during the involvement activity – provision of an agenda.
- What is their role during the involvement activity?
- Could the involvement activity be triggering? If so, what is the triggering content?
- Will any outputs be developed, where would they be shared, and would they be kept there permanently?
- Whether / how to withdraw consent.
- Emergency procedures – who to contact if struggling, who would be informed, and what personal / sensitive information would need to be passed on.



3. Feeling Unsafe

Certain topics and sharing lived experiences, particularly those concerning mental health, can be emotionally difficult and potentially triggering. This does not necessarily mean that topics should be censored; however, there are a number of things youth involvement leads and researchers can do both in advance of an involvement activity or if a space starts to feel unsafe as the activity goes on:

What steps could be taken to help young people to feel safer during involvement in mental health research?

Trigger warnings

- Young people should be made aware in advance if the content may be triggering.
- Potentially triggering discussions could be scheduled for a particular time, so that young people who wish to avoid these discussions do not need to be excluded from the whole meeting.
- Even if young people agree to participate in potentially triggering discussions, youth involvement leads and researchers ought to make continual assessments of the feeling of the room / check-in with individuals that seem off.
- Provide option to compile thoughts in a word document and email after the meeting, for those who are worried about triggering others, not wanting to interrupt others whilst they are disclosing on a sensitive topic, not in the right headspace at the time of the meeting, or uncomfortable sharing in a group space.



3. Feeling Unsafe

Individual wellbeing plans

- It may not always be obvious what content may be triggering for a young person.
- Likewise, each young person is likely to be different in how they want to be supported.
- An individual well-being plan can be completed by the young person in advance, indicating their specific needs and accommodations, what may be triggering for them, signs they may be feeling unsafe, how they'd like to be supported, and an emergency contact.



Contacts

- Young people should be made aware in advance of who in the team they can contact, and how, if they are feeling unsafe, as well as appropriate sign-posting.
- This contact should be available before, during, and after the involvement activity.
- Ideally, this contact should also have mental health first aid training, to help them best support the young people throughout.

Reminders of the ground rules

- Provide a reminder of the ground rules at the beginning of each involvement activity, in particular that:
 - They are not required to, and should not feel pressured to disclose their lived experiences beyond what they feel comfortable sharing.
 - Regular breaks will be built into the involvement activity, but that they can take a break whenever they need to, so long as they let someone know.



3. Feeling Unsafe

Emergency procedures

- Young people should also be made aware in advance of emergency procedures, which should be transparent.
- If a youth involvement lead or researcher has concerns about a young person's well-being and safety, they should:
 - Limit the number of people who get involved, with only the necessary people informed to respect the privacy of the young person.
 - Attempt to check-in directly with the young person first, before using the emergency contact to avoid unintended consequences.

“...assumption from young people when sharing experiences that the [youth-involvement lead / researcher] will keep this information to themselves. It is important that the young person is aware of...what would denote their words being raised with the team and enacting safeguarding polices...so they can consider the potential consequences to sharing their lived experience.”



3. Feeling Unsafe

Additional considerations

Before / During:

- Individual well-being plan could include a pre-agreed discreet gesture or safe word that could covertly inform the contact that the young person is uncomfortable and wishes to leave.
- Text / private message the contact specifying if they just need a break, want to leave the room / enter a breakout room for a 1-to-1 chat or leave.
- Traffic light system / emoji check-ins – i.e., placement of green, amber or red card or sharing of a particular emoji as an indicator of how the young person is doing.

After:

- Dedicated time set aside after the involvement activity for a young person to check-in if needed or just to chat.
- A well-being check-in via email a few days after a particularly intense involvement activity that may have a longer-lasting impact that is not apparent immediately after.
- Online open spaces every few months.

Personally, I feel that safe spaces are essential when it comes to any meeting, whether online or in-person. My top priorities would ensure that each person feels listened to and their voice is respected by all within a group setting. I have had this experience throughout projects that McPin have conducted and I have participated in. There is a sense of mutual understanding and a space which feels non-judgemental each time we have had a meeting. I feel like I can be more myself, relaxed and have a genuine conversation and relationship if a safe space is created; whether online or face-to-face. The main thing I would conclude with is ensuring that any young person that does help out in mental health research is given the opportunity to speak and if they feel unable to, then privately being able to go an individual for support is something that would make me feel confident that I am not going to be judged and I know I have got a backup plan in place in case I am feeling unsafe and in need of further support. -Chris



Make sure to take a look at our 2 other resources on youth involvement in mental health:

[Youth-led Approach](#)
[Ensuring Diversity & Inclusivity](#)



[The McPin Foundation](#)
[McPin Young People's Network](#)
[UoB IMH](#)
[UoB IMH YAG](#)



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[@mcpinypnetwork](#)



contact@mcpin.org
imh@contacts.bham.ac.uk

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[Involve young people in your research](#)

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Further resources

NIHR Oxford Health BRC - Patient and Public Involvement - Young People's Involvement - Research on sensitive topics: briefing for researchers

NIHR Oxford Health BRC - Patient and Public Involvement - Young People's Involvement - Ground rules for digital meetings

McPin YPN Young People's Ground Rules and Meeting Tips

Checklist for co-creating safe spaces for young people participating in research

Safe and Brave Spaces Don't Work (and What You Can Do Instead)

Trauma-informed youth engagement toolkit