

Project reference number: 2024-1-PL01-KA220-YOU-00024343

Summary report of the workshop implemented within the framework of the project RECOVER: **Youth Wellbeing recovery Kit**, Work Package no 02,

PARTNER: European Multidisciplinary Organization for Training and international Consulting

NATIONAL CONTEXT ON YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN AUSTRIA

National Summary Report – Austria

Executive Summary

This report presents a comprehensive overview of the **A3/R3 Human-Centred Participatory Self-Analysis Workshop** conducted in Vienna, Austria, on 15 March (as part of the RECOVER project). The one-day workshop brought together 15 young people (aged 18–23) and 5 youth workers in a series of interactive sessions guided by the “*Healing Dragons*” manual. Two trained facilitators led the process, which focused on empowering youth to reflect on their mental health challenges and strengths in a supportive, participatory environment.

The workshop was a response to pressing youth mental health needs in Austria, providing a safe space for participants to share personal experiences, learn coping strategies, and collaboratively identify solutions. **All four sessions** took a creative and youth-driven approach: from ice-breakers and personal storytelling to group problem-solving and action planning. Participants engaged deeply in activities such as identifying personal “dragons” (challenges) and exploring ways to “heal” or overcome them with collective support.

Key outcomes of the workshop include increased self-awareness among youth, strengthened peer support networks, and practical ideas for improving youth mental health resources. The youth workers involved reported that the participatory format enhanced their understanding of young people’s needs, and facilitators observed notable growth in participants’ confidence and openness over the course of the day. Challenges encountered (such as initial hesitation to speak or emotional intensity) were managed through a flexible, empathetic facilitation approach.

Overall, the workshop proved to be a **successful pilot** of the RECOVER project’s participatory methodology in Austria. It highlighted the importance of youth-centric design in mental health interventions and produced valuable insights. This report concludes with recommendations to sustain and scale such workshops, integrate youth voices into policy, and ensure follow-up support. It also includes testimonials from youth workers and participants, as well as facilitator reflections, all underscoring the transformative impact of the experience. The annexes provide supplementary materials (agenda, activity templates, and visual documentation) for reference and future replication.

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National Context: Youth Mental Health in Austria

Adolescents and young adults in Austria have seen a noticeable dip in mental health since COVID-19 disrupted daily life, learning patterns and social routines. Parents, teachers and clinicians report more frequent cases of anxiety, low mood and general uncertainty. Young people themselves describe a sense of constant pressure combined with fewer reliable outlets for stress relief. Researchers therefore emphasise the need to look closely at everyday contexts—school, social media and life planning—to understand why this age group is struggling and how best to help.

Academic pressure stands out as the single most-cited stressor. Austrian students routinely juggle dense timetables, frequent exams and intense grade competition, often on top of after-school jobs or extracurricular activities (Baumann et al., 2022). This “always-on” workload leaves little time for rest or hobbies, and many youth feel as if any slip in performance will have long-term career consequences. The pandemic did not reduce academic expectations; instead, online learning sometimes made lessons more compressed, forcing students to teach themselves entire units at home.

Evidence links these heavy study loads to higher rates of anxiety and depressive symptoms (Gansner et al., 2021; Yamini & Pujar, 2022). Students who report being “overloaded” also show more sleep problems, irritability and somatic complaints such as headaches. The risk intensifies at schools that lack counsellors or flexible policies—factors that normally cushion academic stress (Libon et al., 2022). In such environments, young people are left to cope alone, increasing the odds of burnout or disengagement.

Pressure to perform academically is magnified by the digital age. Marks, scholarship offers and university acceptances are now posted publicly on Instagram stories or TikTok videos, turning grades into social capital (Hamilton et al., 2024). Students may compare themselves to top achievers online and feel inadequate if their own results do not seem equally “post-worthy.” This blend of academic stakes and social display heightens the emotional cost of even minor setbacks.

Social media is, however, a double-edged sword. Platforms let users find communities, express creativity and share resources—often a lifeline during lockdown. Yet excessive scrolling has been tied to increased depression and anxiety among teens (Gupta et al., 2022; Awad & Connors, 2023). When youth spend hours online, they are more likely to encounter highly edited images of success and happiness, creating unrealistic benchmarks.

Positive experiences do exist online. Peer-support pages, livestream mindfulness sessions and mental-health hashtags can promote coping and solidarity (Vaingankar et al., 2022).

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Still, negative comparison loops, cyber-bullying and distorted ideals remain common. Victims of digital harassment often see steep declines in self-esteem and rising social withdrawal (Yamini & Pujar, 2022; Salvaya, 2024). During lockdowns, many Austrian adolescents replaced in-person interaction with screen time, intensifying feelings of isolation despite constant connectivity (Ghanayem et al., 2024).

Underneath these day-to-day stressors lies a deeper feeling: powerlessness. Large numbers of youth worry they have limited control over career prospects, housing affordability or broader social stability (Um et al., 2024). When job markets look volatile and climate news grows dire, it is easy to doubt one's future (Abas et al., 2023). This outlook can spiral into a feedback loop of anxiety, rumination and disengagement.

Encouragingly, programmes that give young people an active voice show measurable benefits. Participatory, youth-led projects invite adolescents to design workshops, run campaigns and evaluate services, boosting their sense of agency (Vaingankar et al., 2021). Peer-support circles built around shared experiences reduce loneliness and normalise help-seeking (Yu et al., 2024). Participants often report more confidence, stronger friendships and concrete coping strategies.

Digital innovation adds further support. Apps that teach mood-tracking, grounding techniques or psycho-education allow discreet, 24-hour access to help (Lee, 2022). Combined with in-person guidance, such tools can scaffold day-to-day self-care routines, especially when professional therapy is unavailable or wait-listed.

A collaborative model ties these pieces together. When schools, health providers and youth organisations co-plan interventions, programmes fit real student schedules and preferences (Kemp et al., 2021). Skill-building sessions that explore emotions, goal-setting and stress regulation let students tackle feelings of helplessness in structured ways (Shalaby, 2024). Community projects that elevate youth voices strengthen neighbourhood resilience and empower the next generation of local leaders (Schneidtinger & Haslinger-Baumann, 2019; Liang, 2022).

Policies tailored to local needs can lower stigma and improve outcomes. School-based mental-health policies—counsellor ratios, flexible exam timetables, mandatory wellbeing classes—have been linked to fewer disciplinary incidents and higher student satisfaction (Jenkins et al., 2020; Arubuola, 2023). When civic leaders adopt similar frameworks, youth start to feel supported not only by peers but also by institutions.

Comprehensive strategies must balance reducing risk factors with fostering resilience. Programmes that ignore protective elements may overlook valuable strengths such as peer solidarity or family support (Oloyede et al., 2024). Equally, a supportive public narrative—

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media stories that validate mental-health struggles and promote help-seeking—encourages youth to speak up rather than isolate (Kerai et al., 2022).

Combined, these insights suggest a clear path forward. To reverse post-COVID declines in mental health, Austria should ease academic overload, promote healthy digital habits and offer meaningful roles for youth in programme design. Coupled with accessible professional care, empowerment-based initiatives can shift today’s risk landscape into a platform for individual growth and community wellbeing.

On the positive side, mental health has gained visibility in the national discourse. The Austrian government and NGOs have launched initiatives in recent years to improve youth mental health services and reduce stigma. Schools increasingly incorporate psycho-educational programs, and campaigns encourage open conversation about mental wellbeing. **Youth participation** is being recognized as crucial in these efforts – involving young people in designing solutions leads to more effective and empowering outcomes[9]. The RECOVER project aligns with this national context by emphasizing human-centred and participatory approaches, ensuring that youth are not just recipients of mental health support but active co-creators of their healing journey. This workshop in Vienna was conceived against this backdrop, aiming to address local youth needs through engagement, empathy, and empowerment.

Methodology and Participant Profile

Workshop Approach: The workshop employed a *participatory self-analysis* methodology. This means that participants were placed at the core of the process, actively analyzing their own experiences and needs with guidance rather than being passive recipients of instruction. All activities were drawn from the “*Healing Dragons*” manual, a toolkit of interactive exercises designed to help young people explore mental health topics in a creative and supportive way. These exercises ranged from personal reflection tasks to collaborative group work, each encouraging honest communication and mutual understanding. The approach is grounded in the idea that when youth participate in shaping the discussion and solutions, the outcomes are more relevant and empowering for them[9]. Throughout the workshop, facilitators practiced inclusive techniques (such as circle discussions, brainstorming on flip charts, and art-based reflection) to ensure every voice was heard. Confidentiality and emotional safety were emphasized as foundational principles, given the sensitive nature of personal mental health stories.

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Participant Recruitment: The 15 youth participants (ages 18–23) were recruited through local youth centers and university networks in Vienna. All expressed interest in mental well-being and personal development. Within this group, there was a balance of genders (eight young women and seven young men) and a diversity of backgrounds. Many were students (high school graduates or early university level), while a few were employed or in vocational training; some had prior involvement in youth programs, and others were first-timers in a workshop setting. This mix enriched the discussions, as participants brought different perspectives – from academic stress to job-related anxiety – reflecting a broad spectrum of youth experiences. Notably, a few participants had migrant family backgrounds, mirroring Vienna’s multicultural youth population, which added valuable intercultural viewpoints on mental health and stigma.

Youth Workers: In addition to the youth participants, 5 youth workers (professional and volunteer youth leaders) took part. Their role in the workshop was twofold: *observational and supportive*. They were on hand to support group activities, ensure well-being of participants, and also to learn from the process. These individuals (three women and two men, mid-20s to mid-30s) work in roles such as community youth counselors, a school social worker, and NGO project staff focused on youth engagement. By involving youth workers, the workshop sought to bridge the gap between youth and service providers – allowing the workers to **experience participatory methods** in action and to hear youth insights directly. This builds their capacity to apply similar approaches in their daily work.

Facilitation: The session was led by 2 facilitators from the RECOVER project team, both experienced in youth work and psychosocial support. They acted not as lecturers, but as guides and moderators. Their responsibilities included introducing activities, managing time, fostering a respectful atmosphere, and intervening if emotional support was needed. Prior to the workshop, the facilitators underwent training in the Healing Dragons manual to ensure fidelity to its exercises and philosophy. They also prepared materials (flip charts, markers, creativity kits) and a comfortable venue setup (a large room at a Vienna community center arranged with a circle of chairs and breakout tables) to encourage open interaction.

Schedule: The workshop was conducted in a single day divided into four main sessions (morning and afternoon, with breaks in between). In brief:

- *Session 1:* Introduction and Icebreakers – setting ground rules, building trust, and framing the concept of “personal dragons” (challenges) in mental health.
- *Session 2:* Self-Analysis Activities – individual and small-group work from the Healing Dragons manual, prompting youths to reflect on their emotions, stressors, and coping mechanisms.

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- *Session 3: Group Dialogue and Problem Solving* – collective exercises (including a SWOT analysis and creative brainstorming) to identify common issues and envision solutions.

- *Session 4: Reflection and Action Planning* – guided reflection on lessons learned, sharing testimonials, and each participant developing a personal “action plan” or positive step to take forward.

The methodology was thus highly interactive and *participatory by design*, tailoring the day’s flow to the participants’ pace and feedback. This ensured that the content remained relevant to the actual needs of the youth present, and it modeled a form of peer-supported learning that aligns with best practices in youth mental health empowerment.

Workshop Implementation

Session 1: Opening & Trust-Building (9:00–10:30). The day began with a warm welcome and an overview of the workshop’s purpose. Facilitators introduced the *RECOVER* project context and the metaphor of “Healing Dragons,” explaining that “*dragons*” represent the challenges or fears we carry inside. To establish a comfortable atmosphere, a round of icebreakers was conducted. One icebreaker, “*My Strength Shield*,” had each participant share one personal strength or positive trait, helping the group get acquainted on an uplifting note. Ground rules were co-created with input from participants – emphasizing respect, confidentiality, listening without judgment, and the right to pass if anyone felt uncomfortable sharing. As an introductory activity, everyone was invited to reflect silently and write down one “dragon” they face in their life (for example, anxiety about exams, unemployment fears, family pressure). They then anonymously placed these notes in a box. The facilitators drew out a few and read them (without identifying anyone), to illustrate common themes and show that many are dealing with similar issues. This simple exercise immediately set a tone of solidarity: nods and relieved smiles around the circle indicated that participants felt less alone in their struggles. By the end of Session 1, a basic level of trust was built, and the group was ready to delve deeper.

Session 2: Individual Reflection & Self-Analysis (10:45–12:30). In this mid-morning session, activities from the *Healing Dragons manual* guided participants through introspection and creative expression. One key activity was “*Meet Your Dragon*” – a guided visualization where participants closed their eyes and imagined their personal challenge as a dragon, observing its appearance, what emotions it carried, and how it “speaks” to them. Afterwards, youths were given art supplies (papers, markers, clay) to **create a representation of their dragon** – through drawing or modeling – and then journal briefly about why their dragon looks the way it does. The facilitators and youth workers walked around offering support or quiet conversation as needed. Some participants sketched symbolic creatures (for example, a dragon tangled in school books to represent academic stress; a dragon with a social media icon as a heart to represent online pressure). Others wrote poems or descriptions instead of drawing. Following the creative phase, those who

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felt comfortable did a “*gallery walk*” where each person explained their dragon to a small subgroup. This was a powerful moment: many participants opened up about personal stories (one young woman described how her “dragon of self-doubt” grew during the pandemic lockdowns; a young man spoke of a “dragon of loneliness” after moving to the city for university). Peers responded with empathy, some saying “I feel that way too.” The facilitators ensured that each sharing was met with applause or encouragement. By externalizing their issues as dragons, participants could discuss difficult feelings with a bit of distance and even humor. Session 2 concluded with a brief mindfulness exercise to recenter, as some discussions became emotional. All participants took a break for lunch feeling heard and supported, having identified the key issues they wanted to tackle.

Session 3: Collaborative Analysis & Problem-Solving (13:30–15:00). After lunch, the energy was refocused on collective brainstorming and finding ways to “tame” or heal the dragons identified. The session opened with a *SWOT analysis exercise* (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) applied to youth mental health in the participants’ context (detailed results are in the next section of this report). Participants broke into two mixed groups (ensuring a mix of youth and youth workers in each) to discuss and write down on flip charts:

- **Strengths:** personal or community strengths that help youth face mental health challenges (e.g., supportive friends, access to online resources).
- **Weaknesses:** gaps or personal difficulties (e.g., stigma, lack of safe spaces, feeling of powerlessness).
- **Opportunities:** external opportunities to improve matters (e.g., interest in mental health among youth, supportive programs like RECOVER, social media as a tool for outreach).
- **Threats:** external risks (e.g., academic pressure, economic uncertainty, negative social influences).

Each group got creative, using sticky notes cut into small dragon shapes to categorize points on the SWOT poster. Lively discussions ensued – for instance, one group debated whether “social media” is a weakness or an opportunity, ultimately placing it on both sides with notes explaining it can spread awareness **and** cause anxiety. After 30 minutes, the groups reconvened and presented their SWOT findings to each other. It was evident that many issues were shared across groups. This analytical exercise segued into solution ideation. Using a method called “*Dragon Taming Plans*,” participants paired up to tackle one “dragon” (challenge) at a time. Each pair chose a common challenge (such as “pressure to succeed” or “feeling alone”) and brainstormed **practical steps or resources** that could help address it. Ideas were then shared popcorn-style: one pair proposed creating a weekly student support circle on campus; another suggested a social media campaign where youth post real feelings to counter the perfectionism online; others mentioned leveraging existing

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mental health hotlines or having more relatable counselors at youth centers. Youth workers in the room contributed ideas from their experience, for example, one noted a free counseling service that many youth hadn't heard of. All suggestions were compiled on a large poster titled *"Healing Strategies."* By the end of Session 3, the mood was notably hopeful and proactive—participants saw that for each "dragon," there are ways to respond, especially when working together.

Session 4: Reflection, Feedback & Closing (15:15–16:30). The final session aimed to consolidate learning and ensure every participant left with a sense of achievement and next steps. It began with a personal reflection: each participant was given a template called *"My Hero's Pledge"* (a play on the workshop's metaphor, encouraging them to be the hero in their own story). On this sheet, they wrote down **one commitment** to themselves (for example, *"I will practice a relaxation exercise when I feel overwhelmed"* or *"I will reach out to my friend instead of isolating when sad"*). They also listed one strength they discovered about themselves during the workshop and one supportive connection they made (someone they could reach out to afterward). Afterward, a voluntary sharing circle allowed a few people to voice their pledges or general thoughts. One young participant stood up and said, *"My pledge is to silence my dragon of self-criticism by remembering how much everyone here cares. I've never felt this understood before."* This was met with hugs and applause spontaneously.

Facilitators then conducted a quick evaluation activity using a large poster with a drawn thermometer (to gauge satisfaction). Participants placed a sticker on the thermometer from 1 (not useful) to 10 (extremely useful) to rate the workshop. All stickers clustered between 8 and 10, with the majority at **10**, reflecting high satisfaction. In discussion, many voiced that they would love more sessions like this. The youth workers also gave brief feedback in the circle, thanking the youth for their trust and vowing to carry these insights into their work. Finally, the facilitators closed with a summary of the day's journey—acknowledging the courage it took for everyone to participate fully—and an invitation to stay connected. Each participant received a small *"Healing Dragons"* booklet (containing tips and local mental health resources) as a take-home gift. The workshop ended in a round of applause and a group photo. Some participants lingered to chat with each other and with the facilitators, already forming an informal support network.

In summary, the implementation of the workshop was dynamic and participant-driven. All planned activities from the manual were executed, but facilitators remained responsive to the group's emotional needs—adding a mindfulness pause here, or a quick energizer game there (like a silly group dragon roar) when energy dipped. This adaptability ensured that the objectives were met: participants engaged in self-analysis, shared openly, learned collectively, and walked away with both personal insights and a sense of community. The success of the implementation is reflected in the positive outcomes and feedback detailed in later sections of this report.

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SWOT Analysis

As part of the workshop's collaborative exercises, participants and youth workers conducted a SWOT analysis focusing on **youth mental health support in their context and the workshop's approach**. This exercise helped identify internal positives and negatives (strengths and weaknesses) as well as external factors that could aid or hinder progress (opportunities and threats). The findings are summarized below:

Strengths

- **Engaged Youth and Peer Support:** Participants displayed high levels of engagement and honesty during discussions. A major strength identified was the strong peer support evident in the group – youth felt comfortable sharing once trust was built, showing that *young people are willing to support one another* when given a safe space.
- **Effective Participatory Methodology:** The use of creative, participatory activities (from the Healing Dragons manual) was seen as a strength. These methods made it easier to talk about tough issues (e.g., using the “dragon” metaphor) and empowered youth to lead the conversation. The approach tapped into participants’ creativity and personal knowledge, which was motivating and made the content feel relevant.
- **Dedicated Facilitators and Supportive Environment:** The presence of trained facilitators and youth workers who were compassionate and was highlighted as a strength. It ensured a **supportive environment** where everyone’s input was valued. Moreover, the facilitators’ flexibility (adapting the pace, providing emotional support when needed) and the clear ground rules established contributed to feelings of safety and respect.
- **Participant Diversity:** The mix of participants (different genders, backgrounds, experiences) was considered a strength because it brought multiple viewpoints and allowed for rich peer learning. Youth realized that mental health struggles cut across different groups, thereby reducing stigma and fostering empathy among them.

Weaknesses

- **Time Constraints:** A one-day workshop was noted as a limitation. There was *not enough time* to delve into every topic deeply or to allow everyone to share fully. Some participants felt certain discussions were cut short due to the schedule. The intensity of covering all activities in a single day was tiring for a few individuals, which could limit absorption of information by the end.
- **Emotional Intensity and Limited Professional Support:** Given the personal nature of the workshop, emotional moments were inevitable. A weakness identified was that there was no on-site mental health professional (e.g., a counselor or psychologist) specifically designated for immediate support if someone had experienced severe distress. While facilitators were trained in psychosocial support and handled emotional moments well, the group acknowledged it would be better to have a counselor on standby for particularly

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difficult

crises.

- **Initial Reluctance and Engagement Gap:** At the beginning, some participants were reluctant to speak up or skeptical about the “dragons” concept. A couple of youth workers pointed out that *a few very shy participants* spoke very little in large group settings (even if they engaged in small groups). Thus, a weakness is that not everyone’s voice may have been fully heard, especially those who needed more time or a different format to express themselves. This suggests the need for follow-up to engage those quieter individuals or alternative methods (like written input) for them.

- **Resource Awareness:** It emerged that many participants had low awareness of existing mental health resources (helplines, counseling services) before the workshop. This was identified as a weakness in the broader context: even though resources exist in Austria, they aren’t reaching youth effectively. The workshop itself tried to address this by sharing a resource booklet, but initially, this gap was a hindrance to seeking help.

Opportunities

- **Momentum for Continued Engagement:** The enthusiasm generated offers an opportunity to form ongoing peer support groups or follow-up sessions. Participants expressed interest in staying connected (e.g., via a WhatsApp group or periodic meetups). This momentum can be harnessed to create a sustained youth-led support network in Vienna, building on the trust formed.

- **Scaling and Replication:** There is an opportunity to **replicate this workshop model** in other regions of Austria or in schools/universities. The positive feedback indicates that similar participatory workshops could be welcomed elsewhere. The materials (like the Healing Dragons manual and the techniques piloted) can be adapted for different groups. Moreover, youth workers who participated can now champion this approach in their own organizations, potentially training colleagues and spreading the methodology.

- **Support from Organizations and Policy Environment:** Institutions such as local youth centers, NGOs, and even municipal authorities are increasingly interested in youth mental health initiatives. This creates opportunities for collaboration and funding. For instance, an NGO might partner with RECOVER to host more workshops; schools might integrate a session into their health curriculum. The broader policy trend in Austria towards youth participation means there could be backing (grants or endorsements) for projects that involve young people in co-creating solutions.

- **Digital Tools and Media:** Participants identified that social media and digital platforms, while a source of stress, are also an opportunity to reach more youth with positive messages. There’s a chance to develop online extensions of the workshop – for example, a moderated forum or an Instagram campaign where young people share “#MyHealingDragon” stories. Such initiatives can amplify the impact beyond the physical

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workshop, engaging youth who couldn't attend and normalizing discussions on mental health on platforms where youth spend time.

Threats

- **Persistent Stigma and Cultural Barriers:** Despite progress, mental health stigma remains a threat. Some participants mentioned they might still face misunderstanding or ridicule from family or peers outside the workshop if they talk about mental health. In certain communities or families, mental health issues are not openly acknowledged. This cultural barrier could threaten the willingness of youth to apply what they learned or seek help, once back in their usual environment.

- **Sustainability and Resource Constraints:** Running participatory workshops and ongoing support activities requires resources (facilitators, venues, materials, funding). A major threat is the uncertainty of funding continuity for the RECOVER project or similar initiatives. Without institutional support or financial investment, it may be challenging to maintain the momentum. Additionally, youth workers are often stretched thin; without dedicated time and support, they might struggle to follow up with participants or start new sessions.

- **Emotional Burnout and Setbacks:** There is a potential risk of *burnout* for both participants and facilitators if the process isn't managed sustainably. For participants, digging into personal issues can be empowering but also tiring – if follow-up support or positive outlets are not provided, some might feel a post-workshop emotional low. For facilitators and youth workers, handling intense group emotions regularly could lead to compassion fatigue. Any negative incident (e.g., a participant having a severe emotional crisis without help) could also set back confidence in such workshops. Planning for self-care and professional backup is necessary to mitigate this threat.

- **Wider Environmental Stressors:** External factors like changes in the education system, economic downturns, or new pandemics (public health crises) can increase youth stress and undermine gains made by such workshops. For example, if academic pressure intensifies due to policy changes, youths might find it harder to practice self-care learned in the workshop. These macro-level threats underscore that while workshops help individuals cope, systemic changes and ongoing advocacy are needed in parallel.

In conclusion, the SWOT analysis exercise during the workshop highlighted that the **core strengths** of youth enthusiasm, participatory methods, and supportive facilitation created a powerful experience. However, to maximize impact, it is important to address the identified weaknesses (like time limits and ensuring support for emotional needs) and to act on opportunities (scaling up and networking) while being mindful of the external threats (stigma, resource needs) that could affect long-term outcomes. These findings have directly informed the recommendations later in this report.

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Key Insights, Challenges, and Proposed Solutions

Throughout the workshop, several **key insights** were gained about youth mental health and effective engagement, alongside the **challenges** participants identified in their lives. Moreover, the group collectively brainstormed **proposed solutions** to address these challenges. This section synthesizes those aspects:

Key

Insights:

- **Youth Are Eager to Talk When Given a Safe Space:** A major insight from the workshop was that young people *truly want to discuss* their mental health experiences when they feel safe and heard. Early in the day some were reserved, but once the environment of trust was established, participants spoke candidly about topics like anxiety, depression, and hope. This underscores that silence from youth on mental health is often due to lack of safe platforms, not lack of interest or insight.

- **Shared Experiences Build Empathy:** Participants realized that many of their struggles are **common among peers**. For instance, multiple attendees named academic pressure or fear of failure as their “dragon,” and hearing this from others validated their feelings. The “*you are not alone*” realization was powerful; it not only reduced stigma but also encouraged peer support. This insight points to the value of group-based programs as opposed to only one-on-one interventions.

- **Creative Expression Aids Communication:** Using creative methods (art, metaphor, storytelling) enabled participants to express complex emotions that might have been hard to articulate otherwise. This insight is that creativity can circumvent the discomfort or stigma of directly saying “*I am depressed.*” Instead, a participant drawing a caged dragon, for example, spoke volumes about feeling trapped. The group found that these indirect expressions often led to direct conversations subsequently.

- **Role of Youth Workers and Adults:** Another insight was the positive impact of having youth workers present *as allies rather than authority figures*. Youth participants gave feedback that they appreciated youth workers listening quietly to youth perspectives instead of instructing. This improved the youths’ trust in adult allies. It suggests that when adults engage in a humble, learning-oriented way (as in this workshop), they can strengthen their connection with youth, which is crucial for mental health support systems.

- **Holistic View of Mental Health:** Participants came to see mental health not as an isolated issue but one interconnected with social, physical, and academic life. For example, discussions tied mental well-being to things like community belonging, physical exercise (a few mentioned how sports or walking help their mood), and creative hobbies. This reinforced the idea that solutions must also be holistic – involving community, schools, families, and personal habits, not just therapy or medication.

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Challenges

Identified:

- **Stigma and Misunderstanding:** Despite being in a relatively open-minded urban context, many youth cited stigma as a daily challenge. Some mentioned they hide their emotional struggles from family or friends for fear of being labeled “weak” or “crazy.” A participant shared that when he once told a family member about feeling anxious, he was told *“it’s all in your head, just toughen up.”* Such attitudes discourage youth from seeking help.
- **Academic and Career Pressure:** A nearly universal challenge raised was the intense pressure to perform – getting good grades, securing a stable job in a competitive market, etc. Participants feel that their worth is often measured by achievement, leading to chronic stress. One 18-year-old, freshly out of school, described the feeling as *“being in a race that never ends – exam after exam, then the pressure to get into a good university or job.”* This relentless pressure has led some to burnout or anxiety disorders.
- **Navigating Transitions:** The age group 18–23 is one of major life transitions – finishing school, starting higher education or jobs, often moving out from home. Many participants found these transitions overwhelming. Challenges include loneliness after moving to the city, difficulty balancing work and study, and uncertainty about the future. A 19-year-old participant said, *“I moved here for university and thought it would be great, but I’ve never felt more alone – I don’t know my neighbors, and my high school friends are far away.”* Such transitional challenges can precipitate mental health issues if not addressed.
- **Access to Youth-Friendly Support:** It was clear that even when help exists, it doesn’t always feel accessible. Some challenges noted: long wait times for counseling services, not knowing where to find a therapist, or feeling that available services (often designed for either children or older adults) do not fit young adults’ needs. One participant tried a general mental health support group previously but felt out of place as the youngest person there. Thus, finding support that is welcoming and relevant to youth is a challenge.
- **Digital Stressors:** While the workshop leveraged social media as an opportunity, participants also emphasized challenges it brings. Constant comparison, cyberbullying, and the pressure to appear perfect online were mentioned. For instance, a participant admitted spending hours curating an Instagram post to *“look happy”* even when she was struggling in reality. The blurring line between online life and real life has introduced new mental health challenges like FOMO (fear of missing out) and online harassment.

Proposed

Solutions:

(These solutions were generated by participants during group discussions and are presented as potential ways forward.)

- **Peer Support Networks:** A top solution idea was to create regular peer-led meetups or support circles, building on the trust formed in the workshop. Participants proposed meeting perhaps monthly in an informal setting (like a cafe or youth center) where they could check-in on each other, share updates, and continue the conversation. This could be an

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independent youth club focused on wellness or integrated into existing youth organizations. The key is for it to remain youth-driven.

- **School/University Initiatives:** Several participants suggested introducing workshops or discussion groups in schools, colleges, and apprenticeships. Ideas included a “mental health day” at school where normal classes pause for activities similar to Healing Dragons exercises, or student-run mental health clubs on campus. Since academic pressure was a big issue, having educational institutions acknowledge and address mental well-being would be a proactive solution. Participants believed that if they had experienced such a workshop at age 15 or 16, it could have helped them cope better with later stress. They are keen to advocate for this with school counselors or university student unions.

- **Training for Adults (Teachers/Parents):** To tackle stigma and misunderstanding, youths recommended educating those in authority. For example, short training sessions or informational workshops for teachers on how to recognize and support students in distress, or seminars for parents about youth mental health (possibly led by youth themselves to voice their perspectives). One concrete suggestion was to collaborate with the Austrian parent-teacher associations to include a session on mental health at parent evenings, thereby improving empathy and support at home.

- **Digital Platforms for Good:** Embracing the digital reality, participants envisioned creating online platforms moderated by youth. One idea was a “**Youth Mental Health Austria**” **Instagram page or TikTok channel** featuring relatable content: mini videos of youth sharing coping tips, myth-busting posts about mental illness, and directing peers to resources. Another idea was a moderated chat group or app where young people can anonymously share feelings and get peer advice in real-time (with oversight by trained youth workers to ensure safety). By flooding social feeds with positive, real narratives, they hope to counteract the negative effects of social media.

- **Improved Signposting and Accessibility:** As a solution to the challenge of accessing support, participants proposed a few things: creating a simple **directory of youth mental health services** (possibly as a website or pamphlet) that could be distributed widely in schools, universities, and community centers. They also suggested youth-friendly touches like “walk-in” hours at youth centers where a counselor is available without appointment, and offering more sessions in informal venues where youth already gather (e.g., a counselor coming to a sports club once a month). Essentially, bringing services to youth rather than expecting youth to navigate complex systems on their own.

- **Follow-up Projects under RECOVER:** The workshop participants expressed interest in contributing to the RECOVER project’s future. Some volunteered to help organize the next workshop or to speak about their experience to a wider audience (such as at a community event or in a project newsletter). This sense of ownership is itself a solution, as it keeps youth engaged as stakeholders. A suggestion was to have a **Youth Advisory Panel** for the project in Austria – a group of young people (perhaps including some workshop alumni) who

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regularly consult with the project team, ensuring that the project's ongoing activities remain youth-informed and effective.

In summary, the challenges that Austrian youth face are multifaceted, but the solutions they envision are *remarkably practical and optimistic*. The workshop demonstrated that when youths are asked for their input, they can generate ideas that are innovative and grounded in reality. Participants didn't just pinpoint problems; they took the next step to imagine what could help, often drawing on their own experiences of what they wished existed. The consensus was that **ongoing engagement, youth-adult partnership, and creative outreach** are key to tackling the mental health challenges discussed. These insights and proposed solutions will inform not only the RECOVER project's next steps but also have been shared with local stakeholders (like the participating youth workers' organizations) to inspire broader action.

Outcomes and Impact

Despite being a short intervention, the workshop yielded significant positive outcomes and impact for the various stakeholders involved – the youth participants, the youth workers, and the broader objectives of the RECOVER project in Austria. The impact can be observed both at an **individual level** (personal growth, learning) and at a **collective level** (community and organizational benefits). Key outcomes include:

- Empowerment and Increased Self-Awareness:** Virtually all youth participants left the workshop with a greater understanding of their own mental health and a sense of empowerment. Many reported that *putting their feelings into words or art* helped them identify patterns (e.g., realizing how self-critical thoughts were affecting their mood). By naming their “dragons” and acknowledging them, participants felt more in control. For example, one 22-year-old participant noted in feedback, *“I used to think I was just ‘broken.’ Now I see I have specific challenges that I can actually work on.”* This shift from helplessness to agency – a hallmark of empowerment – was a crucial outcome. Over 90% of participants, in a post-workshop survey, agreed with the statement: *“I feel more confident to discuss my mental health after this workshop.”*
- Strengthened Social Support Networks:** An immediate impact of the day was the forging of new friendships and support bonds among participants. By the end of the workshop, contact information was exchanged, and a WhatsApp group was formed organically by the youth so they could stay in touch. This network provides a **peer support system** that did not exist before. Some participants have since met informally to catch up over coffee, and they continue to encourage one another (for example, reminding a friend of their “hero's pledge” on a tough day). This kind of sustained peer support can be protective for mental health, as it reduces isolation

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and creates a sense of belonging – something 81% of youth say is crucial for their well-being[8].

- Improved Mental Health Literacy:** The workshop functioned as an educational experience. Through activities and discussions, participants learned practical coping strategies (deep breathing, reframing negative thoughts, seeking help when needed) and gained knowledge about resources. By the conclusion, everyone had a copy of a resource list, and facilitators observed participants discussing which counseling center was near their university, or how to access a certain hotline. Many participants were previously unaware of these services and now feel more equipped to utilize them. Additionally, the myths and facts discussed (for instance, clarifying that needing help is not a sign of weakness) contributed to **reducing stigma** at least within this group. Youth workers also noted that the young people demonstrated increased mental health vocabulary – using terms like “anxiety triggers” or “grounding technique” which they might not have been familiar with prior to the workshop.
- Youth Worker Capacity Building:** For the 5 youth workers involved, the workshop doubled as a training opportunity. They got to witness participatory methods in action and practice some of the techniques (like leading a small group or facilitating a brainstorming). In follow-up interviews, the youth workers reported feeling more confident in engaging youth on sensitive topics. One youth worker mentioned she has already applied an ice-breaker from the Healing Dragons manual in her after-school group with great success. Another is planning to integrate a mini SWOT discussion about emotional well-being in his youth center’s weekly meet-up. Thus, the **knowledge transfer** to youth workers ensures a multiplier effect – the skills and approaches from one workshop can ripple out to benefit many other young people in different settings.
- Facilitators’ and Organization’s Learning:** The facilitators (and by extension, the RECOVER project team) gained invaluable on-ground insights from piloting this workshop. It was a real-world test of the Healing Dragons manual with Austrian youth, and the overwhelmingly positive reception validates the approach. They also learned what could be improved: for instance, factoring in more break time or possibly extending the program to a two-day format in future iterations to give more breathing room. These lessons will inform future workshops in other countries or contexts within the project. As an impact on the organization, the success story from Vienna can be used to advocate for further funding or partnerships – demonstrating tangible benefits achieved within a short time frame. In essence, the workshop served as a **proof of concept** for human-centred participatory methods in youth mental health, which can strengthen RECOVER’s overall mission.

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- Personal Action Plans and Behavior Change:** Each participant walked away with a personal action plan (their “hero’s pledge”) which marks the beginning of behavior change beyond the workshop. Early anecdotal evidence indicates some are following through. For example, one participant shared with a facilitator a week later that he attended an open day at a counseling center, something he had been avoiding but committed to doing as his pledge. Another participant showed the group chat a painting she made to express her feelings, continuing the creative coping habit she discovered during the workshop. While it’s too early to measure long-term outcomes like reduced anxiety or improved well-being quantitatively, these small steps are promising signs of *impact on daily life*. The workshop essentially planted seeds for healthier coping and help-seeking behaviors.
- Ripple Effect in Communities:** Though the group was small (15 youth), there is a ripple effect as they carry their experiences back to their communities. Some participants mentioned they talked to friends or family about the workshop. For instance, one young man said he convinced a close friend to also seek counseling for exam anxiety after sharing what he learned. A young woman reported that she had a heart-to-heart with her parents about stress, using the workshop’s materials to explain what she was feeling — a conversation she had never had before. These stories illustrate a broader societal impact: slowly, such workshops can contribute to a culture shift where youth mental health is openly discussed and supported by those around them.

Youth Workers' Testimonials

The participating youth workers observed the workshop with a unique dual perspective – they were contributors to the process, but also onlookers learning from it. Their testimonials highlight the impact of the workshop on them professionally and personally, and underscore the effectiveness of the participatory approach. Below are a few selected reflections in their own words:

“I have been a youth worker for 6 years, and this is the first time I truly stepped back and *listened* more than I spoke. It was inspiring to see the youth open up about their struggles once they felt safe. I learned at least as much as the participants did – especially about the daily pressures young people face that we adults sometimes underestimate.” – Youth Worker, (Community Center Mentor)

“The participatory activities were an eye-opener for me. I saw quiet teens become animated when given paints and asked to draw their feelings. It reminded me that conventional talk sessions aren’t the only way – creative expression can speak louder. I’m excited to take the Healing Dragons ideas back to my own organization. We plan to adopt some exercises for our weekly

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youth group, because I saw how well they worked here.” – Youth Worker, (NGO Program Coordinator)

“From a professional standpoint, I appreciated how well-structured yet flexible the workshop was. The facilitators had a clear plan but adjusted on the fly when, say, emotions ran high and we needed a break. It’s a fine balance I often struggle with – structure vs. responsiveness. Watching them handle it was like a masterclass. Personally, I also felt re-energized. Sometimes we burn out in youth work, but seeing these young people support each other so much gave me hope and motivation to keep going.” – Youth Worker, (Youth Outreach Specialist)

These testimonials demonstrate the positive impression the workshop left on the youth workers. They not only validated the methodology (“listening more than speaking,” “sharing power with youth”) but also indicated intentions to *apply* what they learned in their future work. In essence, the workshop served as a professional development opportunity. The youth workers became allies and multipliers for the participatory approach, which amplifies the workshop’s impact beyond the single event. Moreover, their emotional takeaways (“re-energized,” “inspired”) suggest that the workshop renewed their commitment to supporting youth mental health, which bodes well for sustainability of these efforts.

Youth Participants’ Voices

The most powerful testament to the workshop’s impact comes from the youth participants themselves. Throughout the day, and in feedback collected afterward, they shared heartfelt reactions. Below is a selection of the **voices of youth**, capturing their feelings about the experience in their own words:

“I realized I’m not alone in what I feel. Hearing others talk about anxiety and self-doubt so openly was like a weight off my shoulders. I’ve never met these people before, but by the end of the day it felt like we’d known each other forever. I left thinking: *finally, people who get it.*” – Participant, (University Student)

“At first I thought drawing my problems as a dragon was a bit silly, but it actually helped me express things I couldn’t say out loud. When I showed my drawing and everyone nodded and didn’t judge, I got really emotional. This was the first time I ever talked about my depression in front of a group. It felt scary but also really good. Now I feel more confident to maybe tell my best friend about it too.” – Participant, (Apprentice Trainee)

“What I loved was that this wasn’t like a class or lecture. We were doing things, talking, moving – it was fun and serious at the same time. I usually have trouble concentrating all day, but here I was alert and involved. It’s probably because

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everything was about *our* stories. The workshop helped me discover some positive things about myself, like that I'm actually good at helping others – a friend here said I gave them great advice, which made me feel proud.” – Participant, (High School Graduate)

“I came in feeling pretty low and skeptical that a workshop could help. I'm leaving with actual hope. The best part is I have new friends who check on me. We've already decided to meet up next week just to chat – like our own support group. That means a lot because I often had no one to talk to. Also, I learned some cool tricks, like a breathing exercise for panic – I tried it last night when I felt anxious and it did calm me down. So yeah, this thing really did something for me.” – Participant, (Job Seeker)

“The facilitators treated us with so much respect. We weren't talked down to at all. That was new for me – usually adults either lecture or try to fix you. Here, they just made it easy for us to share and listened. It felt like we were in charge of finding answers. And guess what, we did come up with answers! I have a whole list of ideas I want to keep working on, like starting a mental health club at my college. I wouldn't have dared to without this experience giving me confidence.” – Participant, (College Student)

These voices speak to several outcomes: feeling less alone, gaining confidence to share beyond the workshop, finding the workshop engaging (not boring or preachy), forming new friendships, learning practical coping skills, and feeling respected and empowered. For many, the workshop was transformative – turning skepticism into hope, isolation into connection, and passivity into proactivity (as evidenced by the participant who now wants to start a club).

Importantly, the youth participants' feedback also highlights the elements that made the workshop effective in their eyes: openness, relatability, respect, and active involvement. Their quotes reinforce the idea that **participatory, youth-centered approaches resonate strongly with young people**. This provides qualitative evidence to support scaling such methods. In follow-ups, several participants have expressed interest in possibly training to become peer facilitators in the future, which is perhaps the ultimate indicator of success – they were inspired enough to want to pay it forward.

Facilitator Reflections

The two facilitators of the workshop – as both architects and observers of the process – have offered their reflections on what transpired. Their perspective ties together the planning and on-the-ground execution, noting what worked well and what could be improved. Key points from their reflections include:

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- Validation of the Approach:** *“This workshop reaffirmed why participatory methods are so powerful,”* one facilitator noted. They observed that the level of depth and authenticity in the conversations far exceeded what they’ve seen in more traditional workshop formats. By the afternoon, participants were largely running the show, with facilitators just gently guiding – a sign that the human-centred approach succeeded in handing over ownership to the youth. Both facilitators were moved by the creativity participants showed. One said, *“I’ve read the Healing Dragons manual cover to cover, but seeing the activities come alive with these youths’ personal stories was beyond what I imagined.”* They felt the metaphorical framework truly helped unlock communication.
- Group Dynamics and Adaptability:** The facilitators reflected on the group’s dynamics, noting the initial cautiousness that gave way to camaraderie. One facilitator shared that a critical turning point was during the first sharing of “dragons”: *“I could almost physically sense the tension melting when those anonymous fears were read out loud and people saw they weren’t alone.”* From that moment, the group gelled. The facilitators had to be adaptable – for example, they shortened the planned debrief after Session 2 because it was clear the group was eager to jump into creating solutions in Session 3. They also extended the reflection time in Session 4 at the participants’ request (some wanted to speak more about their pledges). These adjustments, in their view, improved the outcome and underscored the importance of *reading the room*. They recommend building in some flex time in future agendas to accommodate these shifts.
- Emotional Safety and Support:** Both facilitators remarked on how emotionally charged some moments were, and how they managed those. They took turns being the “lead” and “support” – while one facilitated an activity, the other quietly checked in with any participant who seemed upset or withdrawn. This tag-team approach worked well. They did not encounter any severe crisis, but they did have a protocol ready (e.g., a quiet room next door for anyone who needed to step out, contacts of a counselor on call). In reflection, they suggested that having a designated mental health professional present (even as an observer) in future workshops could add an extra layer of support. *“Even though we handled it, knowing a counselor was in the room would have further eased our minds in case something big came up,”* one facilitator admitted.
- Participant Feedback and Iteration:** After the workshop, facilitators reviewed participant feedback forms and informal comments. They were thrilled that feedback was overwhelmingly positive (with many 9s and 10s out of 10 in ratings). Constructive feedback from youth (like “more time for discussion” and “include a physical activity to energize after lunch”) was noted. The facilitators are keen to iterate the workshop design accordingly. They are considering adding a short physical exercise or game

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after lunch in the next run to combat the post-lunch energy dip. Also, given many wanted the day to be longer, they are exploring the idea of a two-day workshop or a series of shorter sessions over several weeks, to extend the engagement. One facilitator reflected, *“It’s a good problem when the main complaint is that they wanted more time – it means they found it valuable.”*

- Personal Reflection:** Both facilitators personally found the experience rewarding and somewhat humbling. One said that despite having conducted many workshops before, *“this one will stick with me for a long time, because of how raw and real the youth allowed it to become.”* They learned from the participants’ courage and creativity. Another facilitator mentioned feeling proud of the participants: *“Watching a timid participant transform into a group leader by the end – that’s the kind of change that reminds me why I do this work.”* They also acknowledged the tremendous support of the youth workers and how the collaborative facilitation (with youth workers chiming in at times) enriched the process.

In summary, the facilitators’ reflections confirm that the **workshop met its objectives** and provided several lessons for future implementation. They highlight the importance of flexibility, the value of co-facilitation (working as a team to monitor group well-being), and the impact of fully engaging participants in both heart and mind. Their intention is to use these reflections to refine the workshop model for replication under the RECOVER project. As experienced practitioners, their endorsement of the workshop’s outcomes adds credibility – noting that even from their informed standpoint, the results exceeded expectations. The facilitators concluded that the Austria workshop has provided a strong template and inspiration for upcoming workshops in other partner countries (should those be planned), demonstrating the universal applicability of participatory, youth-centred mental health engagement.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The **Austria National Workshop** proved to be a successful demonstration of how human-centred, participatory approaches can engage young people on the topic of mental health. In conclusion, the workshop addressed a clear need among youth for safe spaces to discuss mental well-being and showed tangible benefits in empowering participants. It fostered new support networks, enhanced understanding for both youth and youth workers, and generated actionable ideas to improve youth mental health support systems. The experience aligns with research and best practices that emphasize youth participation as key to effective mental health initiatives[9], reinforcing the RECOVER project’s strategy.

Several **recommendations** emerge from the insights and outcomes of this workshop:

- Sustain and Scale the Participatory Workshop Model:** Given the positive impact, it is recommended to continue this workshop format on a regular basis. This could

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mean organizing follow-up sessions for the same group to deepen their skills and bonds, and/or scaling up to reach new youth audiences (e.g., hosting similar workshops in other cities or rural areas of Austria). Each new iteration should maintain the participatory ethos – involving youth in planning and possibly even in co-facilitation roles as they become ready.

2. **Establish Ongoing Peer Support Mechanisms:** To prevent the one-off workshop from being an isolated event, create structures for ongoing peer support. This could be as informal as supporting the WhatsApp group that participants already formed, or more formal like initiating a monthly peer-led “mental health meet-up” at the partnering youth center. Providing a bit of resources (a meeting space, some refreshments) and gentle adult mentorship to these meet-ups can help sustain the momentum. Participants from this workshop can act as ambassadors, inviting their friends and expanding the circle.
3. **Integrate Learnings into Youth Work Practice:** It’s recommended that the youth workers and organizations involved incorporate the successful elements of this workshop into their routine practice. This might involve training more staff in participatory methods and the Healing Dragons activities, so that elements like creative expression or youth-led discussion become common in youth programs. Youth workers could also use the workshop’s outcomes (like the SWOT analysis findings or proposed solutions) to inform their service planning – for instance, starting a homework stress support group after hearing how much academic pressure came up.
4. **Policy Advocacy – Give Youth a Voice in Mental Health Strategy:** The insights from this workshop should be communicated to policymakers and stakeholders in youth mental health. It is recommended to compile a brief (using content from this report) to share with local authorities, schools, and mental health services. Advocating for youth representation – such as a Youth Advisory Board in local mental health initiatives – will ensure the participatory approach is embedded at higher levels. The fact that young people generated concrete solutions (peer support groups, school programs, etc.) is powerful evidence that they can and should be involved in designing interventions. Policymakers should be encouraged to support such youth-led ideas, possibly through funding or partnerships.
5. **Enhance Support and Safety Nets for Participants:** For future workshops, it is recommended to have a designated mental health professional available (on-site or on-call) to handle any acute distress. Additionally, consider a debrief or check-in with participants a few weeks post-workshop, to see how they are doing and connect them to services if needed. This kind of follow-through demonstrates commitment to

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their well-being and can catch any late-arising needs, ensuring that no participant is left worse off after sharing sensitive issues.

6. **Cultural and Contextual Adaptation:** If scaling to diverse groups (different regions, or perhaps more marginalized communities), adapt the content to be culturally relevant. The core of Healing Dragons – storytelling and metaphor – is quite universal, but language and examples may be tailored (for instance, using local symbols in place of “dragons” if needed, or addressing specific community stressors). Engaging local youth leaders in adaptation will uphold the participatory spirit and make each workshop resonate with its audience.

In conclusion, the Vienna workshop has shown that empowering youth through participatory self-analysis is not only feasible but highly effective in the Austrian context. By implementing the above recommendations, stakeholders can amplify the impact of this initiative – moving from a single successful workshop to a sustained movement for youth mental health empowerment. The RECOVER project, with its focus on recovery and resilience, is well-positioned to champion these next steps. The energy and optimism emanating from the participants and youth workers are a strong foundation to build upon. As one youth voiced, *“I came in skeptical, and left with hope.”* It is now imperative to nurture that hope into ongoing action, ensuring that more young people across Austria have the opportunity to be heard, supported, and equipped to heal their “dragons.”

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