



Conducting Listening Sessions with Youth and Young Adults to Better Understand the Issues that *Help* and *Harm* Them

The Youth MOVE National TA Center is a program of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) under grant 1H79SM082658-01 and, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Interviews, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.

An Implementation Guide

Introduction

Youth MOVE National Mission & Vision
Purpose of this Guide
Glossary of Terms

3

What is the What Helps, What Harms Framework?

The History

7

Understanding & Implementing the Framework

Guiding Principles

9

Best Practices for WHWH Listening Sessions

Purpose
Determining Who You're Working With
Outreach and Engagement
Setting the Space
Opening the Conversation
Strategic Sharing
Closing the Session
Considerations for Virtual Listening Sessions
After the Session
Additional Considerations for WHWH Spaces

10

Wrap-Up

How to Bring WHWH to Various Settings
Potential Positive Outcomes in Bringing This Framework to Practice

22

Additional Resources

23

Table of Contents

Introduction

This implementation guide offers an in-depth overview of Youth MOVE National’s What Helps, What Harms (WHWH) Framework: an intentional, trauma-informed, youth-driven approach to conducting listening sessions that can inform and lead to real change within systems, communities, agencies, and other settings that impact young people.

Too often, youth and young adult (YYA) voices are left out of decision-making in schools, services, and communities. The WHWH Framework was built to change that. By asking youth directly about what helps and what harms, and taking their answers seriously, adults and systems gain the insight needed to create spaces, supports, and services that are responsive, affirming, and aligned with what young people say they need. This Framework is not only about hearing youth, but about shifting power and responsibility so that systems act on what youth share, contributing to change.



Mission

Youth MOVE National connects, supports, and develops youth leadership in advocacy to create positive change. We practice authentic youth engagement through youth driven decision making by elevating youth voices of lived experience. We ensure that young people are heard and valued as leaders in the agencies, communities, and systems that impact their lives.

Vision

Youth MOVE National envisions a future in which young people are valued as empowered leaders, advocates, and designers of communities that are built for all youth to thrive.

Purpose of this Guide



- To explain the WHWH Framework and why it matters.
- To support youth-serving professionals, teams, organizations, and YYA in creating brave spaces where young people feel comfortable sharing their lived and living experiences.
- To provide clear best practices for holding trauma-informed listening sessions that honor youth voice and lead to meaningful change.

Glossary of Terms

Before exploring the Framework in depth, it's important to establish a shared understanding of some key terms.

Best Practices: Skills and approaches that are consistently updated based upon new evidence and experiences, that intentionally support affirming youth engagement efforts that are effective, empowering, and ethical as defined by the youth who are currently being served.

In practice: This involves an iterative process, intentional planning, clear communication, trauma-informed approaches, and consistent reflection to ensure positive impact. These are not 'one-size-fits-all' rules, but adaptable principles that can be shaped by personal context and community culture, updated to reflect the needs of the time.

Brave Space: An environment where individuals are encouraged to engage authentically, share their experiences, ask questions, and challenge ideas, all while being accountable to others' feelings and identities. Unlike a "safe space," which emphasizes protection from discomfort (and is nearly impossible to guarantee for everyone), a brave space recognizes that growth, understanding, and meaningful dialogue often require participants to step into discomfort, take risks, and confront difficult truths. And at the same time, doing so with mutual respect, empathy, and a commitment to learning from one another.

In practice: Building group agreements, holding space for difficult truths, and balancing honesty, transparency, and vulnerability, with care, so growth and connection can happen.

Listening Sessions: Gatherings led by a trained facilitator, hosted for a group of youth/young adults. Participants are asked to share their own lived experiences within youth-serving systems, centered on what policies, procedures, and experiences were helpful versus those that were harmful.

In practice: Outreach, registration, finding a time to gather, coming prepared with questions and discussion prompts, and more.

Lived and/or Living Experience: Having trauma from navigating systems such as the mental health field, child welfare / foster care systems, substance use programs, justice systems, etc. This can include supporting a loved one, friend, or family member through their lived experiences, having a clinical or non-clinical diagnosis, having experiences of intentional and unintentional unfairness, and more. In general navigating any prolonged traumatic situation is usually viewed as having lived and/or living experience. Please keep in mind the key word is trauma - not just a one time stressful event for a short period of time.

Peer: Individuals who hold both similar experiences and identity demographics

In practice: A 29 year old, Native Indigenous youth who is struggling with substance use, is a peer to another 29 year old, Native Indigenous youth who is struggling with substance use. A white 39 year old struggling with mental health challenges would not be considered a peer the fore mentioned individual.

Trauma (or trauma responses): Conditions and behaviors, often uncontrollable and unpredictable, that regularly negatively interfere with one's life, typical day to day activities, and ability to thrive. Generally, bad things happening and stressful periods are usually one offs, or take place over the course of a short period of time, like a papercut or frustrating work project - this is typically not considered trauma. However, when a stressful occurrence becomes above normal (for the individual) and/or are repeated and ongoing, this often leads to trauma.

In practice: Trauma can come from a death of a loved one, sustained abuse and violence, navigating systems, experiences of intentional and unintentional unfairness, and more, all of which can cause real, long lasting physical, mental, emotional, and more, harm and ongoing health issues, that is often times "invisible" to others.

Trauma-Informed: Generally being aware of lived and/or living experiences of trauma, respecting others perspectives without having to understand them, and being intentional with your actions in order to not only not cause additional harm, or to activate a trauma-response, but to actively try to create a welcoming, accessible, safer, more affirming environment for all.

In practice: Creating safer, more supportive environments; offering choice and empowerment; and working in collaboration with young adults and their support networks.

Youth Peer Support: A recovery-oriented practice where young adults with lived experience in mental health, substance use, or other systems offer mentorship, guidance, and support to their peers. It is about understanding another's situation empathically through the shared experience of emotional and psychological pain and shared identity.

In practice: Youth Peer Support Specialists connect through shared experience, reduce isolation, build self-advocacy, and help peers navigate services. They work in diverse settings, including schools, hospitals, community organizations, and advocacy spaces. In some states, Youth Peer Support is a billable service.

Youth Voice: The unique opinions, perspectives, attitudes, ideas, interests, knowledge, stories, experiences, and actions of YYA.

In practice: Centering YYA identities, interests, needs, lived experience, and perspectives in decisions that directly affect their lives, and supporting them in leadership roles where their voice has real power.



What is the What Helps, What Harms Framework?

The History

WHWH was originally developed in 2012 by Youth MOVE National in collaboration with youth and young adults as a national policy initiative, emphasizing the importance of youth voices in creating meaningful change. It has since evolved into a comprehensive, validated, peer-reviewed, evidence-based Framework for facilitating conversations where young adults can inform best practices by sharing *what helps* in achieving success and *what is harmful* in their lives.

1993

A group of youth in Westchester County, New York, who felt unheard, came together in a local restaurant and created a document addressing the needs of their community. They brought it to an organization called Family Ties, which then submitted it to the County Commissioner, leading to a community conference. The document was referred to as "gold" for its potential impact on a million residents, encompassing community, housing, residential, and education.

2012

Jessica Grimm, former Director of Youth MOVE National's [Bravehearts MOVE of New York Chapter](#), replicated the process. Over the course of six weeks, Jessica visited as many youth-serving organizations as she could get to in the county. This included organizations for young mothers, homeless shelters, peer-to-peer support groups, and many other youth forums. By visiting various youth organizations, holding open discussions, and recording feedback. She identified eleven recurring themes: Mental Health, Violence, Housing, Education, Residential, Social Services, Community, Substance Abuse, Peer Support, and more.

Family Ties organized a roundtable conversation involving county officials, judges, educators, youth, and community leaders. They presented the document and challenged attendees to collaborate on addressing identified issues, emphasizing the importance of youth voices in creating change. This document remains a dynamic resource for Westchester County and has since evolved into Youth MOVE National's formal Framework for holding listening sessions to foster meaningful change and inform policy and legislation.

2014

YMN released the [What Helps, What Harms Executive Summary](#) on Children's Mental Health Awareness Day. This document outlines the history of What Helps, What Harms and the journey from a local to national initiative.



2020

YMN partnered with the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) and New York University (NYU) to seek insight from young people with lived experience receiving treatment for depression during adolescence. To do this, YMN adapted the "What Helps, What Harms" Framework to conduct a nationwide survey. The feedback that youth participants provided went directly towards working with health plans to improve the quality of services and coverage available to youth.



[What Helps, What Harms: Results of a National Survey](#)

2021

Building off the success and data from the NCQA and NYU pilot, YMN's [Youth MOVE Change Initiative](#) (YMCI) funded by the Upswing Fund for Adolescent Mental Health, facilitated a series of focus group conversations with youth and young adults from across the country utilizing the What Helps, What Harms Framework, officially creating a validated, peer viewed, evidence based framework that continues to evolve today.



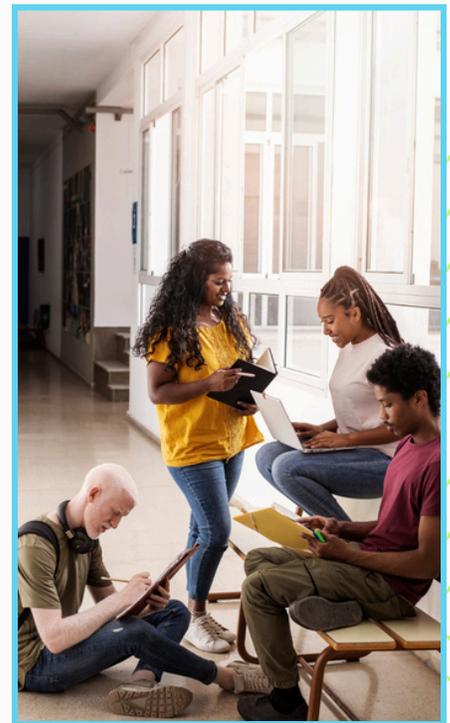
Understanding & Implementing the Framework

Guiding Principles

At its core, WHWH creates structured space for young people to reflect on these essential questions:



1. “In your experience, what do you feel was working for you (helps)?”
2. “In your experience, what do you feel was not working (harms)?”
3. “If you had a magic wand, what would you change to make things more ideal and effective?”



These questions can apply to all aspects of youth life, including services, culture, community, climate, and more. Responses are compiled, summarized, and shared with leadership and other decision-makers with the goal of **driving change** in programs, policies, and practices. Each WHWH conversation is unique to the community it comes from, and that’s one of its greatest strengths!

Best Practices for WHWH Listening Sessions

Purpose

Listening sessions work best when they are trauma-informed, intentional, and centered around youth voice. These best practices are intended to serve as a foundation—not a one-size-fits-all formula, but a set of values and approaches that facilitators can adapt to their context. They help ensure that youth and young adults feel safe enough to share honestly, and that the feedback gathered is meaningful and useful.

Determining Who You're Working With

Every What Helps, What Harms listening session is shaped by the unique individuals in the shared space. Youth and young adults come from diverse places, hold various identities, and carry varied experiences with systems and supports. Paying attention to the participants' backgrounds and experiences sets the stage for how to approach facilitation, what questions you ask, and how participants feel in the space.



Consider Life Experience

Every young adult enters into a listening session with expertise rooted in their lived experience. Some may be speaking from very current, personal interactions with systems and/or services. Others may reflect on past experiences and the ways they continue to shape their lives. Some participants may come from leadership roles, are engaged in peer support work, or support community advocacy efforts. Each of these perspectives brings something essential and unique to the conversation.

Facilitators should be ready to notice and respond to the different ways participants engage. For some, it may look like naming immediate, concrete examples of what helps and what harms. For others, it may sound like connecting the dots between individual experiences and larger systemic trends. Some may need others to share first, process, and then share what comes up for them. What matters is not the stage of life, or method of sharing (out loud, written, in a group, or one on one) but ensuring that the space honors the full range of experiences and the wisdom they bring.



Consider Various Demographics

Involving youth from different demographics (e.g. age, ability, language, geographical location, socioeconomic background) will help foster representation and belonging to the group, as youth are more likely to share openly and honestly when in a shared space with others who have similar cultural backgrounds or lived experiences. Facilitators shouldn't assume what matters most; instead, they should create space for participants to define themselves and decide what feels important to share. When outreach, materials, and agreements reflect and respect participants' identities, trust grows and honesty follows.



Consider Relationship to Systems

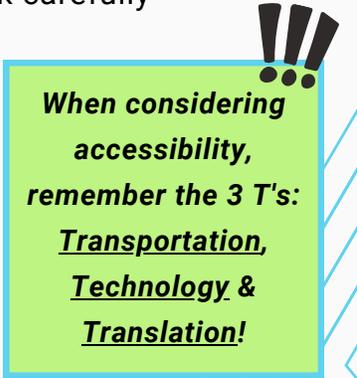
Not all youth and young adults relate to systems in the same way. Some may be currently receiving services, while others may be alumni reflecting on earlier experiences. Some may have engaged with systems mainly through advocacy or as peer supports themselves. Each perspective offers a different but equally valid lens. A young adult who talks about what helps them today is just as important as alumni describing what could have been done differently. Normalizing these differences ensures that all roles and experiences are welcomed into the conversation, while also noting that things can change and shift over time.



Consider Access and Barriers

Ensuring accessibility in participation requires planning ahead. Think carefully about who might be unintentionally excluded.

- *Do participants have access to transportation, reliable technology, or translation support?*
- *Are sessions scheduled in ways that work for those with jobs, caregiving responsibilities, or health needs?*
- *Is compensation or honoraria offered to recognize the time and expertise youth participants bring?*



When considering accessibility, remember the 3 T's: Transportation, Technology & Translation!

Asking these questions and addressing barriers ensures participation reflects the full range of youth voices in the community, not just the easiest to reach.



Practical Strategies to Keep in Mind

The following strategies are not exhaustive, but they have consistently proven effective in supporting authentic youth voice:

- Design outreach to ensure a variety of communities and identities are represented
- Offer multiple ways to contribute, such as speaking, writing, drawing, or submitting feedback anonymously
- Be flexible in facilitation - some groups may connect best through interactive activities, while others may prefer structured dialogue
- At the beginning, explain that people will have different types of experiences with systems, and emphasize that every perspective is valuable
- Create opportunities for youth to shape the process - this could be co-facilitation, leading an icebreaker, keeping time, taking notes, or helping design outreach materials

When facilitators hold this awareness and implement these practical strategies, listening sessions become more genuine, inclusive, and impactful. Every youth and young adult has wisdom that can drive meaningful change. The task is to create an environment where each of those truths can be voiced, respected, and acted upon.

This intentionality ensures that all WHWH listening sessions honor youth voices and avoid reinforcing systemic harm. For example, a young adult with a history of trauma may need more emphasis on creating safety and choice. At the same time, another youth might benefit most from strengths-based encouragement and opportunities for leadership. Understanding the youth you're working with allows you to apply best practices in a way that is culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and genuinely youth-driven, making the support more effective and impactful.



Outreach and Engagement



Outreach is more than logistics. It's the first point of connection!

Youth are more likely to participate when the invitation feels authentic, accessible, and respectful of their time and energy.

Effective outreach strategies might include:

- *Peer-to-Peer Invitations* - YYA who are already engaged in systems/services can personally invite their networks to join, and they are often most responsive when invited by someone they trust.
- *Social Media & Digital Platforms* - Youth-friendly platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat can be utilized with youth-friendly graphics, language, and ease of access to registration. Short, visual, and clear messaging can enhance the visibility of recruitment efforts. These channels can be more effective than traditional job postings, website announcements, or email blasts.
- *Community Partnerships* - Collaborate with youth-serving programs, systems, and organizations, such as schools, after-school programs, youth centers & affinity spaces, cultural organizations, and even faith-based groups. Youth leaders in these organizations can also share information about these listening sessions with those in their networks.
- *Identify Trusted Adults* - Teachers, mentors, coaches, community supports, and more can help spread the word in a way that feels friendly and affirming, rather than intrusive.
- *Incentives & Supports* - Offering food, stipends, or community service hours can help draw YYA in; they are putting in effort and energy, so compensation for that work is a great way to keep them involved and engaged. You may offer transportation, flexible timing options, and, if possible, virtual options to join listening sessions.



- *Clear Youth-Friendly Messaging & Promotion* - Invitations should be short, positive, and as relatable as possible, allowing youth to connect with the topic(s) that you are seeking to discuss, and feel clear around their anticipated role and involvement. Typically, these invitations should include language to empower youth in participating (i.e., “Your voice matters,” “Help shape the future,” or “Connect with your peers”). Making creative fliers, posters, and posts can boost visibility, especially when it comes to placement (i.e., libraries, bus stops, community centers, local shops, parks, etc.).

Setting the Space

Creating a strong foundation for the conversation begins with **community agreements**. These are co-created with participants and establish shared expectations around safety, confidentiality, respect, and accountability.

The agreement is made up of participants’ rights and responsibilities. To do this, start with these two simple questions:

- 
1. What are your rights as a participant in this group?
 2. What are your responsibilities as a participant in this group?

Invite participants to name a right and a corresponding responsibility. For example, one right could be “*confidentiality*,” and the corresponding responsibility would be “*to keep identifying information private*.” Another pair of rights and responsibilities could be “*to have space to speak*,” and “*not to speak over others*.” Every right has a corresponding responsibility, so don’t forget to complete both halves of the additions to your community agreement! By involving participants in shaping these shared values, facilitators set the tone that these spaces belong to them.

Opening the Conversation



Session Grounding & Getting Acquainted

Opening a listening session is about building connection and setting clarity. The way you begin will shape how comfortable participants feel sharing. When opening your space, it is important to start with an **icebreaker** and **introductions**.

Icebreakers set the tone for a friendly, safe, and genuine connection(s). Your icebreakers can range from a single question to an activity to a simple sharing of a fun fact. There are plenty of icebreaker questions and activities that you can find online. What matters most is that the icebreaker lowers pressure and helps participants feel more like a community.

It is also beneficial to invite each person in the group to introduce themselves, which could include each person's name, role in the space, location, a fun question (*i.e.*, "Which fantasy world would you like to be a part of?"), and a question related to your session purpose (*i.e.*, "What made you decide to join this group?"). This introductory phase is meant to ground participants in the space together, foster trust and community, establish a more personal connection between the YYA as well as the facilitator, and get everyone engaged and participating right from the start.

After the group has connected, explain what the **purpose** of the session is, clearly: *"to identify what helps and what harms in young people's experiences with systems, services, and supports"*. If more specific to a certain experience, topic, or system, ensure to communicate that clearly, as well! It is also helpful to share how the data will be stored and what will happen with the input (*i.e.*, *whether it will inform a report, shape program planning, or be shared with leadership*) so participants understand how their contributions will inform efforts beyond the session(s).





Using Guiding Questions to Support Discussion

To keep the conversation flowing smoothly, use **guiding questions** to support participants in sharing their experiences while keeping the conversation focused, intentional, and meaningful. These guiding questions are going to create the structure and flow of your conversation, invite deeper reflection, and ensure that the youth involved are clear on the insight you're hoping to gain. Guiding questions focus the conversation on exploring supports and barriers, so that the full range of experiences within the listening session is reflected in the conversation. This, of course, also ensures that the conversation does not get derailed!

The questions you ask will also support expression, as sometimes youth are unsure where to begin when in these sessions; guiding questions are going to support them in talking about bigger, complex systems by giving them a clear entry point to share their experiences. Fairness is important in these sessions, and guiding questions can elicit responses from just about everyone, so that all voices are heard and the session is both balanced and varied. The concept of asking "what helped" and "what harmed" encourages critical thinking by identifying patterns beyond personal experiences that relate and connect to broader youth-serving system issues. Guiding questions serve as a sort of bridge between the lived experiences of youth and young adults and meaningful strategies for systems change.



Facilitator Tips

- Keep your language open and free of jargon, acronyms, or slang.
- Send questions ahead of time to participants for their independent reflection and preparation before sharing in the live session(s).
- Ask one question at a time and allow silence. Reflection often takes a moment. Consider rephrasing questions if there are long pauses without conversation or comment.
- Avoid paraphrasing youth responses. Instead, thank them and record their words as they are shared.
- Balance participation. If some voices are more active in the space, invite others in with care: *"I'd love to hear from folks we haven't yet."*

For Additional Facilitator Guidance, check out our YMN Peer Center issue brief: [Affirming Facilitation Practices in Youth Spaces](#)





From Guiding Questions to Sharing Stories

Guiding questions open the door for youth and young adults to share what helps and what harms. As those reflections begin to surface, they often take the form of personal stories. Storytelling is incredibly powerful in helping to connect lived experience to systems change. But it can also feel vulnerable.

That is why it is important to ground participants in the practice of **strategic sharing**. This practice reminds participants that they are always in control of their own stories. They can decide what to share, how much to share, and when (or if) they want to share at all.



Strategic Sharing

Context

Strategic sharing is a concept that was coined in 2000 by individuals at the Foster Care Alumni organization, [a project](#) of the Child Welfare League of America, to provide support to young people who were sharing their stories over and over again to various adults—case workers, hospital staff, clinicians, police, etc.

What it Means

Strategic sharing is the practice of telling stories with intention and purpose. It involves choosing what to share, when to share it, and how to share it in a way that builds connection and sparks learning while protecting one's own well-being.

Sharing your own lived experience(s) in the *WHWH* listening sessions as a facilitator is also a great way to connect, inspire, and support young adults in participating. Strategic sharing must always *intentionally* use self-disclosure, ensuring that it serves to improve the relationship between facilitator and participants, and that it is relevant to the session topic and conversation being had.

Why it Matters

Stories are powerful. When youth and young adults speak from lived experience, it can validate others, inspire change, and challenge systems to do better. Vulnerability can inspire others to share as well! But without care, sharing can also feel unsafe or retraumatizing. Facilitators need to ensure participants know that sharing is always a choice, content warnings are shared, and that every person has the right to decide how much or how little to disclose.

Closing the Session

The way a session ends is just as important as how it begins. Youth and young adults may have shared deeply personal experiences, reflected on painful moments, or voiced strong hopes for change. A thoughtful closing helps participants feel grounded, appreciated, and supported as they transition out of the space.

Closing your listening session involves a few steps that ensure the YYA participating feel comfortable with the session, have avenues to stay informed, and have a way to follow-up if need be.



Begin by expressing gratitude.

Thank participants for their time, energy, willingness to share, and courage they brought to the conversation. After all, these young people will have just gone through a process that brings up a lot of worries, issues, past trauma, and introspective/critical thinking. Acknowledge that sharing takes work and carries risk. Gratitude reinforces that the session is not just about collecting information but about honoring lived experience.



Revisit confidentiality.

Remind participants of the confidentiality that was promised at the beginning of the session. Reassure participants that what was shared will be kept private and that any findings shared outside the space will not identify individuals. This reminder strengthens trust and ensures the integrity of the process moving forward.



Create closure by providing clear next steps.

Share how participants can stay informed, whether through follow-up emails, community updates, or future opportunities to engage. Provide your contact information so participants know how to reach out with questions, concerns, or additional reflections after the session.



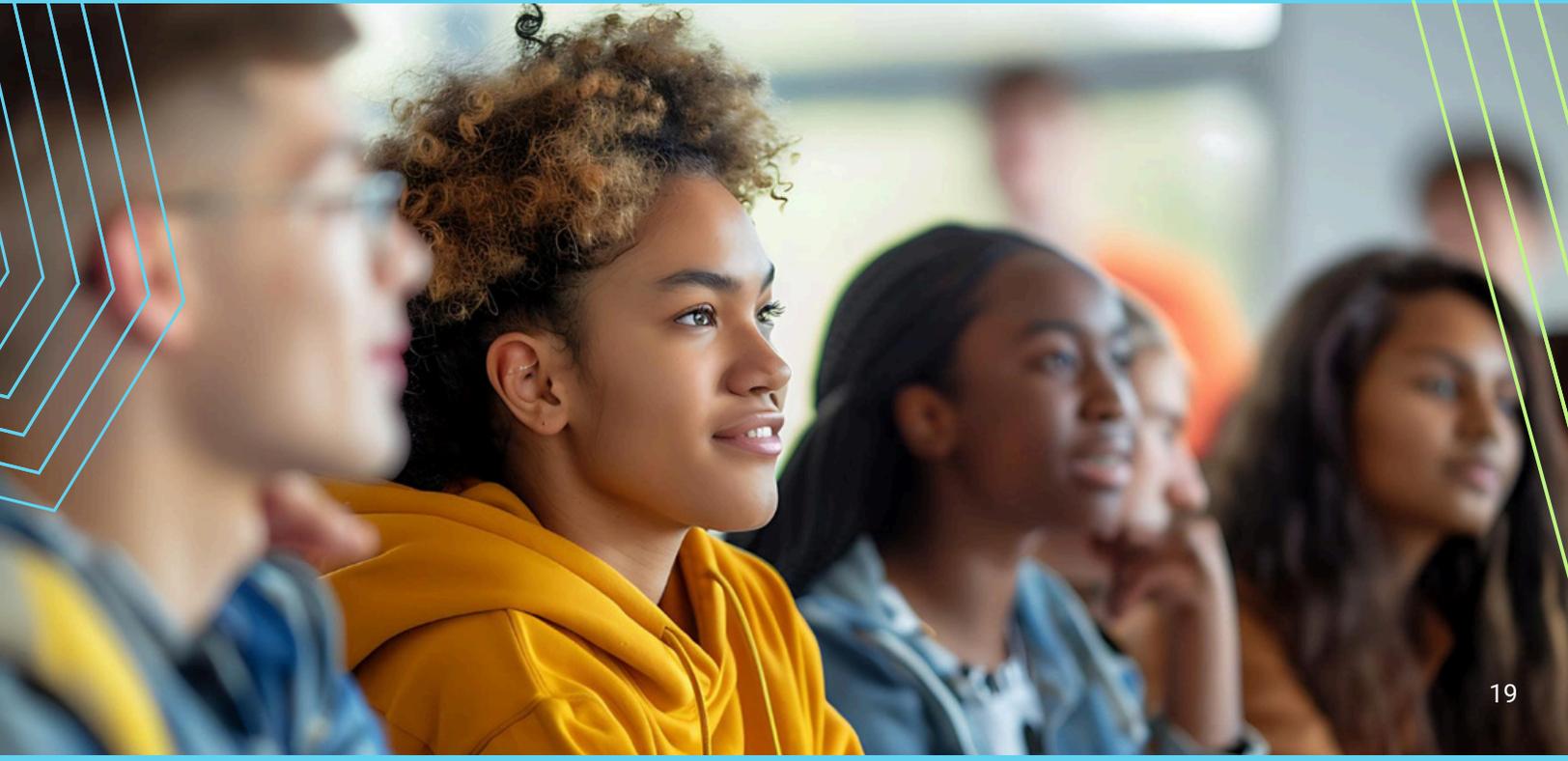
Offer a closing activity or space to check-in before checking out.

Ending with a grounding activity or affirmation (*for example, a reminder that their voices will directly inform change*) can help participants leave feeling valued and assured that their feedback will inform greater changemaking beyond the session. Offering space to reflect on post-session self-care can be beneficial for youth to process and decompress upon leaving the space.



Finally, remain in the space until every participant leaves.

Some may want to stay after others have left to speak to the facilitator one-on-one. It is important that we leave space for anyone to ask for support or clarification, especially if they have any concerns about the session itself.



Considerations for Virtual Listening Sessions

While WHWH can be facilitated in any format, in-person sessions require additional planning to ensure you're being intentional around safety and accessibility.



Trauma and Physical Safety

Physical setup impacts emotional safety. Arrange seating so no one has their back to the door. Ensure the space is accessible to all participants and provide essentials such as water, snacks, and directions to restrooms. Consider a nearby quiet area where participants can step out if they need space to self-care and regroup.



Provide Opportunities for Check-Ins, Guidance, and Support

Support should be available before and after the session. Facilitators should arrive early and remain afterwards so participants can ask questions or debrief one-on-one. These small touchpoints can make a big difference in how supported youth feel.



Respect Participants' Autonomy

Youth and young adults should never feel trapped. Normalize that participants can step out, take breaks, or pass on a question. Autonomy affirms safety and communicates that the space truly belongs to them.

After the Session

The work and best practices of the WHWH Framework does not end when the conversation concludes. The way you follow up after a session matters most. When youth know their voices have led to real action, trust and momentum grow. When feedback is not acknowledged or acted on, it can leave young people feeling dismissed or tokenized. Following through with honesty and accountability demonstrates that their contributions are catalysts for meaningful change.



Follow Up with Participants

Reaching back out is essential. Thank participants once more for the time and energy they gave. Acknowledge that sharing lived experience is important work and that their honesty and courage were meaningful. Share information about what comes next, including when and how they can expect to learn about the findings. If sensitive or activating topics were raised, provide resources for ongoing support.



Follow Up Toward Greater Change

Just as powerful as youth voice is, the action it inspires can be momentous. Youth voice has an impact when it leads to meaningful change in programs, policies, or practices. Facilitators and organizations must carry forward the insights shared into planning spaces, leadership discussions, and decision-making. This follow-through transforms a listening session from a one-time event into a driver of long-term meaningful change.



Feedback Summary

A feedback summary is one of the most tangible outcomes of WHWH. This summary should highlight both “What Helps” and “What Harms,” organize responses into themes, and feature direct quotes from youth and young adults (*always with consent!*). Quotes maintain authenticity and ensure that youth voices are not filtered through adult interpretations. The summary should be written in clear, accessible language so that it can be shared back with youth, community members, and leadership alike. Consider multiple formats for sharing summaries (*i.e., written documents, visual infographics, or even youth-led presentations*) to ensure the findings are accessible and engaging across intended audiences and invested parties.



Sharing Data with Leadership

Youth voice must reach decision-makers in ways that push action forward. Share findings with leaders in formats that highlight urgency and opportunity. Pair “What Harms” themes with specific recommendations for improvement, and point to “What Helps” as practices to protect, sustain, or even expand upon. Presenting the data in this way makes clear that the session was not just storytelling but a call for systems to respond.



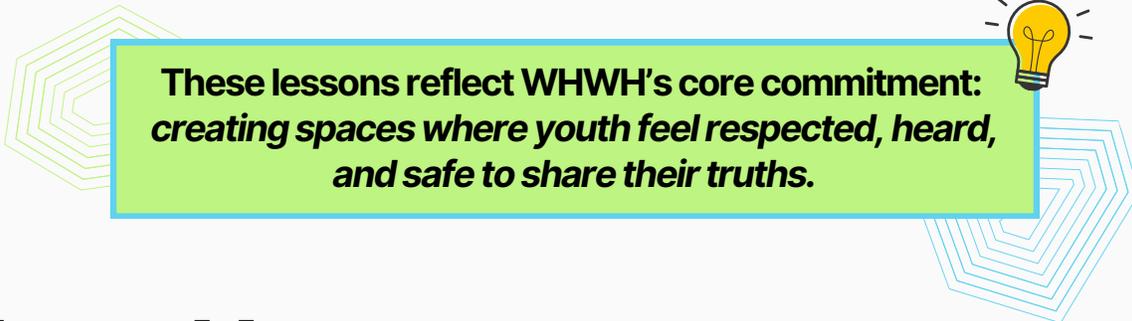
Track Progress and Follow Up

Establish accountability by naming next steps and setting timelines. Set timelines, track progress, and name who is responsible for acting on the recommendations. Just as importantly, report back to youth and young adults about what changes were made because of their input. Following through with honesty, transparency, and accountability shows participants that their contributions are catalysts for meaningful change, not just words left behind in a meeting room.

Additional Considerations for WHWH Spaces

Over years of practice, Youth MOVE National and partners have learned these important lessons that make listening sessions run more smoothly:

- **Geolocation on Registration Forms:** For virtual sessions, use geolocation questions to prevent “bot” registrations and ensure attendees are genuine.
- **Initial Quietness is Normal:** Many groups begin in silence. This does not mean participants are disengaged. With time and trust, voices emerge.
- **Keep Groups Small:** Aim for eight participants or fewer. Smaller groups allow for deeper sharing and make it easier to ensure everyone has space to participate and be heard.
- **Do Not Paraphrase:** Record participants’ words exactly as they share them. Paraphrasing risks changing meaning, even unintentionally, and can break trust. Ask for clarification or expansion on ideas, if needed.



**These lessons reflect WHWH’s core commitment:
*creating spaces where youth feel respected, heard,
 and safe to share their truths.***

Wrap-Up

The What Helps, What Harms (WHWH) Framework is more than just a set of questions. It is a specific, structured framework rooted in the meaningful practice of listening deeply, honoring stories, and committing to acts of change. By creating intentional spaces for youth and young adults to name what helps them and what harms them, organizations can begin to shift culture, improve services, and drive systemic change.

How to Bring WHWH to Various Settings

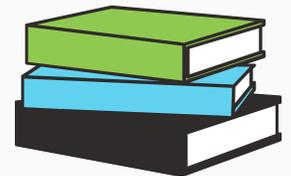
WHWH does not need to be limited to special projects or community forums. It can be brought into schools, agencies, and organizations as part of everyday practice or periodic check-ins. By regularly creating spaces for young adult, staff, or program participants to share what helps and what harms, organizations can strengthen trust and responsiveness in real-time, while opening the door for consistent feedback that drives change and improvements.

And if you need help - reach out to the experts (like us)!

Potential Positive Outcomes in Bringing This Framework to Practice

- **Increased Engagement:** When young people see their feedback leads to real change, they are more motivated to stay involved.
- **Promotion and Visibility:** Organizations that authentically elevate youth voice, build stronger reputations and trust in their communities.
- **Community Benefits:** Listening sessions create opportunities for stronger relationships between organizations and the youth they serve.
- **Systems Change:** Over time, WHWH feedback can spark cultural shifts, policy updates, and structural reforms that benefit not only participants but entire communities.

Additional Resources



- [What Helps, What Harms: Executive Summary >>](#)
- [What Helps, What Harms: Results of a National Survey >>](#)
- [What Helps & What Harms Students' Crises Recovery? >>](#)
- [Strategic Sharing Overview >>](#)
- [Affirming Facilitation Practices in Youth Spaces >>](#)

