



MODULE 3 – Youth Health Literacy and Wellbeing

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Summary

Introduction	04
.....	
Learning Outcomes	05
.....	
Understanding Health Literacy and Youth Wellbeing	06
.....	
Recognising Reliable versus Harmful Health Information	07
.....	
Warning Signs of Unreliable Health Content	08
.....	
Factors Influencing Mental Health, Body Image and Lifestyle	09
.....	
Empathy and Active Listening in Health Conversations	10
.....	
Applying Knowledge in Real-Life Situations	11
.....	
Recognising Risk in Real-Life Scenarios	11
.....	
Activity: Health Myth or Fact?	12
.....	

Summary

Activity: Trust It or Dismiss It	13
.....	
Activity: Web of Influences	15
.....	
Activity: Put Your Phone Down, Focus on Listening	16
.....	
Activity: What Would You Do?	18
.....	
Informed Choices: Consequences Matter	20
.....	

Introduction

Young people today grow up in a digital environment where health information is everywhere and constantly available. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube have become primary sources of advice on nutrition, mental health, body image, relationships and lifestyle. This unprecedented access to information brings real benefits – but it also brings significant risks. Alongside genuinely useful content, young people are routinely exposed to misinformation, unrealistic appearance standards, harmful mental health narratives and commercially driven health claims that may mislead, discourage or cause direct harm.

The challenge is not only that false information exists. The problem is that it is difficult to distinguish it from accurate information, especially when it is presented by trusted peers, popular influencers or content designed to appear professional and credible. Young people often make decisions about nutrition, exercise, mental health support, substance use and other health-related issues based on what they find online, without the tools necessary to critically evaluate what they see.

This module addresses that challenge. It develops the health literacy skills that young people need in order to navigate their digital information environment with greater confidence and critical awareness. Rather than simply teaching health facts, it develops the ability to find, evaluate and use health information – and to apply those skills in real-life situations.

This module helps participants:

- develop critical health literacy skills for evaluating information encountered online
- understand how digital environments influence mental health, body image and lifestyle choices
- practise empathy and peer-support techniques for sensitive health conversations
- move from passive consumers of content to active, informed advocates for their own and others' wellbeing

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Describe the concept of youth health literacy and its impact on personal and social wellbeing.
- Distinguish reliable from harmful health information on key topics relevant to young people.
- Identify internal and external factors influencing mental health, body image and lifestyle habits.
- Apply empathy and active listening when discussing sensitive health topics with peers.
- Apply health literacy knowledge in real-life situations involving misinformation, peer pressure and online health trends

Understanding Health Literacy and Youth Wellbeing

Health literacy is not a fixed set of knowledge. It is a set of skills — the ability to find information, understand it, assess its reliability and use it to make decisions. For young people, this process primarily takes place in digital environments where information is abundant, rapidly changing and not always accurate. Developing health literacy means developing the ability to navigate this environment, not simply memorising health facts.

The impact of health literacy on wellbeing is direct and visible in the areas most relevant to young people's lives:

- **Mental Health:** A young person who understands anxiety can recognise symptoms early, seek appropriate support and avoid the trap of self-diagnosis based on social media content that oversimplifies complex conditions.

Body Image and Digital Influence: Understanding that images on social media are routinely filtered, edited and curated reduces the pressure to compare oneself to standards that do not reflect reality. This knowledge alone can protect against harmful eating habits and low self-esteem.

- **Nutrition:** The ability to evaluate nutrition trends — recognising the difference between evidence-based dietary guidance and commercially motivated health claims — helps prevent harmful eating habits and unhealthy relationships with food.

- Peer Pressure and Addictions: Young people with health literacy are better equipped to recognise when social pressure is being used to promote harmful behaviours and are more likely to make informed decisions rather than uncritically following trends.

Recognising Reliable versus Harmful Health Information

Young people are constantly exposed to health information through social media, influencers and online platforms. The challenge is that not all of this information is accurate, and much of it is designed to appear convincing. A professionally produced video, an aesthetically appealing infographic or an enthusiastic influencer recommendation can make unreliable content appear just as credible as information from a medical authority.

This section develops the ability to critically evaluate health content — to look beyond surface appearance and ask questions that distinguish evidence-based information from misinformation or commercially motivated advice. These skills are essential for making informed decisions and avoiding risks to health and wellbeing.

Warning Signs of Unreliable Health Content

Warning Sign | Example

Miracle results or instant solutions | “Lose 10 kg in a week!”

Fear-based language | “This will destroy your health!”

No evidence or sources | Bold claims without references to studies or experts

Unverifiable or unnamed “experts” | “Doctors say...” without naming the expert or institution

Viral content without context | A post shared thousands of times without an original source

One-size-fits-all advice | Health advice that ignores individual differences in body type, age and context

Rule: If a health claim displays any of these warning signs, stop and verify it. A second credible source — from a healthcare professional, public health organisation or peer-reviewed publication — can be found in 60 seconds and may prevent significant harm.

Factors Influencing Mental Health, Body Image and Lifestyle

Young people's wellbeing is shaped by a broad and interconnected range of factors. Some are internal – personal beliefs, self-image, past experiences and emotional responses. Others are external – social media, family expectations, peer relationships, school pressures and cultural norms. Most of the time, these influences operate simultaneously, reinforcing or counteracting one another in ways that are not always easy to recognise.

Understanding these influences is not merely an academic exercise. When young people clearly see how their environment shapes their choices and sense of self, they are better positioned to make thoughtful rather than reactive decisions.

The most significant categories of influence include:

- Social media and algorithmic content
- Peer relationships and social belonging
- Family and cultural expectations
- School pressure and expectations of success
- Personal experiences and identity

Empathy and Active Listening in Health Conversations

Health literacy is not only about possessing correct information. It also involves the ability to share, receive and discuss information in ways that help rather than harm.

Conversations about health — especially those concerning mental health, body image, substance use, sexual health or trauma-related experiences — are among the most sensitive conversations young people and the adults who work with them will have.

Active listening is a foundational skill for these conversations. It involves giving full attention to what another person is saying, acknowledging their experience without immediately judging, correcting or advising them, and responding in a way that makes them feel genuinely heard

Active listening in practice includes:

- maintaining comfortable eye contact and open, non-defensive body language
- using minimal verbal encouragers such as “I see” and “Tell me more”
- allowing silence without rushing to fill it
- asking open-ended questions where appropriate
- reflecting back what has been heard without distorting or interpreting it
- resisting the urge to give advice, share personal stories or provide reassurance before the speaker has finished

Applying Knowledge in Real-Life Situations

Possessing health knowledge is important, but it is not enough on its own. The real challenge – and the true measure of health literacy – is knowing how to use that knowledge when faced with real decisions.

Real-life health situations rarely resemble classroom exercises. They involve social pressure, incomplete information, emotional risks and time constraints. They require not only knowledge but also judgement, confidence and the ability to navigate conflicting influences.

Recognising Risk in Real-Life Scenarios

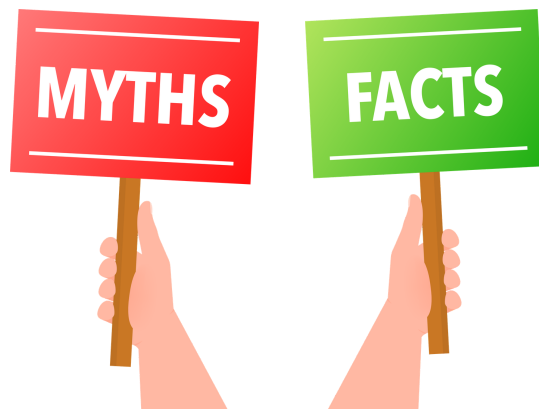
When you encounter health-related content or situations online, a practical set of questions can help cut through the noise:

1. What specific claim is being made and what evidence supports it?
2. Who is making the claim and what is their motivation?
3. What is missing from the picture – what risks, side effects or alternative perspectives are not being presented?

4. Would I follow this advice if it came from a qualified healthcare professional rather than a social media post?

5. If I am unsure, what is the most reliable source I can check before sharing or acting on this information?

Activity: Health Myth or Fact?



This activity introduces the fundamental skill of evaluating health claims before accepting or sharing them. It works well as an opening exercise because it is low-risk, energising and immediately reveals how often people act on information they have not properly examined.

How it works:

Participants work in small groups or as a whole group. A series of statements is presented one at a time. For each statement, participants decide whether it is a myth or a fact and briefly explain their reasoning before the answer is revealed.

Statements:

“Drinking detox teas helps remove toxins from your body.” – Myth

“Images on social media are often edited or filtered.” – Fact

“Talking about mental health can improve wellbeing.” – Fact

“Skipping meals is a good way to lose weight.” – Myth

“Peer pressure can influence health decisions.” – Fact

Discussion Questions:

- How did you decide whether each statement was true or false?
- Were you surprised by any of the answers? Why?
- Which claims were the most difficult to evaluate? What made them difficult?

Key Message:

Evaluating health claims is a skill. With practice, it becomes faster and more reliable.

Activity: Trust It or Dismiss It



This activity develops the habit of evaluating health content before accepting or sharing it.

How it works:

Participants are shown a series of health-related posts, screenshots or short videos. In small groups, they discuss each item and make a collective judgement: trust it or dismiss it. They must explain the reasons for their decision.

Example 1: An influencer promotes a “miracle supplement” that supposedly boosts immunity, energy and sleep at the same time.

Example 2: A WHO-style infographic with referenced data explaining how to recognise symptoms of depression.

Example 3: A TikTok video claiming that “coffee stops growth” — with no sources, only a confident presenter and two million views.

Example 4: A blog post about managing anxiety that provides no professional sources and ends with a link to a paid wellness programme.

Reflection Questions:

- What made the content appear trustworthy?
- Did the visual quality or professional appearance influence your decision? Should it?
- How easy is it to be misled by well-produced online content?

Key Takeaway:

Attractive content is not the same as reliable content. Evidence, sources and expertise matter more than aesthetics.

Activity: Web of Influences



This activity makes the interconnected nature of influences on wellbeing visible and tangible.

How it works:

A large sheet of paper displays a central figure representing a young person. Participants are given sticky notes and asked to think about different factors that may influence a young person's health and wellbeing.

Each participant writes one factor on a sticky note and places it around the figure. As the notes accumulate, a web of influences is created.

When the web is complete, participants classify each influence according to whether its impact is generally positive, negative or dependent on context.

Discussion Questions:

- Which factors influence you most personally? Are they internal, external or both?
- Which of these factors are under your control? Which are not?
- How does social media specifically affect body image? Can you provide an example from your own experience?
- What does the web reveal about the complexity of wellbeing that a simple “be healthy” message overlooks?

Key Takeaway:

Wellbeing is shaped by many interconnected influences. Understanding them is the first step towards navigating them.

Activity: Put Your Phone Down, Focus on Listening



This activity gives participants the experience of being fully listened to without interruption.

How it works:

Participants work in pairs. One person takes the role of speaker and the other the role of listener. The speaker shares a short wellbeing-related concern — real or fictional — such as feeling overwhelmed by comparisons at school and on social media, anxiety about fitting in, or tension with parents about screen time.

The listener's task is pure active listening: eye contact, open body language and minimal verbal encouragement. No questions. No advice. No personal stories. No phones.

After the exercise, pairs briefly exchange impressions before sharing reflections with the whole group.

Discussion Questions:

- As the speaker: What was it like to be listened to without interruption, advice or distractions?
- As the listener: How difficult was it to resist the urge to give advice, comfort the speaker or share your own experience?
- What does this experience tell us about how often young people feel genuinely heard in conversations about health and wellbeing?
- How does this skill connect to health literacy — specifically, creating conditions in which people feel safe seeking information and support?

Key Message:

Many young people feel ignored or immediately offered solutions instead of being heard. Developing the habit of listening before advising builds trust and enables deeper conversations about health.

Activity: What Would You Do?



Scenario 1

Your friend has started a diet they found on TikTok – a very low-calorie plan promising dramatic weight loss in two weeks. They seem excited and ask whether you want to try it too.

- A) Ignore it – it is their choice and you do not want conflict.
- B) Support their enthusiasm but ask where the plan comes from and whether they have checked it with a doctor or nutritionist.
- C) Try it with them – if it works for them, maybe it will work for you too.

Best Answer: Option B.

Scenario 2

You are scrolling through Instagram and see a fitness influencer with 1.2 million followers promoting an “immune-boosting supplement”. The post says it is “doctor approved”, but no doctor is named.

- A) The large following and professional branding make it credible.
- B) Reject it immediately because it is obviously advertising.
- C) Look up the product and its ingredients using a reliable health source before reaching any conclusion.

Best Answer: Option C.

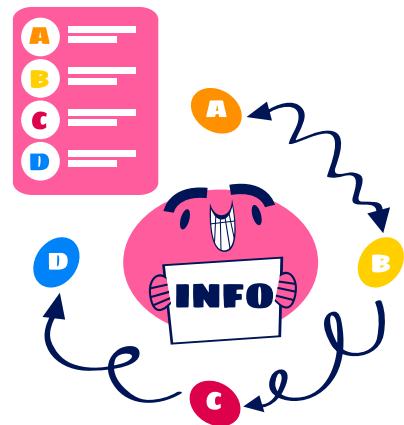
Scenario 3

A peer tells you they believe they have a mental health condition based on TikTok videos.

- A) Agree with their self-diagnosis.
- B) Tell them TikTok is not reliable and they should stop watching those videos.
- C) Listen carefully, acknowledge that their feelings are real and important, and gently encourage them to seek support from a qualified professional.

Best Answer: Option C.

Informed Choices: Consequences Matter



Health decisions have consequences, and those consequences are not always immediately visible. Social media content rarely shows what happens after a dramatic before-and-after photograph, the end of a viral diet or the moment when a supplement stops producing the promised effect.

A useful habit: before acting on any health claim, ask what the potential consequences might be.

- What are the risks if this diet does not work?
- What happens if I stop taking this supplement?
- What does the research say about long-term outcomes, not just short-term results?

These questions are not barriers to making health decisions — they are tools for making informed decisions.

Estimated Duration: 2.5–3 hours, depending on group size and discussion depth

SECTION	TIME
Introduction & Learning Outcomes	10–15 min
Understanding Health Literacy & Youth Wellbeing	20–25 min
Reliable vs Harmful Health Information	20–25 min
Factors Influencing Mental Health, Body Image & Lifestyle	15–20 min
Empathy & Active Listening	15–20 min
Activity: Health Myth or Fact?	20–25 min
Activity: Trust It or Dismiss It	20–25 min
Activity: Web of Influences	20–25 min
Activity: Put Your Phone Down, Focus on Listening	20–25 min
Activity: What Would You Do? + Debrief	15–20 min
Wrap-up & Reflection	10 min