RESEARCH SUMMARY

Critical thinking,

Mental health,

and

Life/Career decision-making

Among young people in Estonia and Slovakia

Combining desk research and focus group findings

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2026

Co-funded by the European Union

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1. Introduction

This research was conducted as part of the Ready 4 Life: MindShift project, an Erasmus+ KA210-YOU Small-scale Partnership in Youth, funded by the European Union. The project is led by Eluks Valmis / Ready For Life (Estonia) as the applicant organisation, with two partner organisations: EduEra (Slovakia) and Coobra (Austria). Its overarching aim is to strengthen the capacities of these organisations and the young people they serve in three interconnected areas: critical thinking, mental health and well-being, and life and career decision-making.

The MindShift project builds on the existing collaboration between EduEra and Coobra through the KA2 AdultLife initiative, now led by Eluks Valmis as the applicant organisation, which brings hands-on experience in youth life-preparedness education and a tested curriculum developed through years of direct work with young people in Estonian schools and youth centres. Each organisation brings distinct expertise to the collaboration: Eluks Valmis leads the project and contributes its curriculum on youth transition to adulthood; EduEra focuses on youth-friendly content creation for rural Slovak youth; and Coobra contributes cutting-edge methodologies from nonformal education and international youth work. Coobra additionally ensures the project's European dimension, with materials produced in English to reach audiences beyond the two primary partner countries.

This research forms one of the key foundational outcomes of the MindShift project and will directly inform the development of its educational resources: nine podcasts, 27 short educational videos, 27 infographics and handouts, lesson plans, and social media campaigns. All designed using a "by young people, for young people" approach, and produced in Slovak, Estonian, and English. The research combined two complementary methodologies. First, systematic desk research was carried out in both countries to map existing tools, concepts, frameworks, and key actors at the local, national, and European level. Second, qualitative focus group research was conducted with young people and youth workers in Estonia and Slovakia, generating rich first-hand insights into lived experiences, unmet needs, and gaps in existing support.

In Estonia, the focus group was conducted online with five upper-secondary school students aged 16–17, studying in different schools across the country. The discussion followed an open, semi-structured format guided by four main research questions covering challenges, coping strategies, key support actors, and young people's expectations of youth-friendly information.

In Slovakia, the focus group took place in Košice in Eastern Slovakia, a rural and semi-urban region—and brought together 14 participants: 10 young people aged 15–22 and 4 youth workers representing local organisations including youth clubs, cultural centres, volunteer groups, and after-school programmes. The session used participatory methods including World Café, deep-dive group discussions, and plenary reflection.

Together, these two strands of research offer a layered picture: the desk research reveals what formal and non-formal support structures already exist, while the focus groups reveal how young people and youth workers experience reality on the ground—where support is felt, where it is absent, and what is genuinely needed. The findings are presented both per

country and in an integrated cross-country analysis, as the patterns that emerged across Estonia and Slovakia were strikingly consistent.

2. Cross-Cutting Findings: What Young People Are Really Telling Us

Before examining each thematic area individually, it is important to name the overarching patterns that surfaced consistently across both countries, both research methods, and across all three topics. These are not incidental observations, they are structural realities of young people's lives that any educational resource, youth work practice, or support system must respond to.

2.1. Young People Feel Pressure But Lack Practical Guidance

Young people in both Estonia and Slovakia report being exposed to high levels of expectation from schools, families, peers, and society at large but receiving very little structured support in how to cope, decide, or navigate. The pressure is real and pervasive. What is missing is not motivation or intelligence, but practical skills, safe spaces, and accessible guidance.

This pressure does not arrive from a single direction. It is layered and cumulative. At school, young people face academic demands, grading systems, and the implicit message that their value is tied to performance. At home, parents often with the best intentions communicate expectations about educational pathways, career prestige, or life timelines that may feel non-negotiable. Among peers, there is constant social comparison, amplified enormously by social media, where curated highlights of others' lives create a distorted baseline against which young people measure themselves and find themselves lacking. And at the societal level, the broader cultural narrative tells young people they must be productive, self-directed, resilient, and ready without specifying what that actually looks like in practice or who is supposed to help them get there.

What is particularly striking is the gap between the volume of this pressure and the quality of the support available to navigate it. Young people are not without resources entirely they have the internet, they have peers, and many have at least one trusted adult in their lives. But these informal resources are inconsistent, unstructured, and often insufficient for the complexity of what young people are facing. A friend can listen but cannot always help someone work through a difficult decision. A parent can offer advice but may not have tools for supporting emotional regulation or critical reflection. A teacher can transmit information

but rarely has the time or training to facilitate the kind of guided self-discovery that genuine development requires.

The result is a generation that is, in many ways, highly stimulated but underequipped. They are flooded with information but lack frameworks for evaluating it. They are aware of the importance of mental health but lack language and tools for tending to it. They are expected to make significant life decisions at increasingly young ages but have had little opportunity to practise decision-making in lower-stakes contexts first. The gap is not one of awareness or ambition it is one of practical skill and supported experience.

This finding has a direct implication for youth work and education: the role of the youth worker, trainer, or facilitator is not primarily to add more information to an already overloaded landscape. It is to slow things down to create structured opportunities for young people to practise the competencies they need, in environments where it is safe to be uncertain, to make mistakes, and to gradually build confidence through experience rather than instruction alone.

2.2. Information Exists But Is Fragmented, General, or Not Youth-Friendly

Desk research confirms that both countries host a substantial number of organisations, portals, platforms, and initiatives addressing mental health, media literacy, and career planning. Yet focus group participants rarely mentioned these resources spontaneously. When probed, many were either unaware of specific tools, had found them too general or too formal, or had not received support in how to use them. There is a significant gap between what exists on paper and what young people actually access and benefit from.

This gap deserves careful examination, because it is easy to misread. On the surface, it might appear to be a communication problem that existing resources simply need better marketing, more visible social media presence, or a wider distribution network. And while visibility is certainly part of the picture, the deeper issue is one of design and relevance. Many existing tools were not built with young people at the centre of their development. They were built by professionals, for young people a subtle but significant distinction that shows up in tone, format, assumed reading level, and the kinds of problems they are designed to address.

A mental health portal that presents information in clinical language, however accurate, does not feel accessible to a 16-year-old who is not yet sure whether what they are experiencing is "serious enough" to warrant help. A career guidance platform that lists occupational descriptions and required qualifications provides information but not orientation, it tells young people what different jobs involve, but not how to figure out which direction is right for them personally. A media literacy resource that explains the mechanics of disinformation in theoretical terms does not equip a young person to pause before sharing a misleading post on a WhatsApp group at 11pm.

Fragmentation compounds the problem further. Even where good resources exist, they are scattered across different organisations, websites, and platforms with no unified entry point. A young person in rural Slovakia looking for support around anxiety, career confusion, and

online misinformation would need to find three separate organisations, in some cases with differing eligibility criteria, languages, or geographic limitations. The cognitive load of navigating this landscape particularly for a young person who is already overwhelmed is itself a barrier. Many simply do not have the energy or the guidance to begin searching.

There is also a structural issue around how resources reach young people in the first place. In both countries, the most commonly cited sources of support in focus groups were informal: parents, friends, and a small number of individual teachers or youth workers who had personally introduced a resource or topic. This points to the decisive role of trusted human intermediaries in bridging the gap between existing tools and actual use. A resource that is technically available but not actively introduced, contextualised, and recommended by someone a young person trusts is, in practice, largely invisible.

The implication for this project is clear: developing additional materials alone is not sufficient. The way resources are designed their language, their format, their interactivity, and the degree to which they reflect the real experiences of young people matters as much as their content. And the way they are introduced and supported through youth workers, educators, and peer networks who understand both the tool and the person determines whether they are used at all. Bridging the gap between what exists and what is actually experienced requires attention to both the quality of the resource and the quality of the human context around it.

2.3. Safe Relational Spaces Are Missing More Than Information Itself

Perhaps the most powerful finding across both focus groups was that young people are not primarily asking for more information. They are asking for someone who listens. They want environments where they can speak without fear of judgment, where different opinions are welcomed, and where they can explore uncertainty without being rushed toward a conclusion. This relational dimension the quality of the space itself was described as the foundation without which no information or tool can truly help.

This finding challenges a deeply embedded assumption in how youth support is often designed and funded. The default response to identified youth needs tends to be the production of content: more websites, more leaflets, more videos, more workshops. And while well-designed content absolutely has a role to play, the young people in this research were pointing to something that no content can replace the experience of being genuinely heard by another human being in a setting that feels safe enough to be honest.

What makes a space feel safe is not simply the absence of visible threat. It is something more active and more fragile. It is the accumulated experience of having spoken and not been dismissed. Of having asked a question and not been made to feel stupid. Of having expressed an unpopular opinion and not been punished socially. Of having shown vulnerability and not had it used against you. For many young people, these experiences are

rare enough that their absence has become normalised, they have simply learned not to expect them, and have adapted by staying quiet, performing confidence, or avoiding the topics that matter most to them altogether.

In Estonia, this dynamic showed up particularly around mental health and critical thinking: young people described not wanting to be seen as weak, not wanting to draw attention to their struggles, and not feeling that classrooms or peer groups were places where genuine uncertainty was welcome. In Slovakia, the rural context added a layer of social visibility that intensified these pressures in small communities where everyone knows everyone, the consequences of speaking openly can feel much higher than in anonymous urban settings. In both contexts, the result was the same: silence not from lack of things to say, but from lack of confidence that saying them would be safe.

The significance of this for youth work practice is profound. It means that the first task of any youth worker, trainer, or facilitator working in these thematic areas is not to deliver a programme, it is to build the conditions under which a programme can actually work. This takes time. It requires consistent presence, genuine curiosity about young people's lives, and a facilitation style that prioritises listening over speaking, questions over answers, and process over content. It means being willing to sit with discomfort, to let silence breathe, and to resist the impulse to fill every gap with information or advice.

It also means recognising that safe spaces do not emerge automatically from good intentions. They are built deliberately, through specific practices: establishing ground rules collaboratively, modelling vulnerability as a facilitator, responding to contributions with genuine interest rather than evaluation, and returning to the same group over time so that trust can accumulate. A single session, however well designed, cannot create this. It is the product of sustained, relational engagement which is precisely why continuity of funding and long-term programme formats matter so much, and why the fragmented, project-based nature of so much youth work remains one of the field's most significant structural challenges.

The recurring keywords that emerged across both contexts ,confusion, overload, pressure, uncertainty, stigma, lack of practical tools, and a longing for real-life relevance ,are not simply a list of problems to be solved. They are a portrait of a generation navigating enormous complexity without adequate relational scaffolding. They should be considered not only as the starting point for any resource or methodology developed within this project, but as a constant reference point: a reminder of who this work is ultimately for, and what it feels like to be them.

3. Critical Thinking and Media Literacy

3.1. Challenges Identified

Critical thinking and media literacy emerged as urgent and underserved areas in both countries. Young people are growing up in an information-saturated digital environment primarily experienced through TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and messaging platforms—without being equipped with the skills to navigate it critically.

In Estonia, focus group participants described a school system that teaches the concept of fake news but rarely creates opportunities to apply critical thinking to real, relevant examples. Students noted that they are expected to form and defend their own opinions, yet the classroom culture often punishes divergence. Group dynamics lead to conformity rather than independent thought. As one pattern of experience captured it: "You learn to say what the teacher wants to hear." Source criticism is not practiced with actual content young people encounter daily. Many students simply rely on gut instinct or post popularity when evaluating information online.

In Slovakia particularly in the rural and semi-urban setting of Eastern Slovakia additional dimensions emerged. In small communities, standing out or expressing an unconventional view carries social risk. Students reported that questioning authority, including teachers, could be actively discouraged. The peer pressure to conform is intensified by the tight-knit nature of rural social networks, where reputation and relationships are closely watched. Furthermore, the Slovak participants described having received virtually no training in source evaluation, with most online decisions made on the basis of intuition or social proof.

Common challenges identified across both contexts include:

- Social media misinformation, with young people unable to distinguish credible from manipulative content
- Lack of debate or discussion culture in schools; students afraid to express divergent opinions
- Teachers who discourage questioning or critical dialogue
- Absence of practical source-evaluation skills
- Peer pressure that makes disagreement feel socially costly, particularly in small communities
- Theory without practice: knowledge about fake news but no experience detecting it in real content
- Algorithm-driven emotional experiences on platforms like TikTok, reinforcing anxiety and distorted worldviews

3.2. Existing Tools and Actors

Desk research confirms that both countries have established actors working in media literacy and critical thinking education.

In Estonia, key organisations include Tuleviku Meedia MTÜ, which delivers guest lessons, workshops, and media literacy materials for schools, with a focus on misinformation, AI, and digital habits. Meediataip, an ERR initiative, has produced articles, podcasts, and videos on source criticism and social media influence, though its active phase concluded in 2023. Teeviit, the national youth information portal, also maintains a media literacy section with up-to-date digital content.

In Slovakia, Zmudri stands out as one of the most widely used youth educational platforms, offering short video lessons and school programmes on critical thinking, hoaxes, and digital safety. The Slovenská debatná asociácia (SDA) develops argumentation and debate skills through clubs, tournaments, and teacher trainings. Demagog.sk provides fact-checking education alongside its public verification work, and IMEC (Inštitút mediálnej výchovy) produces tools, lesson plans, and research for media literacy in youth and school settings.

Shared limitations across these actors include: project-based and therefore discontinuous funding; geographic concentration in urban centres with limited rural reach; tools that prioritise information delivery over active skill-building; and insufficient integration into everyday non-formal youth work.

3.3. What Needs to Be Strengthened

The combined findings point clearly to a set of needs that current provision does not adequately address. These are not abstract recommendations they emerge directly from what young people described as missing in their everyday lives, and from the gaps identified between existing tools and actual youth experience.

Young people need practical exercises using real, familiar online content actual TikTok posts, Instagram accounts, news articles, and WhatsApp forwards they have genuinely encountered. The reason this matters is not simply engagement, though relevance does increase engagement. It is that critical thinking is a contextual skill: it is built through repeated practice with the specific types of content and the specific emotional triggers that young people actually face. Teaching source evaluation using a newspaper article from 1995 or a hypothetical example constructed for educational purposes does not transfer to the moment a young person sees a provocative claim on their feed at midnight and has to decide in seconds whether to believe it, share it, or question it. The closer the training material is to the real digital environment, the more likely the skill is to be applied there.

Young people need safe discussion environments where all opinions are welcomed and mistakes are treated as learning. This is closely connected to the findings on relational safety discussed in Chapter 2, but it has a specific application in the context of critical thinking: many young people have learned, through repeated experience in classrooms and

peer groups, that expressing the wrong opinion carries social cost. Before they can practise genuine critical analysis, they need to experience repeatedly and consistently that this particular space operates differently. Mistakes here are data, not failures. Unpopular opinions are interesting, not dangerous. Changing your mind is a sign of thinking well, not of weakness. Building this culture is the facilitator's first and most important task.

Young people need facilitated debate and dialogue spaces that build confidence gradually. Confidence in expressing and defending a reasoned position is not innate it is developed through practice, and it develops most effectively when the difficulty increases incrementally. Starting with topics that feel personally relevant but not socially charged, then moving toward more complex or contested questions, allows young people to build the internal experience of having navigated disagreement successfully before the stakes feel high. Debate formats should be introduced not as competitive performance but as collaborative sense-making: the goal is not to win, but to think more clearly together.

Young people need tools adapted specifically for their digital reality and age group. This means formats that are visual, interactive, and short enough to hold attention without oversimplifying. It means language that is direct and honest rather than cautiously institutional. It means acknowledging, explicitly, the platforms and dynamics that actually shape young people's information environment algorithm-driven feeds, influencer culture, viral misinformation rather than pretending these can be addressed through generic media literacy frameworks designed for a previous era. Young people are not naive about their digital lives; they are often highly sophisticated observers of social media dynamics. What they lack are structured frameworks for applying that sophistication critically and consistently.

Finally, critical thinking practice needs to be integrated into regular youth work, not treated as a standalone topic reserved for formal education. The moments that matter most when a young person encounters a misleading claim, feels pressured to conform to a group opinion, or struggles to articulate why something feels wrong do not happen during a scheduled media literacy workshop. They happen in ordinary life, in conversations with friends, in the scroll of a phone at a bus stop. The most effective way to build critical thinking capacity is to make it a habit of mind, cultivated through brief, regular, embedded practice rather than occasional intensive exposure. Youth workers are uniquely positioned to do this precisely because they see young people regularly, informally, and over time.

For youth workers, trainers, and facilitators, the implications of all of this are direct and demanding. The role is not to lecture about fake news it is to create conditions in which young people can practise detecting and discussing it together, with a facilitator who models intellectual honesty rather than projecting authority. The goal is to teach how to think, not what to think. This distinction is easy to state and genuinely difficult to embody, because it requires the facilitator to tolerate uncertainty, to welcome conclusions they did not anticipate, and to resist the temptation to correct rather than question. It requires building psychological safety before introducing argumentation, and trusting that young people, given the right conditions, are entirely capable of developing rigorous, independent, critical thought.

Summarised:

The combined findings point clearly to a set of needs that current provision does not adequately address:

- Practical exercises using real, familiar online content (actual TikTok posts, Instagram accounts, news articles young people have encountered)
- Safe discussion environments where all opinions are welcomed and mistakes are treated as learning
- Facilitated debate and dialogue spaces that build confidence gradually
- Tools adapted specifically for young people's digital reality and age group
- Integration of critical thinking practice into regular youth work, not only formal education

For youth workers, trainers, and facilitators, the implications are direct: the role is not to lecture about fake news, but to create conditions in which young people can practise detecting and discussing it together. The goal is to teach how to think, not what to think. This requires building psychological safety before introducing argumentation, and modelling honest uncertainty rather than projecting authority.

4. Mental Health and Well-Being

4.1. Challenges Identified

Mental health emerged as the most emotionally charged theme in both focus groups. Young people spoke openly about stress, anxiety, burnout, and social comparison but in many cases, only after establishing a degree of trust with facilitators and peers. The prevalence of mental health challenges is widely felt; the willingness and ability to address them is significantly more limited.

In Estonia, participants described a school environment in which academic pressure is intense and well-being is not systematically supported. Several noted that school psychologists are present but often overloaded, difficult to access, or perceived as unable to provide meaningful help for complex situations. Social media particularly TikTok was identified as a driver of negative comparisons and emotional difficulty, with algorithms reportedly amplifying sad or anxiety-provoking content. The cost of private therapy was mentioned as a barrier. Perhaps most significantly, shame around seeking help was described as widespread: "Talking about mental health can feel stigmatised, preventing young people from reaching out."

In rural Slovakia, stigma was even more prominent. Mental health is described in these communities as something that should remain private, and seeking help can be interpreted as weakness. The social visibility of small communities compounds this: being seen going to a psychologist, or being known to struggle emotionally, can feel dangerous. At the same time, practical access is very limited professional support is geographically distant, waiting times are long, and school psychologists are described as overwhelmed. Many participants expressed that they experience genuine distress but simply do not know where to turn or what their options are.

> *"I know something is wrong, but I don't know who I can talk to."*
>
> *"We need someone who actually listens, not someone who tells us what to do."*

Common challenges across both countries include:

- Widespread stigma, particularly in rural and conservative community contexts
- Reluctance to seek help due to shame, fear of judgment, or not wanting to burden others
- Overloaded or inaccessible school psychologists
- Long waiting times for professional support
- High costs of private therapy
- Lack of awareness about available support options and how to navigate them
- Social media pressure, comparison culture, and algorithm-driven emotional overload
- Academic pressure and lack of institutional attention to student well-being
- Feeling unheard or invisible within school and community structures

4.2. Existing Tools and Actors

Both countries have established organisations and platforms providing mental health support for young people.

In Estonia, Peaasi.ee is the leading digital mental health portal for young people, offering free, evidence-based self-help materials, tests, worksheets, and the Peahea anonymous online counselling service. The Eesti Vaimse Tervise Ühing (Estonian Mental Health Association) provides professional counselling and therapy, though fees present a barrier for many. Tervise Arengu Instituut (TAI) leads national research and school-based prevention programmes, including the VEPA method.

In Slovakia, IPčko provides 24/7 free and anonymous online chat, phone, and email psychological support, with in-person youth spaces (Káčko) in several cities. Liga za duševné zdravie runs national awareness campaigns and Mental Health First Aid trainings. Náruč provides crisis intervention and therapeutic programmes for children and teens in difficulty. OZ V kocke runs workshops in schools and youth centres, particularly in eastern Slovakia.

Strengths of existing provision include: free and anonymous access channels; evidence-based materials; digital availability transcending geographic barriers; and crisis intervention capacity. However, significant limitations remain: services tend to be reactive rather than preventive; rural areas are underserved; workshop-based prevention formats are limited; and materials can feel too general or insufficiently interactive for young people who need personalised support.

4.3. What Needs to Be Strengthened

The combined findings point to a set of needs in the area of mental health that current provision, despite its genuine strengths, does not adequately meet. These needs exist at two levels: what young people themselves require in order to experience better mental well-being, and what youth workers, trainers, and facilitators require in order to support them effectively. Both levels matter, and neglecting either undermines the other.

Young people need the normalisation of mental health as part of everyday life. It should not be something addressed only in crisis, not a topic reserved for awareness campaigns or emergency interventions, but a dimension of human experience that is spoken about naturally, regularly, and without drama in the spaces where young people spend their time. Normalisation is not about minimising serious mental health difficulties. It is about dismantling the silence that surrounds ordinary emotional struggle: the anxiety before an exam, the low mood that follows a social rejection, the exhaustion of sustained pressure. When mental health is only ever discussed in extreme terms, it inadvertently communicates that anything short of crisis does not qualify for attention. The result is that young people wait, often for a very long time, before feeling permitted to acknowledge that something is wrong.

Young people need peer-support programmes led by trained young people. The research consistently showed that young people trust young people. Not because adults are untrustworthy, but because a peer who has navigated similar experiences carries a particular kind of credibility that no professional qualification can replicate. Peer supporters do not replace therapists or counsellors. They provide something different and, in many ways, more accessible: a first human contact, a reduction in the shame of reaching out, and a bridge toward more formal help when it is needed. Peer support programmes, when properly

structured and supervised, are among the most cost-effective and culturally resonant mental health interventions available to youth organisations.

Young people need emotional literacy workshops using accessible, practical language. Emotional literacy is the ability to identify, name, understand, and communicate one's emotional states. It is a foundational competency that many young people have never been explicitly taught. Without it, even a well-motivated young person who wants to seek help may struggle to describe what they are experiencing in terms that feel accurate or that others can respond to usefully. Workshops focused on building emotional vocabulary, recognising physical sensations associated with different emotional states, and distinguishing between feelings and thoughts give young people a richer internal language with which to navigate their own experience and reach out for support.

Young people need clear information about who to approach and when, presented in youth-friendly formats. One of the most consistently reported barriers to help-seeking in both countries was not stigma alone. It was genuine confusion about what options exist, how to access them, and what the difference between a school psychologist, a counsellor, an online chat service, and a therapist actually is in practice. This confusion is not a sign of disengagement; it is a structural failure of the systems that are supposed to support young people. Clear, honest, visually presented guidance covering what each type of support offers, how to access it, what to expect, and what it costs would meaningfully reduce the threshold for first contact.

Young people need local and community-based access to support, especially in rural areas. Geography remains one of the most stubborn barriers to mental health support. Professional services are concentrated in urban centres. Online services help, but are not sufficient for young people who need sustained, relational support rather than a one-off chat. Community-based models, including youth workers with mental health competencies, trained peer supporters in local schools and clubs, and partnerships between NGOs and health services, are not second-best alternatives to professional care. For many young people in rural areas, they are the only realistic first point of contact, and they deserve to be designed, resourced, and valued accordingly.

Youth workers, trainers, and facilitators have their own set of distinct needs in this area. Mental Health First Aid training is the most immediate and impactful investment any organisation working with young people can make. MHFA does not turn youth workers into therapists. It gives them the knowledge to recognise signs of distress, the confidence to open a conversation without causing harm, and the clarity to know when and how to refer to professional support. Without this foundation, even the most caring and experienced youth worker can feel paralysed in the face of a young person who is visibly struggling, unsure whether to intervene, how to do so, or what to say.

Youth workers need simple conversation frameworks for approaching sensitive topics safely. Not scripts, since young people are perceptive enough to recognise when someone is following a protocol rather than genuinely engaging, but structured approaches that provide enough guidance to feel confident without being so prescriptive that authentic human connection is squeezed out. Frameworks such as active listening structures, open-question

sequences, and check-in protocols give practitioners a backbone for difficult conversations while leaving room for genuine responsiveness to the individual in front of them.

Youth workers need clear referral pathways to professional services. Knowing that a young person needs more support than a youth worker can offer is only half the challenge. The other half is knowing specifically where to direct them, how to make that handover feel safe and supported rather than like a rejection, and how to maintain a caring relationship with the young person while they wait for or engage with professional help. Clear, regularly updated referral maps for each local context are an essential organisational resource that many NGOs have not yet developed systematically.

Youth workers need prevention-focused programme models that address well-being before crisis emerges. The default in many organisations is to respond to visible need, putting support in place when a young person is already struggling. This is necessary, but it is not sufficient. The most significant opportunity for youth work in mental health lies upstream: building resilience, emotional literacy, social connection, and a sense of agency and meaning in young people's lives before difficulties arise. This requires a shift in how programmes are designed and justified, away from crisis intervention metrics and toward longer-term well-being indicators that are harder to measure but ultimately more meaningful.

Finally, youth workers need tools that help young people name and understand their emotions, not only manage or suppress them. There is an important distinction here that is easy to overlook. Much of what passes for mental health education focuses on coping strategies: techniques for reducing anxiety, managing stress, or calming the nervous system. These are valuable, but they can inadvertently send the message that difficult emotions are problems to be eliminated rather than signals to be understood. Sustainable well-being is built not by learning to suppress discomfort but by developing the capacity to sit with it, make sense of it, and allow it to inform decisions and self-understanding. Tools that support this deeper kind of emotional processing, such as reflective journalling prompts, emotion-mapping exercises, and guided group reflection, are as important as any relaxation technique.

The direction is clear, and the research makes it unambiguous: mental health support must move decisively from reactive to preventive. This is not a new idea, but it remains stubbornly underimplemented, largely because reactive support is easier to justify to funders, easier to measure, and easier to design than the quieter, slower work of building well-being before it breaks down. Youth workers are often the trusted adults who young people approach first, before teachers, before parents, and long before professionals. They occupy a position of extraordinary potential influence in the mental health landscape, one that is chronically under-recognised and under-resourced. Equipping them with the competencies, the tools, and the institutional support to open these conversations effectively and to sustain them over time is one of the highest-impact investments this project and the broader youth work field can make.

Summarised:

Young people need:

- Normalisation of mental health as part of everyday life—not only addressed in crisis
- Peer-support programmes led by trained young people
- Emotional literacy workshops using accessible, practical language
- Clear information about who to approach and when, presented in youth-friendly formats
- Local and community-based access to support, especially in rural areas

Youth workers, trainers, and facilitators need:

- Mental Health First Aid training to recognise signs of distress
- Simple conversation frameworks for approaching sensitive topics safely
- Clear referral pathways to professional services
- Prevention-focused programme models that address well-being before crisis emerges
- Tools that help young people name and understand their emotions, not only manage or suppress them

The direction is clear: mental health support must move decisively from reactive to preventive. Youth workers are often the trusted adults who young people approach first—before teachers, parents, or professionals. Equipping them with the competencies and tools to open these conversations effectively is one of the highest-impact investments this project can make.

5. Life and Career Decision-Making

5.1. Challenges Identified

Life and career decision-making was described by young people across both countries as one of the most anxiety-provoking aspects of their current experience. The source of this anxiety is not simply uncertainty about the future it is the combination of premature pressure to decide, limited exposure to real-world options, and an educational system that has not prepared them for the complexity of self-directed choice.

In Estonia, participants described feeling that the expected pathway school, university, career is presented as the obvious route, without sufficient exploration of alternatives. Many

felt that the schools and career guidance tools available are informational rather than experiential: they provide descriptions of professions but not opportunities to discover what those professions actually feel like. Self-assessment tools exist but are not always translated into meaningful guidance conversations. Young people expressed a wish for adult support that helps them understand their own strengths and values, not merely lists their options.

In Slovakia, the challenges were sharpened by rural context. Career guidance in schools was described as outdated or extremely limited, leaving young people largely dependent on family networks, which in rural areas may themselves have limited exposure to diverse career paths. The pressure to choose secondary school at age 14 or 15 was widely experienced as premature. Young people spoke of fearing the "wrong decision" in a way that could feel life-defining. For many, the default response to this anxiety is avoidance—putting off the topic rather than engaging with it. Parents' expectations, while often loving, added an additional layer of pressure.

> *"We're constantly told what to do, but never helped to understand who we are."*
>
> *"School gives us pressure but not real skills."*

Common challenges across both countries include:

- Feeling "lost" about future choices with insufficient guidance to navigate
- Premature pressure to make important educational decisions (at 14–15 years of age)
- Fear of making the "wrong" choice and its perceived irreversibility
- Limited real-life exposure to professions and diverse career paths
- Overemphasis on university as the default or only prestigious pathway
- Career guidance that is informational rather than experiential or coaching-based
- Parental expectations conflicting with young people's own interests and inclinations
- Rural geographic barriers to accessing broader career knowledge and opportunity

5.2. Existing Tools and Actors

Both countries have developed platforms and services addressing career planning and decision-making.

In Estonia, MinuKarjäär.ee, managed by the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, provides digital career guidance, self-assessment tests, occupational descriptions, and

information on labour market trends—all free of charge. Teeviit's Work and Career section offers youth-friendly articles, guides, and personal stories. NÜH (Noored Ühiskonna Heaks) provides transformative experiential learning through international youth exchanges and Erasmus+ projects. VitaTiim, based in Ida-Virumaa, offers an especially valuable community model combining international mobility with local support, particularly serving the Russian-speaking population of the region.

In Slovakia, KomposyT provides digital career diagnostics and educational pathway planning, and is widely used by school counsellors. Euroguidance Slovakia supports career guidance methodology and innovation. SPACE Youth Work Centres in the Banská Bystrica region offer integrated career counselling, coaching, and community-based youth support. Človek v ohrození runs inclusive career guidance for youth from disadvantaged and rural backgrounds. VIAC, based in the Orava region, offers career orientation and life skills programming in a rural setting.

Strengths of existing provision include: digital self-assessment tools with free access; informational resources covering a wide range of professions; and some experiential models such as youth exchanges. Key limitations: most tools remain informational rather than experiential; there is limited coaching or mentoring; rural accessibility is uneven; and connections to real workplaces, role models, or job shadowing are rare.

5.3. What Needs to Be Strengthened

The combined findings point to a set of needs in the area of life and career decision-making that current provision does not adequately address. As with mental health, these needs exist at two levels: what young people themselves require in order to navigate their futures with greater confidence and clarity, and what youth workers, trainers, and facilitators require in order to guide that process effectively. The two are inseparable. Even the best-designed career tools will have limited impact if the practitioners introducing them lack the competencies to create a genuinely exploratory, supportive environment around them.

Young people need strengths-based coaching that starts from who they are, not what they should become. This is perhaps the most fundamental reorientation required in how career support is currently delivered. The dominant model in most schools and guidance services begins with the external world: here are the available options, here are the qualifications required, here is what the labour market needs. This is not without value, but it places young people in a passive position from the outset, as receivers of information about a landscape they are expected to fit themselves into. A strengths-based approach reverses this sequence. It begins with the young person: their natural capacities, their values, the activities that energise rather than drain them, the kinds of problems they find themselves drawn to solving. From this foundation, the external world of career options becomes something to explore with curiosity rather than something to perform for with anxiety.

Young people need real-life exposure through job shadowing, workplace visits, short internships, and professional mentoring. The research was unambiguous on this point: young people feel they are making significant decisions about their futures based on very limited and often distorted information about what different careers and working lives actually involve. The gap between a job title and the lived reality of a profession is enormous, and it can only be bridged through direct experience. Even a single afternoon in a workplace, or an honest 45-minute conversation with someone doing work that seems interesting, can fundamentally shift a young person's sense of what is possible and whether a particular direction feels genuinely right for them. Organisations and youth workers who can facilitate these encounters, even informally and on a small scale, are providing something that no digital platform or career test can replicate.

Young people need peer learning: the opportunity to hear from young people who have navigated similar choices, faced similar uncertainties, and found their own path through. Adult professionals, however generous and well-intentioned, often speak from a position of settled experience that can feel distant from the confusion of mid-adolescence. A young person a few years older who can say honestly "I had no idea what I wanted and here is how I figured it out" offers a form of hope and practical insight that is uniquely credible. Structured peer learning formats, whether through mentoring pairs, panel discussions with slightly older young people, or facilitated peer-to-peer reflection groups, should be considered a core component of career support rather than an optional extra.

Young people need tools that reduce the fear-based framing of career decisions and emphasise exploration. Much of the anxiety that surrounds career choice is not inherent to the decisions themselves but is a product of how those decisions are framed and timed. When a 14-year-old is told that the secondary school they choose will shape their entire professional future, the decision is loaded with a weight it does not need to carry. When young people are given language and frameworks that treat early choices as experiments, as opportunities to gather information about themselves and the world rather than as commitments that determine their fate, the emotional landscape shifts significantly. Tools that operationalise this reframing, such as guided exploration activities, "try it and reflect" mini-challenges, and normalising stories about non-linear paths, are as valuable as any career assessment instrument.

Young people need structured reflection exercises that help them identify their values, interests, and natural strengths. Reflection does not happen automatically. Left to themselves, most young people process experience through the lens of social comparison, external validation, and anxiety about the future, none of which are particularly useful guides to self-knowledge. Structured reflection, facilitated by a thoughtful adult and embedded regularly into youth work practice, creates the conditions for a different kind of self-understanding to emerge. Activities such as values card sorting, peak experience narratives, strength-spotting in everyday situations, and future visioning exercises are practical, accessible, and genuinely effective at helping young people develop a clearer and more confident sense of who they are and what matters to them.

Youth workers, trainers, and facilitators need coaching competencies: specifically, the ability to ask good questions rather than give advice. This shift is harder than it sounds. The instinct to help, when a young person is confused or distressed about their future, is to offer

direction, to suggest options, to reassure with certainty. But this instinct, however well-meaning, often short-circuits the very process of self-discovery that would genuinely serve the young person. A coach-informed youth worker knows that the most powerful intervention is usually a well-timed open question: "What would you do if you weren't afraid of getting it wrong?" or "When do you feel most like yourself?" or "What does the version of your future you actually want look like, setting aside what you think you should want?" These questions do not provide answers. They create the space in which young people can begin to find their own.

Youth workers need decision-making facilitation frameworks that can be applied in both group and individual settings. Facilitating a group discussion about career choices, or supporting an individual young person through a significant decision point, requires more than goodwill and empathetic listening. It requires a structured approach to the process of decision-making itself: how to generate and evaluate options, how to identify and name competing values, how to distinguish between fear-based avoidance and genuine discomfort that signals misalignment, and how to make a provisional choice while remaining open to revision. Frameworks that break this process into clear, manageable steps give youth workers something concrete to offer in these conversations, reducing their own anxiety and increasing their effectiveness.

Youth workers need strength identification and reflection tools adapted specifically for youth work contexts. Many of the tools that exist in this space were designed for corporate coaching, career counselling, or therapeutic settings and require significant adaptation before they are appropriate for non-formal youth work. Materials that are visual, participatory, short enough to use within a standard session, and designed for groups as well as individuals give practitioners flexibility and confidence. When tools are designed with the realities of youth work in mind, including limited time, mixed group dynamics, and the need to maintain energy and engagement, they are far more likely to be used consistently and effectively.

Finally, youth workers need methods for introducing career topics without triggering anxiety or premature pressure. The way a topic is framed at the outset has a profound effect on how young people engage with it. Introducing career discussion with language that emphasises exploration, curiosity, and the normality of not knowing creates a very different starting point than framing it around decisions, pathways, and future consequences. Simple facilitation techniques, such as beginning with imagination rather than planning, with dreams rather than goals, and with questions about what a good life looks and feels like before moving to how to build one, can dramatically shift the emotional tone of career-related conversations and make them feel genuinely inviting rather than threatening.

Career support must shift from information delivery to guided self-discovery. The question at the heart of this work is not "What job should I do?" It is "Who am I, and what kind of life do I want to build?" These are not questions that any platform, test, or guidance booklet can answer on a young person's behalf. They require time, reflection, honest conversation, and the support of an adult who is genuinely curious about the young person in front of them rather than focused on moving them efficiently through a process. Youth workers are uniquely positioned to hold this process, precisely because of the trust, continuity, and relational quality that characterises good youth work at its best. What they need is the

confidence, the tools, and the institutional recognition that this kind of support is not a soft add-on to their role but one of its most essential and impactful dimensions.

Summarised:

Young people need:

- Strengths-based coaching that starts from who they are, not what they should become
- Real-life exposure: job shadowing, workplace visits, short internships, and professional mentoring
- Peer learning: hearing from young people who have navigated similar choices
- Tools that reduce the fear-based framing of career decisions and emphasise exploration
- Structured reflection exercises helping them identify values, interests, and natural strengths

Youth workers, trainers, and facilitators need:

- Coaching competencies: the ability to ask good questions rather than give advice
- Decision-making facilitation frameworks that can be applied in group or individual settings
- Strength identification and reflection tools adapted for youth work contexts
- Methods for introducing career topics without triggering anxiety or premature pressure

Career support must shift from information delivery to guided self-discovery. The question is not "What job should I do?" but "Who am I, and what kind of life do I want to build?" Youth workers are uniquely positioned to hold this process—when equipped with the right tools and confidence.

6. Principles and Priorities for Youth Workers, Trainers, and Facilitators

The combined findings of this research: desk research and focus groups, Estonia and Slovakia converge on a coherent set of principles for effective youth work in these three

thematic areas. These are not prescriptions but orientations: ways of approaching young people and designing learning experiences that genuinely respond to what has been heard.

6.1. Build Psychological Safety First

Without a sense of safety in the room, no method works. Young people consistently described the absence of safe spaces as the primary barrier—before stigma, before lack of tools, before geographic distance. Safety is not an atmospheric nice-to-have; it is the prerequisite for everything else. For facilitators, this means investing deliberate time and skill in establishing trust, ground rules, and a culture of non-judgment before introducing any challenging content. It means modelling vulnerability and honesty. It means ensuring that silence and uncertainty are welcomed, not rushed past.

6.2. Teach Skills, Not Only Information

Young people do not need more facts about fake news, mental health, or career options. They need to practise evaluating a real post, naming a real emotion, or making a real decision with support. Critical thinking, emotional regulation, and decision-making are competencies they are built through experience and reflection, not absorbed through reading. Youth workers should design sessions that ask young people to do something, not only learn something.

6.3. Work With Real-Life Context

Sessions that use hypothetical or generic examples feel irrelevant. Sessions that use a TikTok video from last week, a real career dilemma from a participant's life, or a genuine emotional challenge from the group feel urgent and alive. Whenever possible, anchor activities in the actual digital and social environment young people inhabit. This requires facilitators to stay curious and current about young people's worlds and to be willing to learn from them.

6.4. Combine Coaching and Facilitation Approaches

Young people explicitly said they want guidance, not authority someone who helps them think, not someone who tells them what to think. This is the essence of coaching: asking powerful questions, creating space for reflection, and trusting that young people have the capacity to find their own answers when properly supported. Facilitators should move away from expert-delivery formats toward dialogue-based, question-led, and peer-engaging approaches.

6.5. Strengthen Peer-to-Peer Models

Youth trust youth. Across both countries, young people identified friends, siblings, and peers rather than professionals or institutions as their primary sources of support. This is not a failure of formal systems but a feature of young people's social world. It points toward the value of peer mentoring, youth circles, trained peer supporters, and intergenerational dialogue between young adults and teenagers. Peer-to-peer formats can normalise topics, reduce stigma, and provide relatability that adult-led sessions cannot always replicate.

6.6. Integrate Digital and Offline Formats

Online tools can increase access, especially in rural areas where geography limits participation. Yet focus groups consistently pointed to the human relationship as the irreplaceable core. The ideal is a hybrid approach: digital tools that prepare, extend, or complement in-person encounters; not digital formats that replace human connection. For geographically dispersed or underserved young people, remote access options are essential but they work best when combined with occasional in-person community.

6.7. Focus on Prevention, Not Only Crisis Response

Across all three themes, existing provision tends to be reactive: available when things have already gone wrong, but rarely present to build resilience before they do. Mental health support is often accessed only in crisis. Career guidance arrives only in the final years of compulsory education. Critical thinking education is triggered only when misinformation causes visible harm. Youth workers are in a unique position to shift this: they see young people regularly, in community settings, over time. This continuity allows for sustained, preventive programming that builds capacity before challenges escalate.

7. Key Actors and Organisations Identified

As part of the desk research, relevant actors were systematically identified in both partner countries across the three thematic areas. The following table provides an overview of the most significant organisations identified in Estonia and Slovakia, which can serve as potential partners, referral networks, or sources of materials for the project.

Estonia

Mental Health

Peaasi.ee is Estonia's leading digital mental health portal for young people, offering free, evidence-based resources and the Peahea anonymous counselling service. Eesti Vaimse Tervise Ühing provides professional counselling and therapy, with some local government-funded free access. Tervise Arengu Instituut (TAI) leads national health behaviour research and school-based prevention programmes.

Critical Thinking and Media Literacy

Tuleviku Meedia MTÜ delivers workshops, guest lessons, and conferences on media literacy with a focus on misinformation and AI. Meediataip (an ERR initiative) produced articles, podcasts, and videos on source criticism and media awareness. Teeviit, managed by the Estonian Education and Youth Board, hosts a national media literacy section targeting young people aged 7–26.

Life and Career Decision-Making

MinuKarjäär.ee provides digital career diagnostics, tests, and occupational information. Teeviit's Work and Career section provides youth-friendly articles and personal stories. NÜH offers international youth exchanges and experiential learning programmes. VitaTiim, based in Ida-Virumaa, provides community-based non-formal education with a strong integration mission.

Slovakia

Mental Health

IPčko provides 24/7 free, anonymous online and phone psychological support with in-person youth spaces in several cities. Liga za duševné zdravie leads national mental health awareness campaigns and Mental Health First Aid trainings. Náruč supports children and teenagers in crisis through therapeutic programmes. OZ V kocke runs emotional literacy and prevention workshops in schools and youth centres.

Critical Thinking and Media Literacy

Zmudri is Slovakia's most widely-used youth education platform, offering video lessons on critical thinking, hoaxes, and digital safety. Slovenská debatná asociácia (SDA) builds argumentation and debate skills through clubs and tournaments. Demagog.sk leads fact-checking education alongside its public verification work. IMEC produces media literacy

tools, lesson plans, and research for youth and school settings. Mediálna gramotnosť+ is a national platform uniting organisations and experts working in media literacy.

Life and Career Decision-Making

KomposyT is the national digital platform for career diagnostics, tests, and educational pathway planning. Euroguidance Slovakia supports career guidance methodology and good practice. SPACE Youth Work Centres in the Banská Bystrica region offer integrated career counselling, coaching, and community-based support. Človek v ohrození runs inclusive career guidance for disadvantaged youth, including the award-winning Cesta k inklúzii programme. VIAC provides career orientation, life skills, and coaching workshops from a rural Orava base.

8. Conclusion

This research has confirmed, with clarity and depth, what many in the youth work field sense intuitively but rarely have documented: the gap between what formally exists and what young people actually need is wide, and it is experienced most acutely by those who are geographically, socially, or economically least advantaged.

Across Estonia and Slovakia, across rural and urban settings, across young people and youth workers, the same core needs surface again and again. Young people want to be heard before they are helped. They want spaces where uncertainty is normal, where mistakes do not define them, and where the adults around them have both the skills and the willingness to hold genuine conversations. They want to practise thinking, not just learn about it. They want to understand themselves—their strengths, emotions, and values—before being asked to make decisions that feel permanent.

Youth workers, for their part, are motivated and caring—but often under-equipped. They lack structured tools, practical methodologies, and professional development in the specific competencies that this work requires: coaching approaches, emotional literacy facilitation, mental health first aid, and critical thinking pedagogy grounded in digital reality. The mismatch between their commitment and their resources is one of the key bottlenecks the project can address.

The desk research has mapped a rich ecosystem of actors in both countries. Both Estonia and Slovakia have organisations doing meaningful work in each of the three thematic areas.

Yet these actors are often project-funded, geographically limited, digitally under-interactive, or unknown to the young people who need them most. Strengthening connections, improving visibility, and expanding practical and relational formats would significantly enhance their impact.

The findings of this research therefore provide a clear and urgent mandate for the project's next phases. Educational resources developed within this project must be:

- Evidence-based, drawing on both existing good practice and the lived realities documented here
- Practically oriented, giving youth workers tools they can use immediately and confidently
- Youth-centred in design, reflecting the voices, language, and digital worlds of the young people they serve
- Rooted in psychological safety, building safe relational conditions as the foundation of every methodology
- Preventive in orientation, addressing critical thinking, mental health, and career clarity before crises emerge
- Locally adaptable, acknowledging the different contexts of rural Slovakia, digital Estonia, and the communities in between

The young people who participated in this research did not ask for perfection. They asked to be taken seriously. They asked for spaces where they are met with curiosity rather than judgment, with questions rather than answers, and with patience rather than pressure. This research is the beginning of a response to that ask—and the responsibility to follow through belongs to every partner in this project.

What is ultimately at stake is not a set of project deliverables, but a generation of young people navigating an increasingly complex world without adequate maps. The transition to adulthood has always been challenging. What is new is the scale of digital information overload, the speed of change in the labour market driven by artificial intelligence, and the visibility of struggle on social media—all of which amplify pressure while simultaneously making it harder to find reliable, human, and personalised guidance. This research confirms that young people are not passive or disengaged. They are asking for help. They are asking in the language of their lived experience: through reluctance to speak in class, through anxiety about future choices, through quiet exhaustion behind school performance. The work of youth workers, educators, and NGOs is to learn to hear that language—and to respond with tools and spaces that genuinely meet them where they are.

8.1. Concrete Steps for Youth Workers and NGOs

The following practical steps are grounded directly in the findings of this research. They are intended as an actionable starting point for youth workers, youth organisations, and NGOs working with young people in the areas of critical thinking, mental health, and life and career decision-making. They are not exhaustive, but represent the highest-priority areas where concrete action can make an immediate and meaningful difference.

Critical Thinking and Media Literacy

- **Run regular "media moment" sessions.** Dedicate 15–20 minutes at the start or end of youth work sessions to analysing one piece of real online content together—a trending TikTok video, a news headline, or a viral social media post. Ask: Who made this? Why? What is missing? What emotion does it trigger, and why? These short, repeated exercises build source-evaluation habits more effectively than any one-off workshop.
- **Introduce structured dialogue formats.** Simple frameworks such as Socratic questioning, Fishbowl discussions, or informal debate formats give young people a structure within which expressing a different opinion feels safe and manageable. Start with low-stakes topics before moving to more charged social or political questions. The goal is to normalise disagreement as intellectual curiosity, not conflict.
- **Create a shared "fact-check toolkit" with your group.** Work with young people to co-create a simple, visual reference guide listing their preferred tools for verifying information—fact-checking websites, reverse image search, trusted news sources in their language. Making this collaboratively ensures ownership and increases the likelihood that young people will actually use it independently.
- **Address the social cost of speaking up.** Especially in rural or tight-knit communities, young people need explicit permission and protection to disagree. Youth workers can model this by openly sharing their own uncertainties and changed opinions. Establishing group agreements about respectful disagreement at the beginning of any programme creates the conditions for genuine critical dialogue.
- **Partner with local media literacy organisations.** Organisations such as Zmudri and Demagog.sk in Slovakia, and Tuleviku Meedia in Estonia, offer free materials, guest sessions, and training for youth workers. Inviting these organisations into your programme, or using their ready-made resources, brings expertise without requiring NGOs to build everything from scratch.

Mental Health and Well-Being

- **Complete a Mental Health First Aid training.** This is the single most impactful investment a youth worker or NGO can make. Certified MHFA programmes—available through Liga za dusevne zdravie in Slovakia and through various providers in Estonia—equip practitioners with the skills to recognise signs

of distress, open conversations without causing harm, and refer appropriately. It is a practical, evidence-based foundation for everything else.

- **Build a clear, visible local referral map.** One of the most commonly expressed needs by young people was not knowing who to turn to or what options exist. NGOs can address this directly by mapping the mental health resources available in their specific area—including free online services (IPcko, Peaasi.ee), local professionals, school psychologists, and crisis lines—and presenting this information in a simple, youth-friendly visual format that is regularly updated and displayed prominently in youth spaces.
- **Embed emotional check-ins into regular programme structures.** A simple opening ritual—asking young people to rate their energy on a scale of 1–10, name an emotion with one word, or place a coloured dot on a feelings chart—normalises emotional awareness without requiring anyone to overshare. These low-threshold practices, done consistently over weeks and months, send a powerful message: how you feel matters here, and you do not have to hide it.
- **Develop or pilot a peer support programme.** Identify young people within your community who are trusted, empathetic, and willing to receive basic training in active listening and peer support. Even a small group of two or three trained peer supporters within a youth club or school can significantly reduce the isolation that many young people feel. Peer supporters do not replace professionals—they provide a first human contact and reduce the threshold for eventually seeking formal help.
- **Use storytelling and personal narratives to reduce stigma.** Inviting a young adult or local figure to speak openly about their own experience of anxiety, burnout, or help-seeking is often more powerful than any information campaign. Stories humanise mental health struggles in a way that statistics and information leaflets cannot. When planning events or workshops, build in space for authentic personal narratives alongside evidence-based content.
- **Advocate within your networks for continuity of funding.** Mental health prevention requires sustained, trusting relationships over time. One-off workshops have limited impact. NGOs should advocate—to funders, local governments, and school partners—for multi-session, ongoing programme formats rather than single events. Document and share evidence of what sustained engagement achieves: this is how the funding landscape gradually changes.

Life and Career Decision-Making

- **Introduce strengths-based exercises before career information.** Before presenting career options, professions, or educational pathways, invite young people to explore who they are: what energises them, what they are naturally good at, what values feel non-negotiable, and what kind of daily life they want. Tools such as strength card sorting, “best moments” reflection exercises, and values ranking activities take 30–60 minutes and provide the foundation for all subsequent career conversations to feel personal rather than generic.

- **Organise “real life” encounters with professionals.** Young people in both countries described limited exposure to real professions as one of their biggest disadvantages. NGOs and youth organisations are often well-placed to organise informal “coffee chats,” panel discussions, or short job-shadowing experiences with local professionals. Even a 45-minute conversation with someone who has an interesting career path—presented not as a model to follow but as a story to learn from—can significantly shift a young person’s sense of what is possible.
- **Reframe decisions as experiments, not commitments.** Much of the paralysis young people experience around career decisions stems from fear of irreversibility. Youth workers can shift this framing by consistently using language that treats choices as explorations: “What would you try if you knew you could change your mind?” or “What is one small step you could take this month to learn more?” This lowers the emotional stakes and makes movement feel possible again.
- **Incorporate structured reflection into any career-related activity.** After any experience—a workplace visit, an internship, a guest talk, or even a career test—always close with guided reflection questions: What surprised you? What resonated? What felt wrong or uncomfortable, and why? This reflective layer is what transforms an activity into genuine self-knowledge. Without it, even excellent experiences pass without leaving lasting insight.
- **Address parental influence explicitly and compassionately.** Parental expectations were identified as a significant source of pressure in both countries. Youth workers can help young people navigate this not by dismissing parental concerns, but by facilitating conversations that acknowledge the tension between family expectations and personal direction. Role plays, scenario discussions, and letter-writing exercises (even if never sent) can help young people develop the language and confidence to engage in these conversations at home.
- **Discuss AI and the changing world of work directly and honestly.** Many young people are aware that artificial intelligence is transforming the labour market but feel unequipped to think through what this means for their own futures. Youth workers can facilitate open conversations about which skills are becoming more important (creativity, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, adaptability), which professions are changing, and how to build a career identity that is resilient rather than narrowly specialised. This conversation does not require expertise in AI—it requires honest facilitation of uncertainty.

8.2. A Final Word

None of the steps outlined in this chapter require extraordinary resources or specialist expertise. They do not depend on large budgets, purpose-built facilities, or access to clinical professionals. They require something at once simpler and more demanding: consistency, intentionality, and the willingness to show up for young people as a thoughtful, curious, and honest human presence. What young people described needing most is not a perfect

programme or a cutting-edge platform. It is a trustworthy adult in their community who takes their inner life seriously and creates space for them to grow into themselves.

This is worth sitting with, because it runs counter to a tendency in the youth support sector to look for solutions in new tools, new technologies, and new frameworks. These have their place, and this project is itself contributing to the landscape of available resources. But the research is unambiguous that tools and frameworks are only ever as good as the human relationships through which they are delivered. A media literacy workshop facilitated by someone who genuinely listens to young people's experiences of social media will always outperform the same workshop delivered by someone who is simply working through a checklist. A career guidance session held by a youth worker who is truly curious about the young person in front of them will always be more transformative than the same session reduced to the administration of a diagnostic test. The human quality of the interaction is not a nice-to-have layer on top of the methodology. It is the methodology's most essential ingredient.

This also means that investing in youth workers is not separate from investing in young people. It is the same investment. When an organisation funds professional development for its practitioners, when it creates supervision structures that prevent burnout, when it advocates for stable funding that allows relationships with young people to develop over time rather than being repeatedly severed by project cycles, it is directly improving the quality of support that reaches young people. The field has sometimes been slow to make this connection explicit. This research makes it impossible to ignore.

The three thematic areas explored in this paper, critical thinking, mental health, and life and career decision-making, are not separate problems requiring separate solutions. They are interconnected dimensions of the same underlying challenge: growing up in a world that is complex, fast-moving, and not always designed with young people's genuine flourishing in mind. A young person who lacks confidence in their own thinking is more vulnerable to misinformation and peer pressure. A young person who is struggling with anxiety is less able to engage in the kind of open, exploratory reflection that good career decision-making requires. A young person who has never experienced a safe space for honest conversation is less likely to reach out for mental health support when they need it. These connections mean that youth workers who integrate all three thematic areas into their practice, rather than treating each as a separate programme strand, are not adding complexity. They are reflecting the reality of young people's lives more accurately and providing support that is correspondingly more coherent and more effective.

The Ready 4 Life: MindShift project is designed to equip youth workers and organisations with exactly this kind of integrated, practical support. The podcasts, videos, infographics, lesson plans, and community events that will emerge from this project are not intended to replace the human relationship at the heart of good youth work. They are intended to make it easier, more structured, and more confident. A youth worker who has access to a well-designed emotional check-in tool does not become less human in using it. They become freer to focus their attention on the young person in front of them, rather than spending energy constructing the activity from scratch. A facilitator who has a clear framework for introducing career reflection does not become more mechanical. They become more present, because the structure holds the process while they hold the person.

The research presented in this paper is the foundation on which all of this will be built. It is a foundation made not of abstract theory but of real voices: young people in Estonia and Slovakia describing their confusion, their pressures, their unmet needs, and their genuine desire to be taken seriously. What is built on it will be shaped by continued listening to those young people and to the practitioners who work alongside them every day. That commitment to listening is not a phase of the project that ends with the publication of this paper. It is the orientation that should run through every resource, every workshop, every social media post, and every multiplier event that follows. The young people at the centre of this work did not ask to be researched. They asked to be heard. This project's most important obligation is to ensure that the hearing continues, and that what is built genuinely reflects what was said.

Research conducted in Estonia and Slovakia · 2025

Methods: Desk Research · Focus Groups · Qualitative Analysis

This research paper was written by the project team and subsequently reviewed and linguistically refined with the assistance of Claude, an AI assistant developed by Anthropic. All content, findings, and conclusions reflect the original research conducted by the partners of the Ready 4 Life: MindShift project.