



# Young People in Advocacy: How we can Elevate Youth Voices in Mental Health Advocacy

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# Disclaimer

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# Learning Objectives

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1. Describe strategies for **engaging and supporting** youth labeled with serious emotional disturbance in advocacy efforts.
2. Apply **Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation** to advocacy work with youth labeled with serious emotional disturbance.
3. Distinguish between the **tokenization** of youth labeled with serious emotional disturbance and **true engagement**.

# About me: My Advocacy Journey

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My experiences with serious emotional disturbance and advocacy go hand in hand. When I was diagnosed with learning disabilities at the age of eight, I quickly began working with teachers to empower other students with disabilities. I have continued to advocate for and implement change at many levels, including the United States Congress. **None of these efforts would have succeeded without adult mentors** who encouraged my ideas, taught me the tools of systemic change, and have been active partners in supporting these projects.

# Engaging and Supporting Youth

# Why Engage Youth?

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- “Nothing about us without us”
- Youth have a unique understanding of the systems that serve (or fail to serve) them
- We can only support youth if we know what they need
- Programs designed with youth can have greater engagement and impact
- Build trust with the community you serve

## Consider

1. What is your goal or mission in helping youth?
2. How would engaging youth help you meet that mission?

# Setting the Table

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- Ask youth their why
- Consider schedules
- Fidget toys
- Breaks
- Comfortable seating
- Pronouns in introductions
- Intentionally welcoming space

## Inclusive Options for Engagement

- Submitting written questions
- Have everyone share input
- Utilize technology for facilitation
- One-on-one discussions with youth

# Collaboration and Common Goals

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## Adults Provide

- Access to data
- Broader view of an issue
- Network with other adults
- Unique understanding of certain systems, institutions, and groups
- The trust of their peers

## Youth Provide

- Insider insights into issues
- Lived experience and story
- Network with other youth
- Unique understanding of certain systems, institutions, and groups
- The trust of their peers



# Mentorship

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## Why Mentor?

- Increase the number of talented individuals working in your field
- Helping youth grow and develop broadly-applicable skills

## Tips

- Bring youth as a guest or “plus-one” to events
- Give youth tools to succeed instead of doing things for them

## Guiding Questions

- Where do you see this field going?
- What can I do to help?

# Supporting Youth Labelled With SED in Crisis

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- Providing reassurance and destigmatizing seeking help
- Prioritizing supporting the youth with their recovery
- Balancing role as an advocacy mentor and service provider
- Reminding youth of the value their lived experience brings to advocacy work
- Highlighting that they have intrinsic dignity and value that is not dependent on their advocacy work

# Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation



# Poll: Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation

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Have you heard of or utilized Hart's  
Ladder?



# The Ladder

- Published in UNICEF in 1992
- Intended for use as a tool
- Ranked levels of engagement

## ROGER HART'S LADDER OF PARTICIPATION



**RUNG 8 - Youth initiated shared decisions with adults:** Youth-led activities, in which decision making is shared between youth and adults working as equal partners.

**RUNG 7 - Youth initiated and directed:** Youth-led activities with little input from adults.

**RUNG 6 - Adult initiated shared decisions with youth:** Adult-led activities, in which decision making is shared with youth.

**RUNG 5 - Consulted and informed:** Adult-led activities, in which youth are consulted and informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of adult decisions.

**RUNG 4 - Assigned, but informed:** Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, decision-making process, and have a role.

**RUNG 3 - Tokenism:** Adult-led activities, in which youth may be consulted with minimal opportunities for feedback.

**RUNG 2 - Decoration:** Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, but have no input in how they are planned.

**RUNG 1 - Manipulation:** Adult-led activities, in which youth do as directed without understanding of the purpose for the activities.

Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, as cited in [www.freechild.org/ladder.htm](http://www.freechild.org/ladder.htm)

# 9th Rung

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Many advocates argue that there ought to be a 9th rung added to Hart's Ladder. This proposed 9th rung describes projects that are **fully youth led**.

As an adult, here is how you can bring elements of this concept into your work:

- Letting youth discuss without adults
- Connecting youth to other youth
- Being sure not to **hinder or resist** youth efforts
  - Actively resisting youth participation
  - Hindering youth by discouraging them from advocacy

# My Experience of Participation

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# Shared Decision Making

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## Adults

- Interest, not doubt
- Truly engage youth
- Understand the rationale
- Learn from youth
- Problem solve together
- Insight into thought processes

## Youth

- Practice speaking up
- Build trust with adults
- Understand the rationale
- Learn from adults
- Problem solve together
- Insight into thought processes



# Tokenization vs True Engagement



# Discussion: Tokenization

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What do you think of when you  
think of tokenization?



# Definition: Tokenize

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“To treat or view (a person) in a way indicative or suggestive of tokenism (tokenism n.); (often and in earliest use) to use (a member of a minority or marginalized group) to give the appearance of racial, sexual, etc., equality or diversity within an institution or organization.”

# Lived Experience

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“Lived experience refers to “representation and understanding of an individual’s human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one’s perception of knowledge” based on one’s own life. ...People with lived experience are those directly affected by social, health, public health, or other issues and the strategies that aim to address those issues. This gives them insights that can inform and improve systems, research, policies, practices, and programs.”

# Going Beyond Lived Experience

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- People with lived experience must be **included** in advocacy
- Lived experience can be a **tool and a motivator**
- Let youth identify however **they prefer**
  - Young person with lived experience
  - Young professional with experience implementing programs
- Respecting youth as **professionals, not just patients**
- Lived experience is **not the only thing** youth have to contribute as advocates

# True Engagement Looks Like

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- Youth are compensated fairly
- Youth are involved at all stages of the process
- Youth input is taken seriously
- Invite other youth
- Youth work together
- Youth are given recognition and credit for their work
- Youth are given the chance to learn
- Adults have the humility to learn from youth
- Youth are valued for their expertise



# Discussion: Self-Disclosure

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Are there any reasons youth may not want to be publicly labelled with SED?



# Self-Disclosure

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- There is still profound **stigma** in many fields
- Youth with lived experience have a right to **autonomy and privacy** over their story
- Many grants require lived experience and while this is good in many ways, stories are more than just requirements for grants
- **Recovery journeys are personal** and should have a degree of separation from professional identity
- There is a **spectrum** of strategic self-disclosure
- What is the **message and point** behind self-disclosure



# Advocacy in Practice

# Levels of Advocacy

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- “**Self-advocacy** refers to an individual's ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs, and rights.”
- “**Individual advocacy** [is when] a person or group of people concentrate their efforts on just one or two individuals.”
- “**Systems advocacy** is about changing policies, laws or rules that impact how someone lives their life. These efforts can be targeted at a local, state, or national agency. The focus can be changing laws, or simply written or unwritten policy.”

# Your Role

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## Respect

- Treat youth advocates in ways that **uplift rather than tokenize**

## Support

- **Mentor and support** youth as both advocates and individuals with SED

## Engage

- Utilize **Hart's Ladder** to ensure youth are fully included

Thank You

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# Questions and Discussion

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