

YOUUnite

**Holistic programme fostering the integration
of overweight and adipose youth healthy into
the labour market**

INSTRUCTIONS FOR TRAINERS AWARENESS MODULE

YOUUnite

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1. INTRODUCTION

The first three chapters of this Module contain essential instructions and guidelines that are consistent across all six Modules developed within the YOUnite Programme. If you have already reviewed these sections in another Module, you may proceed directly to the Module-specific content. However, we recommend revisiting these chapters if you need a refresher or are new to the YOUnite training materials.

The Instructions for Trainers is a supporting document for the Training Modules developed as part of the YOUnite project, designed to assist trainers, youth workers, and counsellors in working with young people with overweight and obesity, and those at risk of becoming so. The Module activities can be downloaded from the **YOUnite website**.

YOUnite is a project aimed at helping adolescents with overweight and obesity to overcome challenges and improve their employability. Supported by the Erasmus+ programme, the YOUnite project has developed an engaging Training Programme that builds up self-confidence and helps young people cope with socio-economic difficulties and potential sources of discrimination. The objective of the Modules is to provide young people with little prior knowledge in this field the first steps towards a healthier lifestyle, both physically and mentally.



The specific target group for the Training Modules includes young people aged 15 to 24, in particular those who are marginalised or disadvantaged such as NEETs (those not in employment, education, or training) with overweight or obesity. However, the materials can also be used as a preventive tool for young people at risk of overweight or obesity, or to raise awareness about the potential challenges associated with these conditions.

The YOUNITE project partners have developed six Training Modules covering Health/Medicine, Nutrition, Sport, Stress, Awareness, and Employability. These Modules are based on non-formal education practices, designed to boost the self-confidence of young people as they prepare to enter the labour market. The Modules can be implemented as a complete programme (all six Modules) or selected individually to suit different needs and circumstances, offering flexibility and adaptability

The Training Programme was first piloted in the summer of 2024 in Austria, Finland, Hungary, and Poland, where youth coaches, trainers, and young participants tested the various Modules. Based on their feedback and evaluations, the materials were refined to enhance their practical application.

Each Module includes detailed activity descriptions necessary for planning and execution, while the **Instructions for Trainers** provides additional, complementary resources.

These instructions are designed to support trainers and teachers who work with youth on a daily basis, equipping them with the tools and knowledge they need to effectively lead the training programme. They are user-friendly and accessible, meaning no prior expertise on the topic is required.

Whether new to the subject or looking to deepen your understanding, these guidelines will help you confidently deliver the Modules and engage with youth in a meaningful way.

The Instructions for Trainers also aim to equip youth workers and trainers with insights into the specific challenges faced by young people with overweight and obesity. Additionally, it seeks to combat weight stigma by promoting weight-inclusive language that fosters a more empathetic and effective approach to health, nutrition, and wellness.



The instructions provide an overview of key considerations for trainers, including how to empower and interact with vulnerable adolescents, particularly those who have not previously engaged with the topic, and how to ensure a supportive and inclusive environment.

2. OBESITY AS A SIGNIFICANT GLOBAL ISSUE

In the European Union (EU), weight problems and obesity are increasing at a rapid rate. In 2019 52.7% of the adult (over 18 years old) EU's population was overweight according to the Eurostat data [1]. Obesity is a serious health problem, it is considered as one of the key risk factors for many non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, hypertension, stroke and cardiovascular diseases [2]. Overweight and obesity are linked to more deaths worldwide than underweight. According to the WHO European Regional Obesity Report in 2022, obesity and overweight problems affected almost 60% of adults and nearly one in three children (29% of boys and 27% of girls) in the WHO European Region [3].

Obesity as a medical condition has direct and indirect effects as well. This medical problem has an undeniable effect on health conditions. Obesity in children and adults increases the risk of several health related problems, such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol which are risk factors for heart disease, type 2 diabetes, breathing problems (asthma, sleep apnea), joint problems such as osteoarthritis and musculoskeletal discomfort. The previously mentioned problems are also associated with psychological problems (anxiety, depression), low self-esteem and lower self-reported quality of life, social problems (bullying, stigma), and for children with obesity there is a high risk for being obese as adults [4].

Besides obesity's effects on health conditions it also has an economic impact. Obesity is responsible for direct medical costs and non-medical costs.



In the EU, the trend is that annual obesity-related medical care costs account for between 1.9% and 4.7% of the total annual health care costs and 2.8% of the annual hospital costs. Health care expenditures for individuals with overweight and obesity were 9.9% and 42.7% higher, respectively, when compared to adults with healthy weight [5].

Furthermore, there is substantial evidence that people with obesity are less likely to be employed and, when employed, earn lower wages. Overweight and obesity are barriers in the labour market and for professional success (World of Labour, Susan L. Averett) [6].

3. GENERAL GUIDANCE AND UNDERLYING METHODOLOGY TO CONDUCT THE TRAINING: BI-CYCLE MODEL, WAYS TO ENGAGE WITH THE TARGET GROUP, RECOMMENDATIONS TO LEAD THE ACTIVITIES

The purpose of the Training Programme is to introduce young people to the topic and make them more adaptable and better able to join the labour market, and not to 'cure obesity', which is a long-term undertaking. The main focus is on labour market integration rather than health training.

The methods used by trainers may vary, as they come from different backgrounds, have different experiences, and professional profiles. The most important aspect is that the training itself is supposed to be entry-level training to encourage participants to pursue further self-improvement.



The Bi-cycle Model can be thought of like a bicycle, two wheels moving at the same time and influencing each other in their movement. The big wheel represents the motivational and relational aspect of the training process, while the small wheel represents the various ways trainers can provide support to the group, such as by giving information, making suggestions, or facilitating activities. Both wheels are essential to keep the training moving forward smoothly.



A model that served as the basis for the Training Modules methodology is the Bi-cycle Model, presented by SALTO Youth Initiatives Resource Centre [7]. However, the model was modified to better suit the specific needs and purposes of the Training Programme. The methodology aims to provide guidance for the main training phases and will assist in managing the training process during the implementation of the Training Modules.

The Bi-cycle Model has the following phases:

- 👉 motivating;
- 👉 getting to know;
- 👉 building the relationship;
- 👉 identifying needs and competences;
- 👉 supporting;
- 👉 evaluating;
- 👉 keeping contact and feedback.

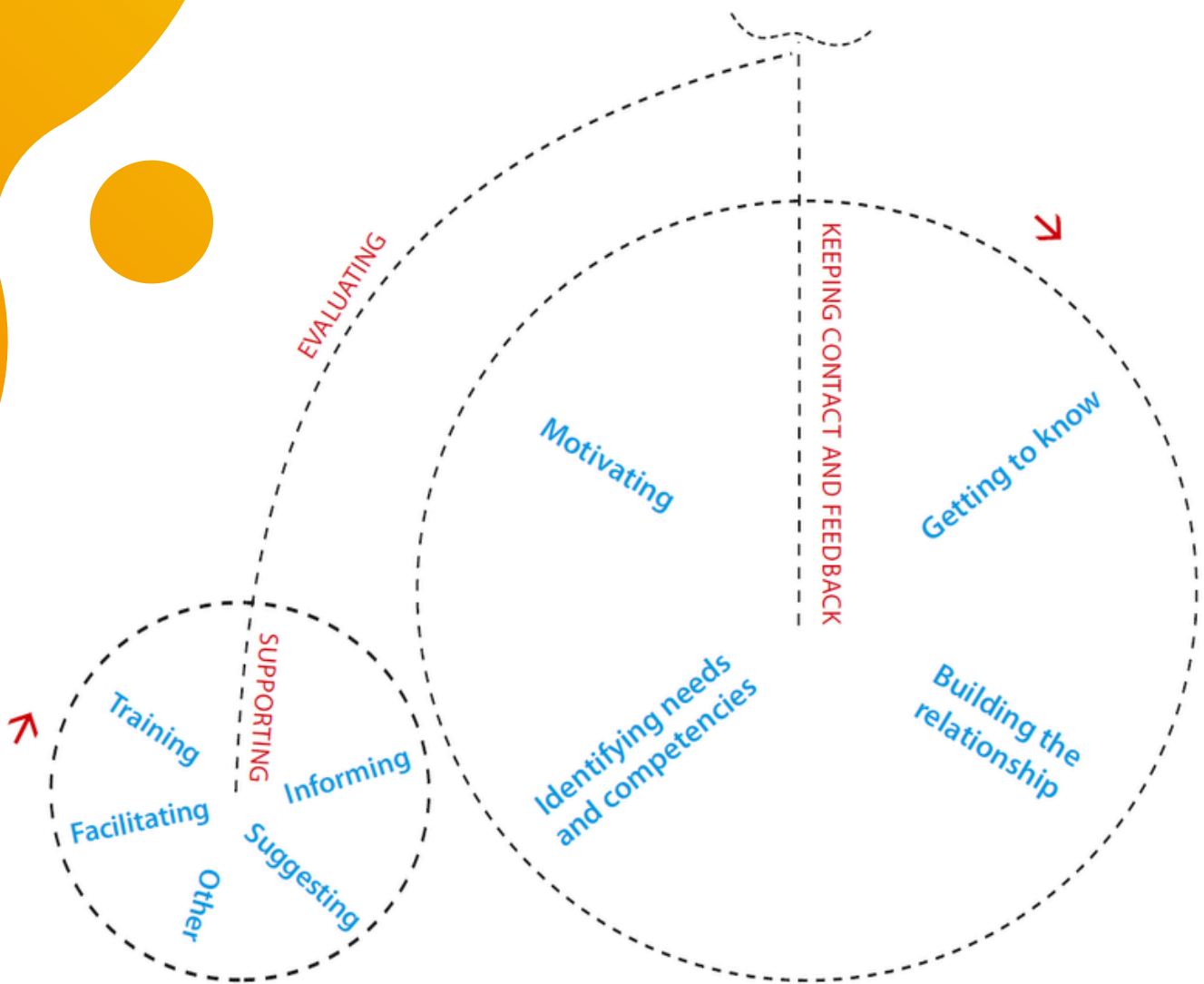


Figure 1. Bi-cycle model. Source: SALTO Youth Initiatives Resource Centre (2006)

Trainers play a pivotal role in achieving the objectives of the Training Module as they are the ones who undertake the crucial work represented by the bigger wheel. The expertise and guidance provided by trainers are essential. Trainers act as the driving force behind the implementation of the Module, guiding participants towards successful integration into the labour market.

In simple terms, the small wheel represents what occurs during the training, while the larger wheel illustrates how it is happening, with a focus on group dynamics.

To understand the model, we have to go through each phase that is in the bigger, front wheel.

Motivating

Trainers are instrumental in inspiring and maintaining the focus of participants throughout the implementation of the Training Module. To effectively motivate young people, put yourself in their position: *what would inspire and energise you if you were part of the group?* Consider these elements to enhance motivation:

- 👉 **A safe, healthy environment (physical).** Ensure that the training space is comfortable and conducive to learning.
- 👉 **A nurturing environment (emotional).** Foster a supportive atmosphere where participants feel valued and understood.
- 👉 **Positive, respectful, and supportive relationships.** Build trust with the group by showing genuine care and respect as their trainer.
- 👉 **Setting realistic and achievable goals.** Help participants set attainable objectives that they can work towards, which will provide a sense of accomplishment.



Getting to know

Trainers facilitate the process of getting to know the group of participants who take part in the training. In this stage, the trainer focuses on understanding the participants' backgrounds and experiences.

This involves creating a welcoming and safe space where young people feel comfortable sharing their personal stories, challenges, and aspirations, ensuring a deeper understanding of individual needs. Try to get as much information as possible at the beginning of your training process to have a clear picture of the young people you will work with and the tasks to be undertaken accordingly.

To help young people reflect on their self-image and for you to get to know what their deepest wishes, dreams and fears are, it is suggested to use the method 'Personal Mind Map'. Please refer to the further readings [16, 17] in the final chapter for more detailed information on this method.

The Personal Mind Map is a powerful tool for self-reflection, getting to know each other and resource oriented youth work.

Getting to know each other stage is an important foundation to a strong relationship that will hopefully be productive and fruitful to both the trainer and the group. This is the trainer's chance to get to know the key characters and players in the group: who is leading, who has the ideas, who is most passionate about the training, who is the most committed, who is the joker, who is more sceptical, and many others.

Besides, please remember that getting to know each other means giving the opportunity to young people to get to know you as well. What experiences brought you there, what kind of person you are, what type of activities you did as a young person, what are the values you would stand for.

Building the relationship

It means essentially managing group dynamics, which is managing the interactions between participants as well as between the group and you. In practice, your aim is to create a positive environment by developing your skills as an observer and communicator. You need to be able to understand both verbal and non-verbal signals to know what is happening with each participant. This understanding will help you get the most out of the group and adapt to different communication styles. It is important to avoid negative attitudes that can prevent group members from expressing themselves naturally.

To achieve this, it is essential to apply socio-psychological skills like empathy, patience, adaptability that are essential for human interaction. These skills will help you understand group dynamics and, when combined with strong communication skills, will allow you to support young people in managing their aspirations, coping with change, and developing skills for the labour market.

Your effectiveness in building a good relationship with the group will often depend on your experience, your ability to listen, observe, and establish dialogue, as well as maintaining an open-minded attitude and the ability to work with different personalities.



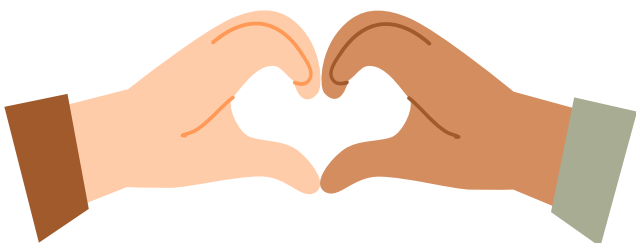
Identifying needs and competences

It is very important that you find out what competences and abilities the members of the group have already and which ones they need to develop in order to reach the targets of the training. Do not worry if you find out that the group is missing some essential capabilities to do a given task related to the training.

Through a Training Module they will have the chance to develop them and your task as a trainer will be to help the group to identify their own learning objectives to be reached.

Supporting

It is about providing ongoing guidance and encouragement throughout the Module training. The trainer acts as a mentor and coach, offering personalised advice and resources to help participants achieve their goals. This involves helping participants set realistic goals, and being available to address any challenges they may face. The trainer should create a supportive network around the participants, making them feel continuously encouraged and guided throughout their journey.



Evaluating

this involves measuring the progress and outcomes of the training. The trainer should use various methods like feedback forms, self-assessment exercises, or group discussions to gather insights on the effectiveness of the training.

Providing constructive feedback and encouraging participants to reflect on their progress helps identify what has been achieved and what areas need improvement. The trainer's role is to ensure that evaluation is a continuous process, allowing for adjustments that enhance the training's impact.

Keeping contact and feedback

Maintaining contact involves continuous communication and the exchange of information between the trainer and the young people. It is important for the trainer to be responsive to any questions that arise during the training. Make sure the young people know when and how they can reach you if they need help.

Regarding feedback, it is essential to create an environment where both you and the young people can give and receive feedback. To ensure feedback is productive and beneficial, keep in mind the following:

- 👉 Feedback should be clear, concrete and understandable to the person or group receiving it.
- 👉 The person or group should be able to accept the feedback and see it as constructive.

- Feedback should provide actionable information that the person or group can use to improve.

Make sure the feedback you give is focused on the needs of the person or group receiving it, not on your own needs. This helps avoid defensive reactions and encourages positive changes.

At the same time, use feedback from the young people to reflect on and improve your own training practice.

The do's and don'ts when talking about obesity and overweight

There are several different ways in which obesity is commonly described in the media and throughout society which can contribute to weight stigma. These can include:

- Language that does not put the person first.
- The use of derogatory and pejorative labels.
- Inaccurate or misplaced use of medical jargon.
- Failure to acknowledge the wider context regarding causal aspects of obesity.

This type of language risks simplifying obesity and its causes, fails to capture the wider drivers and determinants of obesity, and creates a negative image of people affected by obesity. This in turn can reinforce misconceptions about obesity and contribute to weight stigma.

People First Language refers to putting an individual before the medical condition that is being discussed. For instance, it is preferable to say 'a person with obesity' as opposed to 'an obese person' or any other critical labels. The use of people first language is really important as it helps to avoid dehumanising individuals living with chronic diseases.



The use of people-first language ensures that we are not labelling an individual with their disease. This is something that can be applied in a number of different scenarios, and we encourage its use when talking about obesity.

Examples of words and phrases to avoid

- ✗ Obese person
- ✗ Obese subject/participant
- ✗ Obese children

Alternative language and considerations

- ✓ Person/individual with obesity
- ✓ Subject/participant with obesity
- ✓ Children with obesity

Despite increasing evidence that obesity is caused by multiple factors, many people still see obesity as the result of individual behaviours and choices. When talking about obesity, it is not uncommon for individuals to use certain words for dramatic effect. While these are often not meant to be targeting a person directly, their use should still be avoided.

Examples of words and phrases to avoid

- ✗ "Curse"
- ✗ "Strain"
- ✗ "Plague"

Alternative language and considerations

- ✓ Use accurate facts and figures
- ✓ Be clear on what the problem is rather leaving it open to interpretation
- ✓ Avoid ambiguous language
- ✓ Be explicit on the health consequence. For example, "*Obesity can affect our health in x, y and z ways.*"

Obesity should be referred to as a disease rather than a condition. In contrast, overweight is typically defined as a medical condition based on body mass index (BMI). When using the term "overweight," it should be employed either as a noun or an adjective in person-first language [8]. For example, both "people with overweight" and "people who are overweight" are acceptable; however, "overweight people" is not.

Outside of a scientific, clinical, or public health context, more neutral and inclusive terms can be used, such as "individuals with a higher weight" or "persons with a larger body."

Practical tips for trainers and educators working with youth with overweight and obesity

Engaging with the target group of youth people with overweight and obesity as a group requires a thoughtful and sensitive approach. Here are some dos and don'ts to consider when leading activities.

Dos:

- Establish a non-judgmental and supportive environment where participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences.

Example: Begin sessions with ice-breaker activities that encourage everyone to speak, ensuring all voices are heard without criticism or interruption. Use phrases like "Thank you for sharing" to validate contributions.

- Employ respectful and inclusive terminology that promotes positivity and acceptance.

Example: Use people-first language and always frame discussions in a positive light, focusing on well-being rather than weight alone.

- Recognise that each participant's journey with obesity is unique, and validate their feelings and perspectives.

Example: During discussions, acknowledge individual experiences by saying things like, "I understand that everyone's journey is different, and it is important to respect each person's story."



- Encourage open dialogues where participants can express their thoughts, questions, and concerns freely.

Example: Create an anonymous question box where participants can submit questions or concerns they may feel uncomfortable voicing aloud. Address these questions in a group setting to foster open communication.



- 👉 **Provide evidence-based information about obesity and healthy lifestyle choices to empower informed decision-making.**

Example: Share resources such as pamphlets or videos from reputable health organisations and explain the science behind nutrition and exercise in an accessible way. Host a Q&A session to clarify any doubts.

- 👉 **Help participants reflect on their experiences and challenges, connecting the information to their lives.**

Example: After a lesson on healthy eating, ask participants to reflect on their current eating habits and discuss what changes they might want to make. Encourage sharing by prompting with questions like, "How do you think this could apply to your daily life?"

- 👉 **Foster a sense of belonging among participants through peer support activities and opportunities for connection.**

Example: Organise group activities that require teamwork, like a group walk or cooking class, to encourage bonding. Encourage participants to share what they learned or enjoyed about the activity.

Don'ts:

- 👉 **Refrain from making assumptions or judgments based on appearance or experiences, treating all participants with respect.**

Example: Avoid comments like "You look like you need more exercise." Instead, focus on general statements that apply to everyone, such as "It is great to find activities we all enjoy."

- 👉 **Steer clear of language that reinforces stereotypes or negative beliefs about obesity, and avoid hurtful or stigmatising terms.**

Example: Instead of saying, "People with obesity are lazy," focus on the complexities of weight management, like "There are many factors that affect a person's weight."



- ❏ **Do not pressure participants into sharing personal information or use tactics that may shame or embarrass them.**

Example: Avoid forcing anyone to share their weight or personal struggles. Instead, encourage voluntary sharing by creating a safe space and saying, "Share only what you feel comfortable discussing."

- ❏ **Encourage participants to seek guidance from healthcare professionals for personalised advice, rather than providing medical recommendations.**

Example: Instead of giving medical advice, guide participants to consult a doctor for personal health concerns. You might say, "It is best to talk to your healthcare provider about this to get advice that is tailored to you."

- ❏ **Discourage comparisons among participants and emphasise individual progress and growth.**

Example: Avoid statements like "Look how much weight he lost!" Focus instead on personal achievements by saying, "You have made great progress in your journey, and that is what matters most."

- ❏ **Emphasise shared experiences and common goals, avoiding actions that may inadvertently isolate participants.**

Example: Use inclusive language such as "We are all here to support each other," rather than singling anyone out. Activities should be designed to include everyone, regardless of fitness level or ability.



- ❏ **Acknowledge the multifaceted nature of obesity, avoiding oversimplified explanations or solutions.**

Example: Instead of saying, "Just eat less and exercise more," discuss the complex factors that contribute to obesity, such as genetics, environment, and emotional health, and validate these complexities.

4. GOALS OF THE AWARENESS MODULE, AWARENESS CHALLENGES IN CONNECTION TO OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY, SCIENTIFIC INSIGHTS ON AWARENESS AND OBESITY

Raising awareness about the various dimensions of obesity can help participants make more informed decisions about their health, encouraging them to prioritise healthier behaviours. By providing accurate information and dispelling myths, the Module aims to educate young people with overweight and obesity, leading to increased self-confidence and motivation to contribute to improved self-esteem and overall well-being.

The Awareness Module has several interconnected goals, all aimed at empowering young individuals and fostering positive change in their lives. **These goals include:**

- 👉 Educational empowerment and awareness
- 👉 Reducing stigma and promoting self-confidence
- 👉 Encouraging healthy behaviours and developing coping strategies
- 👉 Fostering social support and advocacy



Awareness challenges in connection to overweight and obesity

Awareness challenges refer to the difficulties individuals and society face in recognising, understanding, and addressing the issues related to overweight and obesity. These challenges can significantly hinder efforts to prevent and manage the disease effectively.

Obesity is often viewed as a result of personal failure or lack of willpower, rather than a complex condition influenced by multiple factors [9]. Many young people lack an understanding of proper nutrition, portion sizes, and the impact of dietary choices on weight and health.

There is often insufficient awareness of the serious health risks associated with overweight and obesity, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers among others. Furthermore, people often oversimplify the causes of obesity, attributing it solely to personal choices without recognising the complex interplay of genetics, environment, and socio-economic factors.

The proliferation of misinformation through social media and other channels leads to confusion about what constitutes a healthy diet and effective weight management strategies. The stigma associated with obesity as well as discrimination can discourage individuals from seeking help or discussing their weight concerns, leading to a lack of awareness about effective treatment options [9].

Schools may not adequately educate students about stress, nutrition and physical activity, missing a crucial opportunity to instil healthy habits early on. Additionally, in some communities, particularly those with lower socio-economic status, there may be a lack of awareness of, or access to, affordable healthy food options and opportunities for physical activity.

Scientific insights on awareness and obesity

The impact of self-perception

Stereotype threat theory, particularly weight-based social identity theory and the Cyclic Obesity/Weight-Based Stigma (COBWEBS) model, directly informs the focus on how self-identification as overweight can impact health [10]. This is due to the negative effects that concerns about social rejection and chronic stress have on health-promoting behaviours. In addition to these theories, which emphasise social identity and the stress related to social rejection, the internalisation of weight stigma may independently explain why self-identifying as overweight is associated with poor health.

The stigma attached to self-identifying as overweight in a society that stigmatises heavier body weight can lead to a chronic stress response to this social-evaluative threat, resulting in direct physiological effects (for example, activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, which can affect appetite and body fat deposition) [11].



Concerns about social rejection may also cause some individuals to engage in less healthy behaviours (for example, reduced physical activity), not necessarily because of direct distress, but because they choose to avoid potentially distressing situations where they may be judged negatively (for example, exercising in public) [12].

How mindfulness may affect obesity

A study randomly assigned 12–17-year-old females with type 2 diabetes to a 6-week mindfulness intervention (learning to breathe), based on Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), or to a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) group. The results showed that immediately after treatment, participants in the mindfulness group had significantly improved depression symptoms and insulin resistance [13]. These improvements persisted at 6 months and 1 year post-treatment. At 1 year post-treatment, the mindfulness group also showed slight improvements in body mass index (BMI) and percentage of body fat [14].

Mindfulness interventions have the potential to positively influence eating behaviours by bringing intentionality to the act of eating. This intentionality can foster purposeful changes in behaviour. Mindfulness practices have been shown to improve depression, anxiety, and suicidality in adolescents through yoga, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), spirituality, and MBSR. These improvements may enhance the overall wellbeing of adolescents, enabling them to better focus on weight-loss behaviours [15].



5. RELEVANT TERMINOLOGY

Self-awareness is the ability to recognise and understand one's own thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. It involves being conscious of your strengths, weaknesses, values, and motivations. Improving self-awareness can lead to better decision-making, healthier relationships, and personal growth. One can enhance self-awareness through practices such as mindfulness meditation, journaling, seeking feedback from others, and reflecting on past experiences. Engaging in regular self-reflection and introspection helps individuals gain deeper insights into their thoughts and emotions, leading to a more authentic understanding of oneself and greater self-acceptance. Additionally, seeking out diverse perspectives and actively listening to feedback can provide valuable insights into how one is perceived by others, further enhancing self-awareness.

Social awareness refers to the ability to understand and empathise with the emotions, needs, and perspectives of others in various social situations. It involves being attuned to the dynamics of social interactions, recognising cultural differences, and demonstrating empathy towards individuals from diverse backgrounds. Improving social awareness requires practising active listening, observing nonverbal cues, and cultivating empathy. Engaging in meaningful conversations with people from different cultures and backgrounds can broaden one's perspective and enhance understanding of social dynamics. Additionally, participating in community activities, volunteering, and seeking out opportunities to collaborate with others can help individuals develop a deeper awareness of social issues and foster empathy towards others' experiences and challenges. By continuously honing social awareness skills, individuals can build stronger connections, navigate social interactions more effectively, and contribute positively to their communities.

Neuroplasticity refers to the brain's ability to reorganise and adapt throughout life in response to experiences, learning, and environmental changes. It involves the formation of new neural connections, the pruning of unused connections, and the restructuring of existing neural networks. Neuroplasticity enables the brain to compensate for injury or disease, learn new skills, and adapt to new situations. It underlies various cognitive functions, including memory, learning, and recovery from brain injuries. This phenomenon highlights the brain's remarkable capacity for growth and change, allowing individuals to continually evolve and develop throughout their lives.

Mindfulness is a mental state characterised by present moment awareness, non-judgmental acceptance, and a deliberate focus on the present experience. It involves paying attention to thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and the surrounding environment without getting caught up in them or reacting impulsively. Practising mindfulness can benefit people in numerous ways. It has been shown to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression by promoting relaxation and fostering a sense of inner calm. Mindfulness enhances emotional regulation, allowing individuals to manage challenging emotions more effectively and respond to difficult situations with greater clarity and composure. It also improves attention and concentration, enhancing cognitive functioning and performance in various tasks. Additionally, mindfulness cultivates self-awareness and self-compassion, fostering a greater sense of overall well-being and resilience in the face of life's challenges.

Self-concept is the way individuals perceive and define themselves.

Self-esteem is a person's evaluation of their own worth. Understanding self-concept and self-esteem is essential for building a healthy sense of self-awareness.



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Acknowledgments:

YOUnite is a project aimed to help adolescents with overweight and obesity in overcoming challenges and improving their employability on the labour market. YOUnite project, supported by the ERASMUS+ programme is seeking to develop a new engaging and self-confidence building training programme to support young obese people to cope with socio-economic difficulties and any other potential source of discrimination.

The partnership is led by ÖSB Consulting (Austria) with partner organisations from Finland (ACR), Hungary (EMINA), Poland (Zdrowy Kształt), and Austria (ÖSB Social Innovation).

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