

Seven Strategies for Supporting Youth in Moments of Global Unrest



EVIDENCE
BRIEF

This Evidence Brief summarizes seven strategies for supporting young people in moments of global unrest. Developed by Arielle Anucha and Hajar Seiyad, Research Assistants at YouthREX.

TWO KEY MESSAGES

01. Youth are engaged and responding to moments of global unrest – including the Israel-Hamas war.

The devastation of the current Israel-Hamas war directly impacts young people around the world – not only those with Palestinian or Israeli backgrounds and those with identities connected to the region through ancestral or religious ties.

The current conflict began on October 7, 2023, when Hamas launched an attack on Israel, killing more than 1,200 Israelis and capturing more than 200 hostages.¹ Months after that initial attack, the response of Israeli military forces has resulted in more than 30,000 Palestinians killed, more than 70,000 injured, and, according to local health authorities, thousands missing.² Over 60% of Gaza’s housing has been damaged or destroyed and approximately 1.7 million Palestinians – 80% of the population – is internally displaced.³ Gaza is experiencing a humanitarian disaster; the entire population is at severe levels of acute food insecurity due to Israel’s “extensive restrictions on the entry and distribution of humanitarian aid.”⁴ Palestinians are also facing significant shortages of water, fuel, electricity, and essential medical supplies.

This current conflict is an escalation of decades-long oppression faced by Palestinians, acknowledged by many within Israel who have led movements for peace. Prior to October 7, Gaza was described as an “open-air prison,” characterized by restricted mobility, denial of opportunities, and economic devastation due to blockades.⁵

The conflict is not just a local matter, confined to the Middle East – it attracts global attention, stirring up strong opinions, raising unresolved issues steeped in historical and intergenerational trauma, injustice, and displacement, and triggering heavy emotions, often tied to a sense of identity, morality, and justice. This resulting polarization can seep into local communities, causing divisions and shaping how young people understand justice, peace, and conflict resolution. Youth workers need to support young people in making sense of the images and information they are accessing, get a handle on the complexities, and build understanding and empathy within their communities.

02. Social media influences how young people experience global crises.

Social media has made the world more interconnected; as a result, young people are more conscious of global crises than previous generations. Now, young people can quickly learn about issues happening around the world,

from Europe to Africa to Asia. Research has shown that younger people are more globally minded than older adults.⁶

They are also more emotionally invested. Global crises that once felt far away and distant are made more urgent and intimate by social media, which humanize the impacts of political decisions and personalize human suffering. For example, many youth in Ontario feel invested in the people of Gaza because of a personal connection – whether through the storytelling posted by journalists on the ground, or by following or connecting directly with people living through the conflict.

Social Media and the Israel-Hamas War

The current war and humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Middle East has dramatically impacted diverse young people across the globe, including in Canada. Millions of young people are witnessing this conflict through the eyes of people sharing their daily realities in Gaza. Since October 7, 2023, young Palestinian citizen journalists have documented their experiences in Gaza and accumulated millions of followers. Content creators like [Motaz Azaiza](#) and [Bisan Owda](#) have been documenting their experiences daily, and many young people have begun to feel a personal connection to both.

A young person in California described receiving notifications on her phone each time Azaiza posts and worrying when too much time has passed; after watching him document his life for more than 100 days, she shared, “it almost feels like he’s a brother. He’s a friend, and we’re seeing him suffer in real time.”⁷ Another young person in Toronto described similar concerns for Owda: “If [she] hasn’t posted for 12 hours, there are hundreds of tweets: ‘Where’s Bisan?’ ‘Does anybody know

where Bisan is?’ ‘Is she okay?’”⁷ Young people aren’t simply watching conflicts happen around the world anymore; instead, they know the names, faces, and stories of those experiencing crisis, in real time, and so they feel more connected in moments of global unrest than ever before.

Hopelessness vs. Engagement & Action

This sense of connection can either result in feelings of hopelessness or provide the foundation for further engagement and action. For example, many young people experience ‘climate anxiety’ – anxiety over the climate crisis and the feeling that they are unable as individuals to effect change because powerful institutions fail to act.⁸ Young people are experiencing similar emotions about the situation in the Middle East. Although this generation of young people is more globally aware, their ability to change the unfolding of these events, or their outcomes, has remained unchanged.

Due in large part to social media, young people express knowing so much about global issues and conflicts but feel that they can’t do anything to solve these crises. As one young person described, “I think we have all fallen into some sort of spiral of depression where you want to help, but you can’t help.”⁹ Other young people have felt empowered in the face of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, and use social media platforms to engage in activism by organizing campaigns and demonstrations, involving themselves in political discussions at the local level, and participating in boycotts.

Feelings of Overwhelm

Regardless, many young people find following global crises like the Israel-Hamas war to be simply overwhelming. Most youth are not watching mainstream news channels; instead, they get information from social media, where they can constantly consume content about social issues. A mainstream media broadcast might feature a segment on the war in the Middle East before moving on to other stories, but, on social media, users can access content at any time, and all the time. The content that young people access on social media is also often raw, unfiltered, and unmediated, possibly without necessary context, as people on the ground film and upload footage directly onto social media sites and that content is shared by users with various political ideologies and agendas.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: SEVEN STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING YOUTH IN MOMENTS OF GLOBAL UNREST

01. Use trauma-informed approaches.

Implement trauma-informed approaches in supporting youth affected by global crises, acknowledging the potential for vicarious trauma, providing resources and supports for coping and healing, and recognizing that “the core of any service is genuine, authentic, and compassionate relationships.”¹⁰

The principles of trauma-informed care include:^{10,11}

- **Acknowledgement** of young people’s feelings and lived experiences. Youth workers affirm youth’s concerns and demonstrate **compassion**.
- **Safety** in physical settings and interpersonally. Youth workers can intentionally establish safe and inclusive spaces where youth can express their thoughts, feelings, and concerns freely, within a non-judgmental environment. Encourage open dialogue, active listening, and mutual respect.
- **Trustworthiness** and **transparency**. Youth workers engage with youth authentically and make decisions with respect and fairness to build trust.
- **Collaboration** towards **empowerment**. Youth workers strive to minimize differences in power between staff and young people, facilitating youth **choice and control**.
- **Strength-based practice**. Youth workers recognize, amplify, and build on the individual and collective strengths of young people.
- **Peer support**. Youth workers facilitate engaging support from those with lived experiences of trauma and from loved ones, including family members.
- **Intersectionality**. Youth workers are attuned to intersecting cultural, historical, and identity-specific issues, moving beyond cultural stereotypes and biases.

02. Create space for discussion and promote diverse perspectives.

Create space for conversations about the ways that current events and global crises may be impacting youth. Current issues provide an opportunity to connect the personal to the political by making associations between policies/political actions and young people's identities.¹² In this way, youth workers can foster critical consciousness and promote open discussion for critical reflection and space for youth to demonstrate political efficacy.¹²

Promote diverse perspectives and ask questions that encourage thoughtful discussion and reflection. Discourage the perpetuation of stereotypes or hate of any kind, including, for example, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Arab racism.

03. Promote digital literacy.

Support youth to navigate what they are experiencing through social media by promoting digital literacy. Young people need guidance in the development of skills to critically analyze images and information, interrogate sources, identify biases and ideologies, and navigate online discussions responsibly. Consider providing workshops or other learning opportunities that will empower youth with the agency and digital skills to engage online safely and responsibly.

04. Encourage youth to bear witness safely.

Encourage young people to protect their mental health. When injustice occurs, many feel a responsibility to 'bear witness' in honor of the victims or survivors – a process of seeing/ experiencing an event that affirms that what happened is true. This may resonate more for youth who have a personal stake in a conflict or crisis through shared religious or ethnic ties (for example, Palestinian-Canadians, Arab-Canadians, or Muslim youth watching what is unfolding in Gaza, or Jewish youth who both may or may not consider their affiliation with the land of Israel as a critical part of their Jewish identity). People impacted by global unrest may feel obligated to bear witness and may even feel guilty if they are not constantly updated or aware of events as they unfold. Even experiencing oppression vicariously can have negative repercussions for mental health and wellbeing.¹³

However, there are mental health implications when a young person shares an aspect of identity with the victim or survivor of a traumatic event.¹⁴ For example, people who identified as either LGBT2SQ+ or Hispanic reported spending significantly more time than others watching media that covered the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida (which targeted LGBT2SQ+ and Hispanic people), and reported more stress in response to the shooting.¹⁴

Youth should be encouraged to take breaks when consuming media related to global events; in fact, to “minimize the dangers associated with media exposure to collective trauma, people should try to engage with content from trusted sources for no more than 30 minutes” at a time.¹⁴ Suggest youth avoid looking at content before they go to sleep at night or when they first wake up, as the stress of viewing graphic or distressing images, videos or other content might keep youth up or affect their mental health as they move into the day.

05. Model and promote ‘radical empathy’.

Encourage youth to practice radical empathy when engaging with peers who have opposing viewpoints. Radical empathy encourages safe and healthy dialogue by acknowledging and empathizing with the experiences and traumas of others.

For example, the events of October 7, 2023, and the Israeli government’s military response has awakened historical trauma for both Palestinian and Jewish people around the world.¹⁵ Practicing radical empathy in the context of the Israel-Hamas war would make room for an understanding of the traumas of both Israelis and Palestinians, “rejecting hierarchies of suffering”¹⁶ from a framework of collective liberation.

Youth workers can encourage youth to understand the emotions driving different viewpoints, even if they do not necessarily agree with the conclusions.

06. Encourage young people to engage in advocacy and activism.

Supporting youth to use advocacy and activism to combat feelings of hopelessness can encourage young people to unplug from passively watching events unfold on social media and foster a sense of agency. They can then feel as though they are part of the change they want to see instead of feeling helpless and powerless in the face of doom scrolling through the distressing news that seems unending on their social media feeds.

It is natural for youth to feel angry when they know that injustices are occurring, whether those are the effects of climate change or someone being mistreated because of their gender or race. Activism, in whatever form one chooses, can empower youth and support channeling difficult emotions, including anger and grief, in productive ways. For example, engaging in anti-racist activism served as a coping mechanism that allowed racialized youth who had seen news of racialized violence and other racially-charged events to direct their negative emotions towards action: “the act of doing something may lessen the feelings of helplessness.”¹³

Participating in advocacy and activism not only reduces the challenging and negative emotions that young people feel when watching global crises unfold, but it also engages them to get involved in their communities and find support in like-minded peers. Taking direct action, even minimally, can relieve the hopelessness and helplessness that so many youth are feeling right now. Youth should be encouraged to be proactive by making financial donations, protesting, writing petitions, calling local representatives, and organizing boycotts.

For some youth, even engaging in online activism can be empowering and reduce feelings of helplessness, such as posting on social media. Educating others in a personal way, like offering a friend a new perspective by sending them a private direct message, can help youth to feel less passive. Online activism may also be more accessible for those young people who may not be able to get involved in in-person actions (for example, due to ability, geography, or even other demands on their time).

07. Provide advocacy training.

Equip youth with the knowledge and skills they need to be effective advocates by providing access to training sessions on a variety of topics, including nonviolent protest, community organizing, campaign planning, and how to engage with policymakers to amplify their voices and contribute to positive change.

HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using combinations of the following key terms: "youth," "young people," "conflict," "war," "Gaza," "social media," "mental health," "best practices," "antisemitism," "Islamophobia," "anti-Arab racism."

ENDNOTES

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