HOW TO TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION

A communications guide

This guide was written by FrameWorks UK in collaboration with the HSE Mental Health and Wellbeing Programme.

FrameWorks UK is a not-for-profit, mission-driven organisation, specialising in evidence-based communication strategies that shift hearts and minds. They help charities and other organisations communicate about social issues in ways that create change, through practical guidance underpinned by their framing research.

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is for those working to build good mental health in Ireland, in particular people who are promoting and delivering mental health and wellbeing initiatives and services.
It provides practical communication tips and advice to help shift thinking, build understanding and increase support for action on mental health promotion.

Generally, when people think about mental health, they tend to think only of mental health problems. This means solutions are thought about in terms of treatment when someone is already unwell. How we can work upstream to create good mental health, and prevent mental health challenges in the first place, isn't well understood.

People also often think about health in very individual ways: I am mentally healthy or not because of how I take care of myself, how resilient I am, whether I exercise and eat well. This way of thinking makes it harder for people to see how our surroundings shape our mental health – from our homes to our neighbourhoods, to the money in our pocket.

Finally, people often feel that change isn't possible and think that mental health problems are only something that 'other' people experience.

Our communications can help us overcome these ways of thinking and reduce stigma by showing how our surroundings shape our mental health, and putting solutions front and centre.

WHAT IS FRAMING?

Framing is the choices we make about the ideas we share and how we share them. This includes what we choose to emphasise, how we explain things and what we leave unsaid. These choices can lead to radical changes in how people think, feel and act.

All communications are framed. But when we make these decisions deliberately, and backed up by evidence, we can be more confident that they will achieve our intended results.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Start with the things *everyone* needs to be mentally healthy.** To reduce stigma, we need to start by universalising the issue and showing that it should matter to all of us.

- **Harness the power of explanation.** To help build understanding of how we can create the conditions for good mental health we can use step-by-step explanation, specific metaphors, and talk about the role of chronic stress.

- **Talk about solutions.** Show there are concrete things we can do to create good mental health and explain why they work.

- **Avoid jargon.** Including acronyms and technical terms. Use human language.

- **Select the right images.** Ones which showcase context and solutions, rather than focus on people experiencing mental health challenges.

- **Use numbers to strengthen your story, not to tell it.** Select data carefully and be clear what the numbers show.

1. START WITH THE THINGS *EVERYONE* NEEDS TO BE MENTALLY HEALTHY

The first thing we say in our communications is the most important. It can either trigger helpful ways of thinking or tap into unproductive ones.

To help reduce stigma, we need to show that there are things we all need to be mentally healthy. This helps to build understanding that this isn't just an issue for 'other' people – it should matter to all of us.

What this can sound like

"In order to thrive and be mentally healthy all of us need things like a safe, secure place to call home, enough money to pay the bills and connections to friends and family."

Our choice of words can help reduce stigma or inadvertently reinforce it. Here are some things to try, and some to avoid:

More of this	Less of this	Why
Talk about what we all need to thrive, show these needs are universal.	Avoid terms like 'disadvantaged' or 'vulnerable'.	Terms like vulnerable can increase stigma and make this about 'other' people. We want to show that mental health affects all of us, and that all of us should care.
Focus on places where people may experience barriers or difficulties.	Avoid talking about groups of people as this can lead to stigma.	When we put the focus on place, we help to show how our surroundings shape our health and move the focus away from individualism.
Use terms like 'we', 'us', 'our' and 'all' where appropriate.	Using terms like 'them' or with a 'the' preface.	Using collective terms like 'we' avoids 'us-and-them' language, building more inclusive communications.

2. HARNESS THE POWER OF EXPLANATION

To help build understanding of how we can create the conditions for good mental health promotion we can use specific tested metaphors and step-by-step explanation.

We can also build understanding of mental health inequalities by talking about the concept of chronic stress.

Metaphor

Talk about the **building blocks of health and wellbeing** to explain the things that we all need to be mentally healthy and how they shape our lives.

Why it works?

Metaphors are a powerful way of explaining something complex. They create a vivid mental picture which makes it easier to understand, without dumbing it down.

How to do it

- Talk about the 'building blocks of mental health' or the 'building blocks of health and wellbeing'
- Compare building a mentally healthy society with that of constructing a sturdy building.
- Each building block represents one thing we all need in our lives to be mentally healthy. Use examples of these, things like: a secure job, enough money to pay the bills, a decent home, access to healthy food, and connection to friends and family.

BUILDING BLOCKS OF MENTAL HEALTH

What this sounds like

"To create an Ireland where everyone can thrive, we need all the right ***building blocks of health and wellbeing*** *in place: stable jobs, good pay, warm homes and community connection.*

"Right now, in too many of our neighbourhoods, blocks are missing. It's time for us to fix the gaps."

Use the **overloaded metaphor** to explain how we can struggle when different challenges add up and how this impacts our mental health. This metaphor works by showing that our circumstances shape our behaviour.

How to do it

- Describe how challenges like a job loss, money worries or relationship breakdowns can overload us, making us unable to cope.
- Use words like overloaded or weighed down to show how these challenges combine – and how the right supports can help to lighten the load.
- This is particularly useful for talking about the impact of stress on parents and how it affects their ability to be the parents they want to be.

What this sounds like:

"When parents become ***overloaded*** *by things like job loss, debt, relationship breakdowns, or illness they can have a hard time staying on track – and giving children the care and attention they need to thrive.*

Advice, support and a listening ear, like those offered at our services, can help by ***lightening the load*** *on parents."*

Watch out: only use one metaphor in each piece of communication. Avoid mixing them together.

Step-by-step explanation

When we explain step-by-step, it makes it clear how the things around us shape our mental health.

How to do it?

- Don't assume your audience has knowledge of the factors shaping mental health or how we could improve them
- Spell out step-by-step how one thing leads to another
- Use words which explicitly link cause and effect: this **leads** to, this **means**, this **causes**, this **results** in etc
- Use simple language
- Focus on just one building block of mental health at a time.

What this looks like

Instead of stating that when people have insecure or irregular work it can lead to poorer mental health, explain how irregular work affects mental health:

Cause: When we have insecure or irregular employment ...

Step 1: ...It means that it is harder to afford a decent home and heating.

Step 2: Constantly worrying about having enough money to pay the rent or mortgage and bills can lead to chronic stress, anxiety and depression.

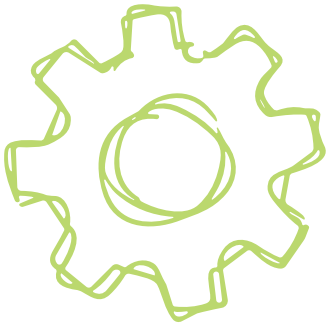
Step 3: Living in cold, damp homes can also worsen physical and mental health.

Consequence: Poorer mental health.

Solution: Improve job security.

Putting this into a piece of communication, it might look like:

"For us to thrive and be mentally healthy, we all need the building blocks of health and wellbeing in place. Things like a stable job, a warm home, and connection to friends and family. When we don't have secure or regular employment it means that it is harder to afford a decent home and pay the heating bills. Constantly worrying about having enough money to pay the rent, or mortgage, and our bills can lead to chronic stress, anxiety and depression. Living in a cold, damp home can also worsen physical and mental health. This is why to improve mental health in Ireland we need to improve job security."



Chronic stress

Use the phrase **chronic stress** to explain why it's harder for some people to be mentally healthy and why we need targeted support.

How to do it?

- Explain how, when we don't have the things we need to be mentally healthy – like enough money to get by, a secure home, and regular employment – it causes chronic stress, and this leads to poorer mental health.
- Talk about chronic stress, not just stress, to raise the seriousness of what you're describing.

What this sounds like:

*"Experiencing poverty worsens our health and wellbeing. When we can't afford the things we need, like heating and healthy food, and are constantly worrying about making ends meet, it leads to **chronic stress**. Stress worsens anxiety and depression and can lead to increased blood pressure and a weaker immune system, resulting in poorer physical and mental health."*

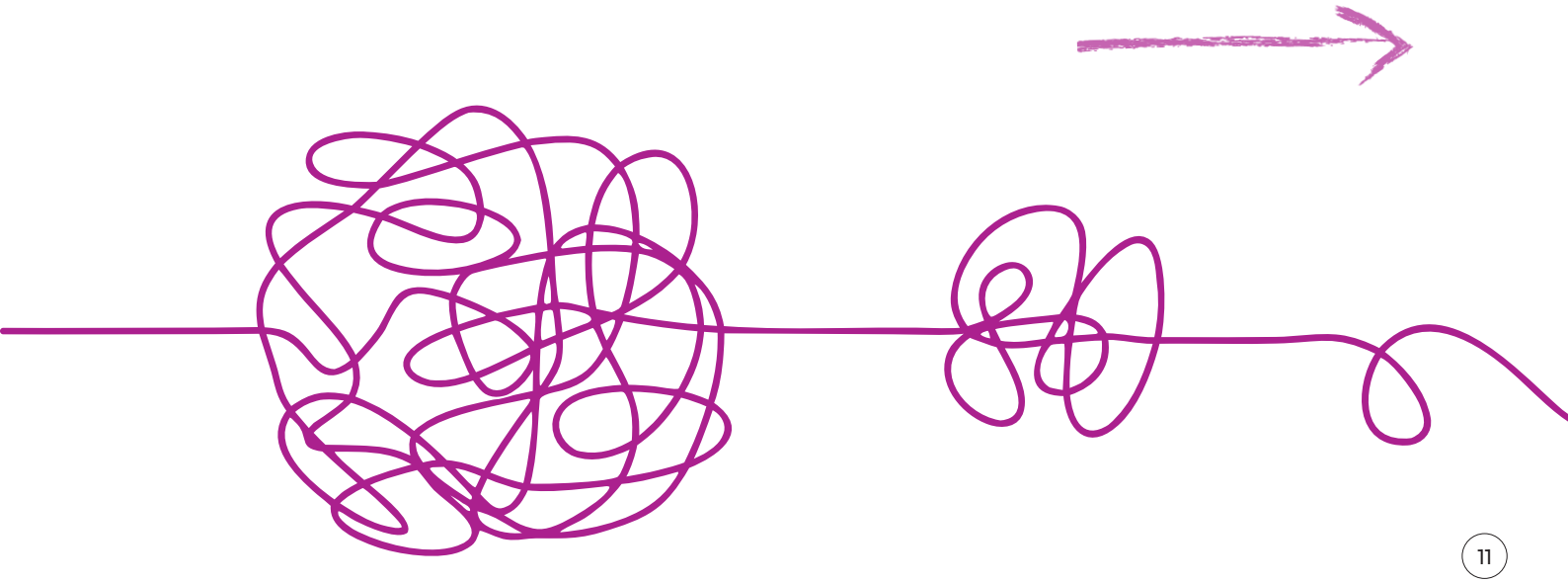
3. TALK ABOUT SOLUTIONS

When it comes to challenges like mental health, it's easy for people to feel that the issue is just too big to solve. When we trigger this way of thinking, we make people less likely to act, because they don't believe that change is possible. To overcome this, we need to showcase examples of solutions.

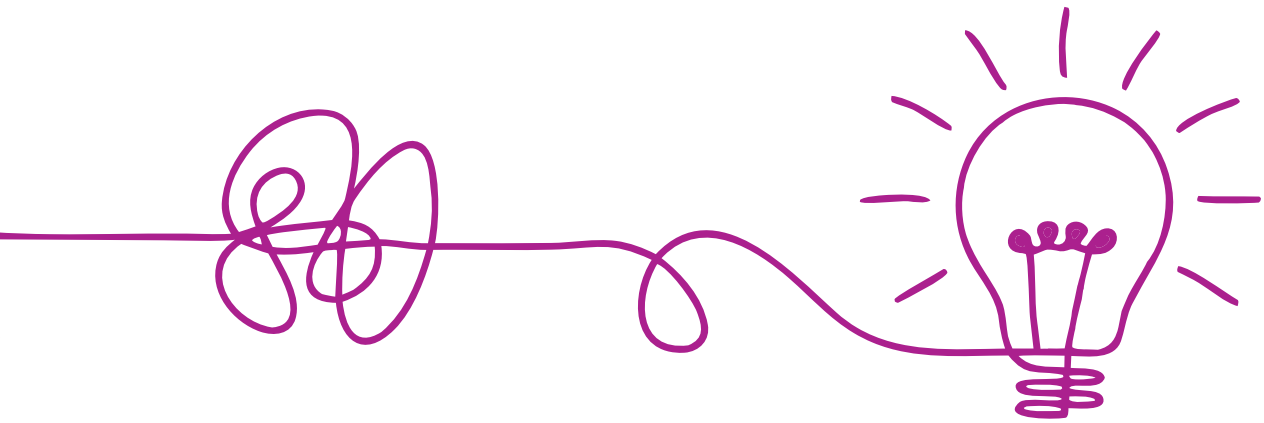
What to do

- Explicitly talk about actions that can be taken to improve mental wellbeing
- Talk about systemic solutions at least as often as individual ones
- Explain how solutions would improve mental health
- Build solutions into your communications early and often
- Avoid talking about mental health crises
- Balance urgency (we need to act now) with efficacy (we can fix this)

Instead of	Try	Why?
Increase access to evidence-based parenting programmes in socially and economically disadvantaged areas in line with the Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme.	To lay the foundations for good mental health from children's earliest years, we can expand our successful family support programmes. Prioritising support in areas most affected by poverty will lighten the load for parents facing increased cost-of-living pressures and help every child to reach their full potential.	Start with why this solution matters. Making this about supporting families, rather than teaching parents, reduces stigma and defensiveness. It also makes this something for all families, rather than triggering thinking that this is for 'other' families, not like me.



Instead of	Try	Why?
Social prescribing recognises that health is heavily determined by social factors such as poverty, isolation, and loneliness. It is estimated that around 20% of patients consult their general practitioner for what is primarily a social problem. Social prescribing offers GPs and other healthcare professionals a means of referring people to a range of nonclinical community supports that can have significant benefits for their overall health and wellbeing.	One of the ways we can create better mental health in Ireland is to invest in social prescribing. This is where we provide support and connect people to activities in their local area that match their interests. For example, this could be linking someone to an art group where they can meet new people or connecting them with a local walking group if they're feeling lonely and want to get out more. By connecting people together in their communities, we can boost self-esteem, reduce loneliness and improve wellbeing.	Start by explaining what this solution will help achieve: better mental health. Then describe in simple terms, with examples of what this might involve.
The HSE's Making Every Contact Count brief intervention programme supports patients/service users to address the impact their drinking has on their mental health.	When we are struggling to get by, or life throws unexpected problems our way, it can lead to anxiety and chronic stress. At times like this, we sometimes drink alcohol to help us cope. But alcohol can worsen mental health, increasing depression and anxiety. By taking every opportunity to talk to people visiting our services about how we can manage stress –without alcohol – we can improve physical and mental health.	When it comes to drinking alcohol, people think this is solely a matter of individual choice. By describing the context which might lead someone to drink more, we help reduce stigma and support people to see, and address, the root causes shaping mental health.



4. AVOID JARGON

Jargon, acronyms and technical language make it harder for your audience to understand what you're saying. Worse still, it can make people feel like they are being deliberately excluded, and that what you're talking about is simply not for them.

What to do

- Use plain language
- Write acronyms out in full every time
- When you do need to use a technical term, explain what it means
- Use real-life examples to make your communications feel tangible

What this sounds like

Instead of	Try	Why?
Initiate community empowerment programmes to enhance social capital and environments that promote mental health and wellbeing across the life course.	We all need some human connection to thrive. By organising community activities, and providing local opportunities to learn new skills, we can boost community connection, reduce loneliness and improve mental health.	Start with what we all need and make the case for why this activity matters. Then explain what it is about, avoiding jargon like 'social capital'.
Support the implementation of initiatives to address the impact of loneliness and social isolation across the life cycle.	Support activities to address loneliness and isolation throughout our lifetime.	Avoid unnecessary words and use more familiar language ie 'lifetime' rather than 'lifecycle'
The aim of [insert organisation/service name name] is to combat disadvantage and improve the functioning of the family unit.	[Insert Organisation name/ service/ is on hand to help families thrive. It offers advice, support, childcare and connection. This can reduce stress and isolation, especially for new parents.	Make the language more human. Say what the service does and why it matters.

5. SELECT THE RIGHT IMAGES

Communication is more than the words we use; it's our images too. We want to select images that help illustrate how our surroundings shape our mental health or depict solutions that can promote good mental wellbeing.

How to do it

- Select images that highlight context and bring to life the things that support or harm our mental health. Use images of places like workplaces, homes, neighbourhoods, food banks etc.
- Make sure our images are humanising and promote dignity – avoid cut-off heads, head-in-hands, or images of people in distress.
- Use groups of people rather than individuals
- Diversity – use a diversity of ages, genders, and ethnicities to show that mental health is something we all experience

Advance

Avoid

6. USE NUMBERS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR STORY, NOT TO TELL IT

Numbers alone do not build understanding. Without context and explanation, they can reinforce unhelpful ways of thinking. For example, using statistics about the scale of mental health challenges can fuel the idea that the problem is "too big to solve".

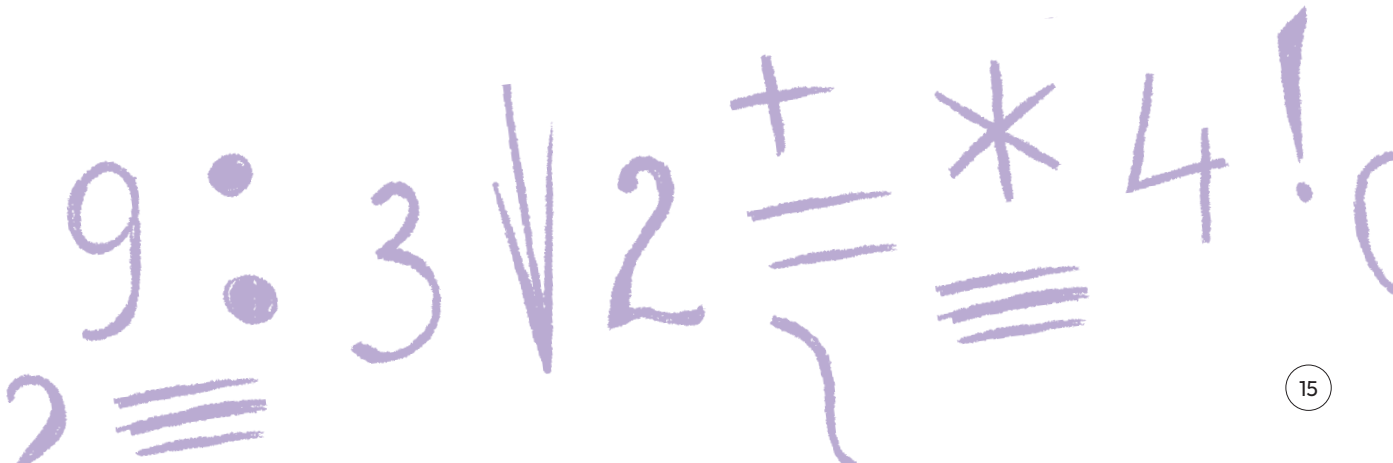
Ask yourself: what story is your number supporting?

- Is it helping to build understanding?
- Could it be fuelling fatalistic thinking, individualised thinking, stigma or othering?
- Does it help highlight the things we all need for good mental health?
- Is there another number which could better support your story? For example, a number which shows the impact of a solution? e.g. That social prescribing can reduce GP visits by up to 28%.

Top tips for framing numbers:

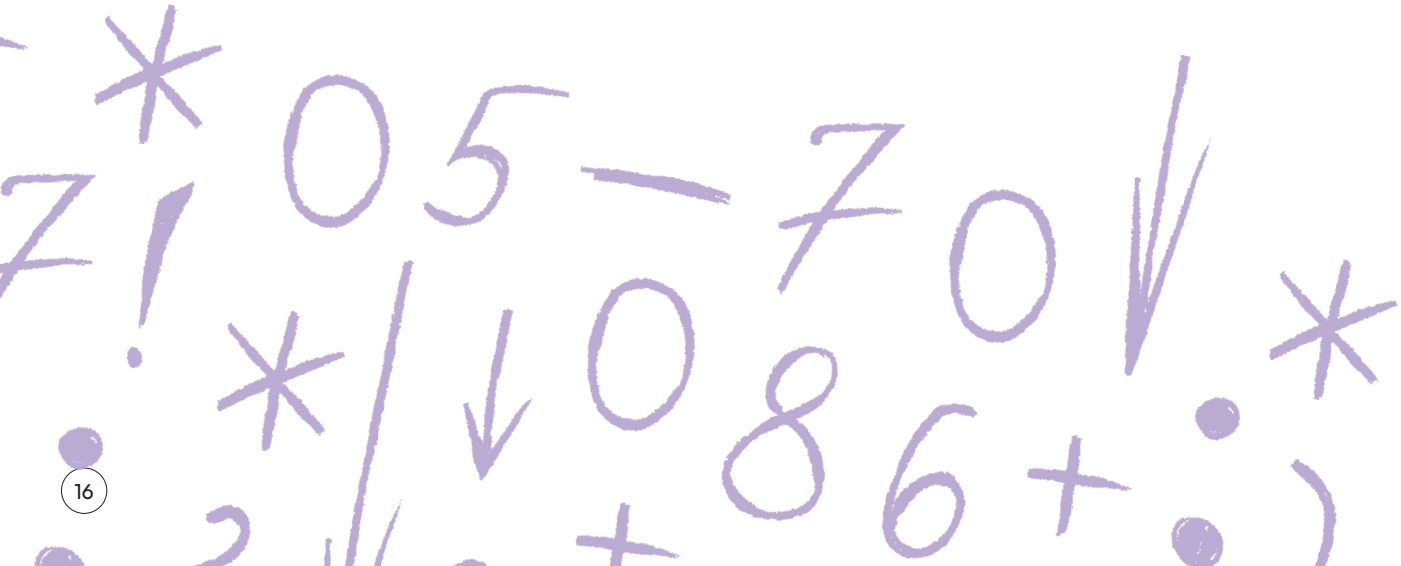
- **Lead with the story you want to tell**. In this case, how can we show the impact of our surroundings on our mental health.
- **Place numbers in context.** Explain what your data is showing, and what is driving the figures. Where possible include a solution.
- **Make numbers easy to understand.** Compare large numbers to something more familiar or relatable. Consider simplifying percentages – people will more easily grasp "1 in 5 people" than 20% of people.

Always check: if you took the numbers out, would your point still make sense?



How you can do it

Instead of	Try	Why?
48% of Irish adults would feel comfortable discussing mental health concerns openly with their friends, family, or colleagues.	Negative stereotypes around mental health and the trivialisation of mental health challenges is rife across our media – from TV to social. This affects our attitudes and behaviours in ways we often don't even realise. This stigma may help to explain why only half of Irish adults would feel comfortable discussing mental health concerns openly with their friends, family, or colleagues.	Without explaining what is driving this statistic, it can be hard to understand what it means, or what we can do about it. The first example leaves it up to people to fill in the gaps for themselves. This can leave the door open for misinterpretation. By providing more explanation – including explaining how stigma comes about – we can join the dots for people and help set up appropriate solutions.
In Ireland, a significant number of young people experience mental health difficulties, with research indicating that by age 13, 33% are likely to have experienced some mental health issue, increasing to over 50% by age 24	All young people need a safe and caring home, good education and a supportive community to thrive. If we get these building blocks of wellbeing in place, we can help turn around the fact that a third of our young people experience a mental health challenge by the age of 13.	Focussing on the things all of us need early on gets people thinking of our common experience – rather than it being an "us" and "them" issue, and instead, one that we could all be affected by. By zoning in on the smaller statistic, we also avoid the trap of big numbers playing into a fatalistic mindset.



7. PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: AN EXAMPLE

Act, Belong, Commit

We all need connection to other people and to have a sense of purpose in our lives. Act, Belong, Commit is helping to improve wellbeing in Ireland by supporting people to do three things:

- Act – do something
- Belong – do something with someone
- Commit – do something meaningful

By joining people up with activities in the local area, including opportunities to volunteer or learn new skills, meet people and get active, we can help build connection, belonging and purpose.

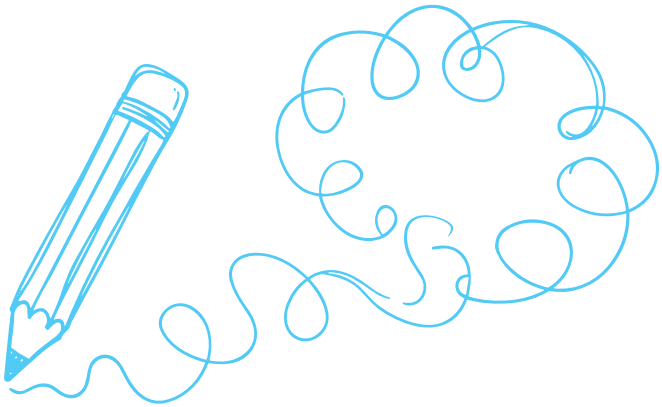
Strengthening the vital building blocks of health and wellbeing – like connection to friends and our local community - lays the foundation for good mental health. The stronger the blocks, the more we are able to withstand life's shocks and challenges.
Find out more about how, together, we can build better health and wellbeing with Act, Belong, Commit: https://actbelongcommit.org

Putting it all together

We can use the recommendations in this guide collectively to build understanding of what mental health promotion is, why it matters, and build support for upstream solutions to improve mental health in Ireland.

8. CHECKLIST

Use this checklist to help you put the recommendations into practice.



- ☐ Have you started your communications by talking about the things we all need to be mentally healthy?
- ☐ Have you used an explanation to show how our surroundings shape our mental health?
  - ➪ Are you using words that link cause and effect like leads to, it means, it results in, because?
  - ➪ Have you used the building blocks of mental health or overloaded metaphor?
  - ➪ Have you talked about the impact of chronic stress?
- ☐ Have you included a solution?
  - ➪ Is it mentioned early and repeated?
- ☐ Have you replaced technical language, jargon and acronyms?
- ☐ Have you selected images which help to highlight the role of our surroundings, or things that would make mental health better?
  - ➪ Do you have a diversity of people in your images?
  - ➪ Have you avoided images depicting people in distress?
- ☐ Have you put statistics or data in context?
  - ➪ Have you helped people understand numbers by comparing them to something relatable?

Further information:

www.yourmentalhealth.ie

www2.hse.ie/mental-health/self-help/balancing-stress

www.allirelandsocialprescribing.ie

www2.hse.ie/living-well/alcohol