



Powered by Youth

Advancing Youth Mental Health Through Physical Activity

A Report from the pre-conference workshop at
Bold Ideas for Brighter Futures 2026
2nd Global Conference: Child and Adolescent
Mental Health

Cape Town, South Africa
May 18 2026

Global conversations on
reimagining youth mental health
through movement, connection
and leadership





Executive Summary

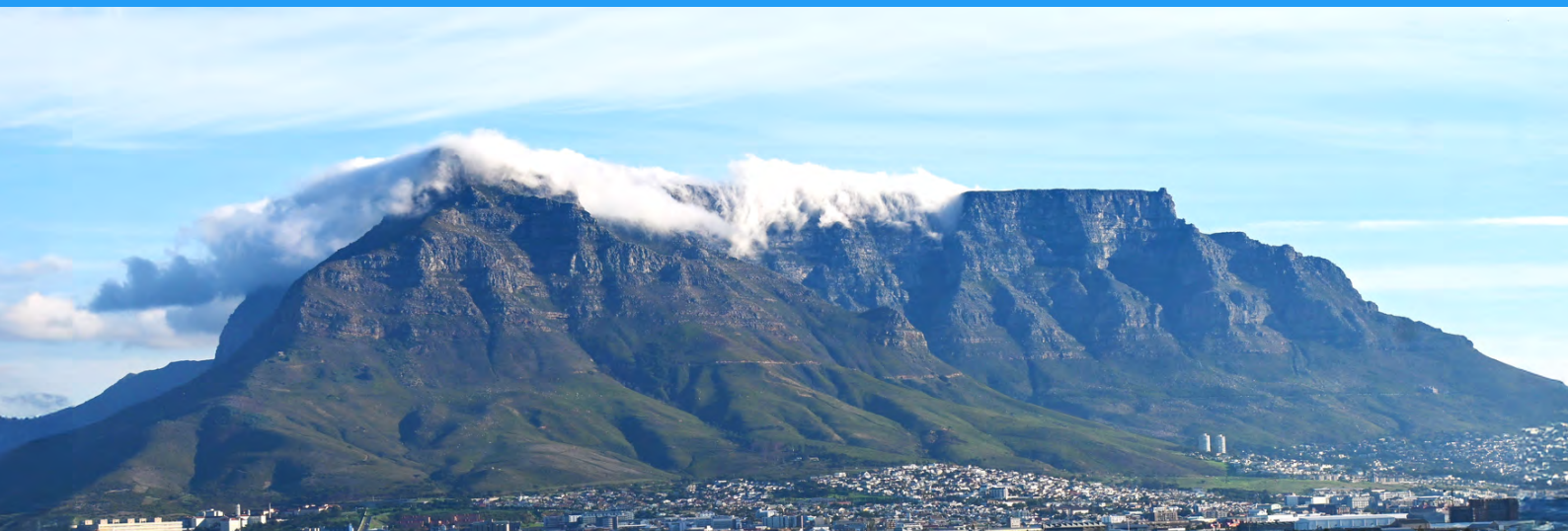
Young people around the world are increasingly vulnerable to mental health challenges. Yet most adolescents lack access to formal mental health services. Physical activity is a simple universal adjunct to clinical treatment that builds the developmental conditions underpinning adolescent well-being.

This report explores physical activity as a platform for promoting adolescent mental health, drawing on a workshop that brought together researchers, practitioners, and youth advocates from six countries to examine evidence and identify strategies for using movement as a tool for youth development. Evidence shows physical activity supports mental health through neurobiological, psychosocial, and behavioral pathways, reducing stress and building coping skills, while also stabilizing circadian rhythms, a benefit especially valuable for adolescents' shifting sleep-wake cycles.

The Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences (HOPE) framework frames how physical activity delivers four building blocks: supportive relationships, safe environments, meaningful engagement, and emotional growth, that foster belonging, agency, identity, confidence, and resilience. Case studies from India, South Africa, Malawi, Uganda, the United States, and Sweden show how approaches from running and cycling to therapeutic camps and school programs put these principles into practice.

The central conclusion is that physical activity is not merely exercise, but a delivery system for the positive experiences underpinning adolescent mental health. Advancing this agenda requires stronger evidence from underserved populations, youth-centered design, investment in safe and inclusive environments, and integration of physical activity into education, health, and community systems.

Youth mental health is strongest when programs are powered by youth.



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Introduction

1 in 5

youth globally
experience a mental
health disorder

<10%

of affected youth
globally receive
treatment



Physical activity operates at a developmental level, building identity, competence, and relational skills. Regular exercise is associated with reduced incidence of depression in young people. Physical activity confers the greatest benefit for youth at highest risk, who are exposed to cumulative adversities such as poverty, violence, chronic illness, stigma, and discrimination, who are simultaneously least likely to be reached by clinical services.



About the Workshop

Powered by Youth: Advancing Youth Mental Health Through Physical Activity

At the Bold Ideas for Brighter Futures 2026: 2nd Global Conference on Child and Adolescent Mental Health in Cape Town, South Africa, on May 18, 2026, this workshop brought together programs from India, South Africa, Malawi, Uganda, Sweden, and the U.S., each showing how youth mental health can be advanced through physical activity in different contexts and communities.

The Science

This opening section introduced key evidence on the relationship between physical activity and youth mental health, highlighting the potential of physical activity to support young people across different populations, settings, and mechanistic pathways.



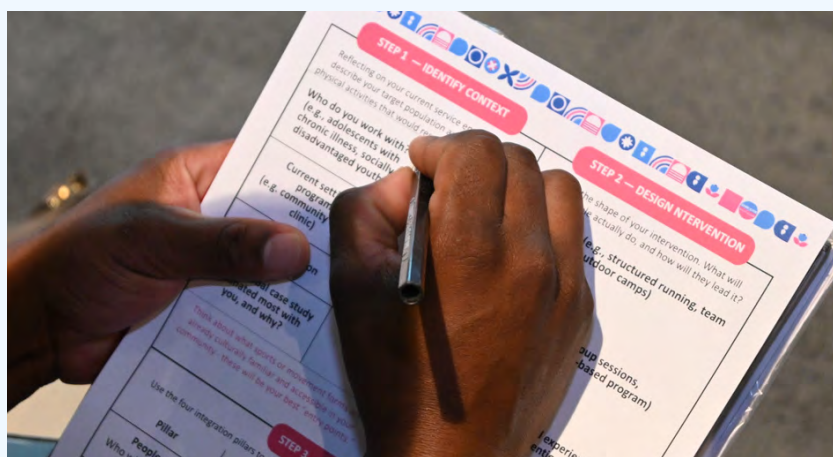
Programs in Practice

This section featured real-world examples from programs. Speakers shared how physical activity is being integrated into youth mental health programming through approaches such as running, cycling, camp-based activities, school-based movement, and community-led models.



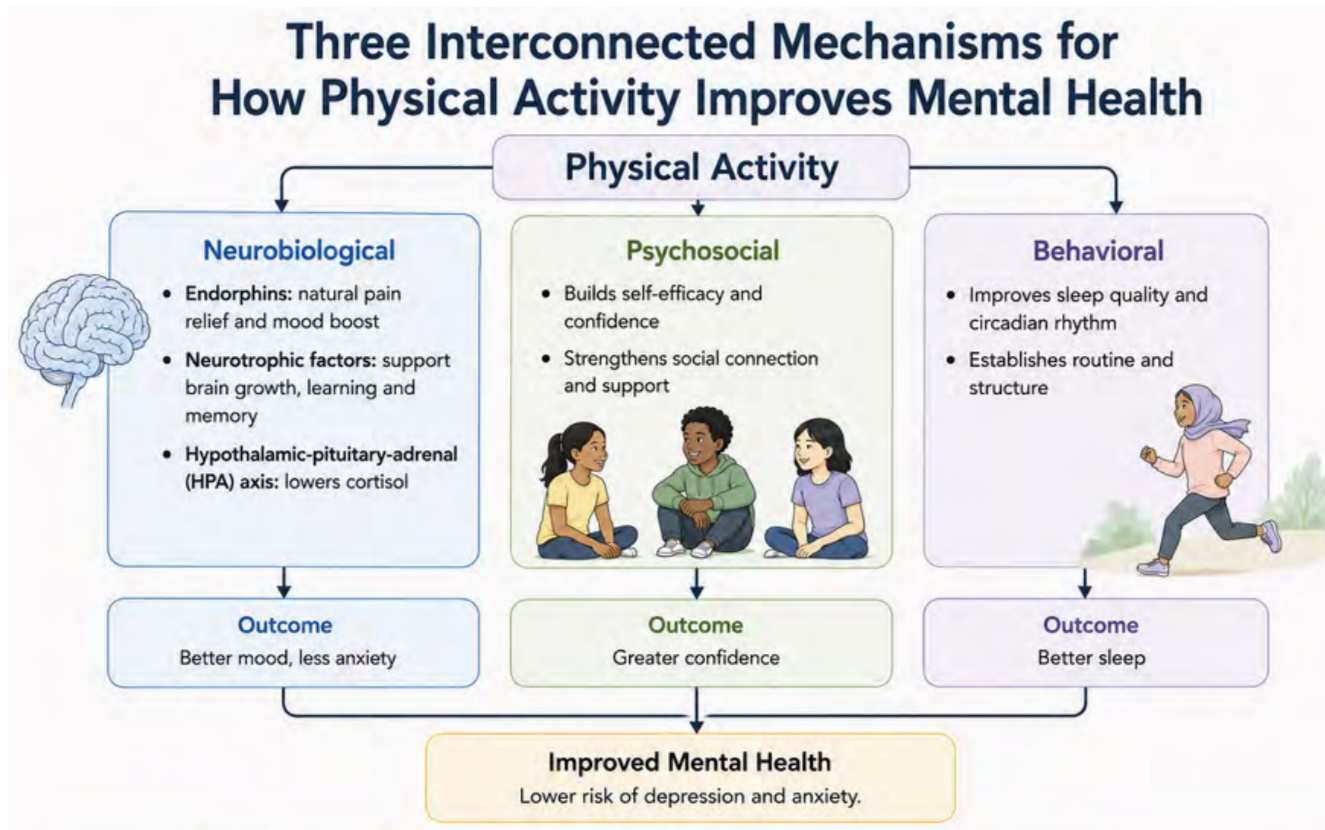
Action Toolkit

A guided reflection activity that helped participants move from discussion to application by identifying what could work in their own communities.



The mechanistic pathways of physical activity and mental health

During the teenage years, the brain is highly adaptable, which means young people are more affected by difficult experiences but also more likely to benefit from positive influences such as exercise.



Neurobiological

Moderate-level exercise releases endorphins, which improve mood and create feelings of well-being in the short-term. Physical activity helps the body manage stress in the long-term by reducing high levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, that can result from long-term adversity. Exercise also increases the production of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which supports brain growth, memory, learning, and emotional control.

Psychosocial

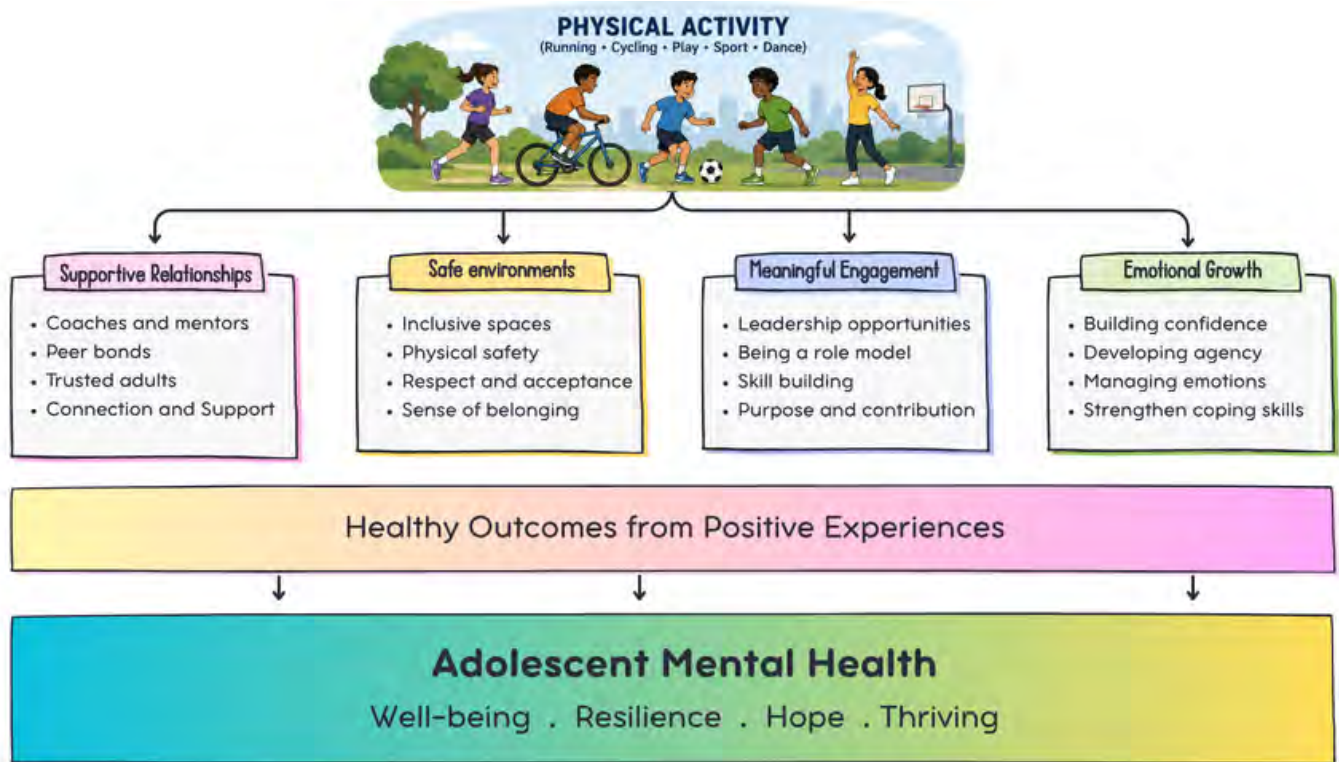
Physical activity helps young people feel more confident in their abilities, improves self-esteem, and strengthens social connections. Activities done in groups are beneficial because they provide peer support, teamwork, and a sense of belonging that individual exercise cannot offer.

Behavioral

Physical activity improves sleep by helping regulate the body's natural sleep-wake cycle. Better sleep is linked to improved mood and fewer negative emotions the next day. This circadian benefit stabilizes the body's internal clock and is particularly transformative in adolescents, whose circadian biology is already shifted by puberty.

Positive Childhood Experiences and the HOPE Model

The Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences (HOPE) Framework serves as a guiding structure for initiatives aimed at enhancing youth mental health.



The HOPE Framework serves as a guiding structure for initiatives aimed at enhancing youth mental health.

Relationships emphasize the importance of social connections and support systems among peers and mentors.

Safe Environments ensure that young people engage in activities without fear or harm, fostering a sense of belonging.

Meaningful Engagement highlights the value of youth participation in decision-making processes.

Emotional Growth focuses on developing coping skills and emotional intelligence.

Together, these components create a holistic approach that not only improves mental health outcomes but also encourages lifelong habits of physical activity.

Case Studies

Exploring initiatives promoting youth well-being

Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate how population-level policy can create conditions reinforcing daily engagement and behavioral normalization of physical activity that are not dependent on individual programs alone but embedded across education, sport, and public policy systems.



The Positive Running Program

RISHI Foundation, India

“The support I received is now the support I give others.”

- Sahana, Captain



The RISHI Foundation's Positive Running program is a youth-centered initiative established in 2022, that enrolls adolescents living with HIV for two years and positions them not as passive recipients of services but as active participants, peer leaders, and role models. Running is the entry point through which broader developmental outcomes, including belonging, agency and resilience are cultivated. Through regular aerobic exercise, participants experience improvements in mood, stress regulation, and emotional well-being.

Relationships	Environments	Engagement	Emotional Growth
Young people run together in peer-led groups and are supported by mentors and adult facilitators.	The program takes place in community settings, outside of clinics, where young people can feel safe, active, and free from being defined by HIV.	Youth take part in camps, running events, and youth-led activities, while also mentoring newer runners and building civic skills.	Running supports stress relief and emotional regulation, while peers help each other process stigma, grief, goal-setting, and leadership.



Pedal for Good

South Africa

"It is a safe space where I can be myself, it makes me forget about my anger."

- Brandon, Coach

Pedal for Good began their program in 2020, integrating cycling, mentorship, and psychoeducation to support school-going adolescents in under-resourced communities in the Western Cape who face high levels of violence and poverty, with limited access to mental health services. Pedal for Good inverts these dynamics: no referral is required, and adolescents join what they experience as a cycling club, not a therapeutic program. The program combines structured cycling activities with trauma-informed sessions focused on emotional awareness, communication, self-regulation, problem-solving, and relationship-building.



Relationships	Environments	Engagement	Emotional Growth
Adolescents build relationships with adult mentors, peers, and coaches, including positive role models with lived experience.	The program uses outdoor community spaces where young people can be active in a safe, welcoming, and non-threatening way.	Youth learn bicycle maintenance, support one another, take part in shared rides, and bring what they learn back to families and schools.	Cycling and trauma-informed sessions help young people build resilience, emotional awareness, and confidence through shared challenges.



SeriousFun Medical Specialty Camps

Malawi, Uganda, and South Africa

“ We believe that no one should ever play alone. Moving our bodies and playing together is part of every single activity. ”
- Camp Counsellor



SeriousFun Children's Network operates recreational therapeutic camps for children and adolescents with serious health conditions. Three programs from across Africa were represented at the workshop: Camp Hope (Baylor Foundation, Malawi), Sanyuka Camp (Baylor Foundation, Uganda), and Camp Footprints (Just Footprints Foundation, South Africa).

The core principle of changing the activity to include every child rather than excluding children who do not fit the activity, is a statement about what this delivery system conveys: that everybody is capable and every person belongs.

Relationships	Environments	Engagement	Emotional Growth
Campers build strong bonds with cabin groups, volunteers, peers with similar experiences, and trained former campers who become leaders.	Camps provide medically supported outdoor spaces where children can safely be away, participate fully, and feel included regardless of health needs or disability.	Children are encouraged to take part fully, lead equally, build self-awareness, and experience love, safety, respect, and inclusion.	Reflection circles, play, and recreational activities help campers grow in confidence, identity, perseverance, and acceptance of illness.

SeriousFun Medical Specialty Camps

Malawi, Uganda, and South Africa

Camp Hope, Uganda Sanyuka Camp, Malawi Baylor Foundation

These play-based camps serve children living with HIV and those undergoing treatment for chronic illness and employ a four-step pedagogical model of challenge, success, reflect, discovery, in which physical exertion is followed by guided reflection.



Camp Footprints Just Footprints Foundation South Africa

These inclusive camps extend the HOPE model to children with physical disabilities, designing activities around abilities rather than limitations: adapted ball games for wheelchair users, guided movement to music for children with walkers, creative play emphasizing strengths for amputee children.



School-Based Initiatives

Sweden

“I have noticed enormous effects on concentration and energy levels when I have planned movement into the lesson.”

- Teacher



The school-based approach in Sweden emphasizes mobility, collaboration, self-esteem, and understanding of lifestyle and health, with inclusive participation as a core priority. The **Leisure Activity Card** provides each child with an annual allowance exclusively for organized recreational activities. **Idrottsklivet**, a national program led by the Swedish Sports Confederation, works with 376 organizations across 60 communities to build long-term structures for organized sport in underserved areas. **Generation Pep** equips 5,700 schools with tools for integrating movement into the school day, including standing classrooms and structured movement breaks.

Relationships	Environments	Engagement	Emotional Growth
Students build peer connections through shared classroom movement, daily group activity, and support from community coaches.	Schools create safer, more active learning environments through movement breaks, standing classrooms, and physical activity infrastructure.	Students become active participants in their own health and learn from peers as informed agents of lifestyle and well-being.	The program supports inclusive participation and moves away from performance-focused gymnastics toward activity that all students can take part in.

ACTION TOOLKIT

Participants identified designs to be adapted within their own community settings and generated practical recommendations for embedding physical activity into youth mental health programming.

STEP 1 — IDENTIFY CONTEXT

Reflecting on your current service environment, describe your target population and the types of physical activities that would resonate in your setting.

Who do you work with? (e.g., adolescents with chronic illness, socially disadvantaged youth)

Current setting / program (e.g. community health clinic)

Country / region

Which global case study resonated most with you, and why?

Think about what sports or movement forms are already culturally familiar and accessible in your community – these will be your best "entry points."

STEP 2 — DESIGN INTERVENTION

Sketch the shape of your intervention. What will young people actually do, and how will they lead it?

Activity type (e.g., structured running, team sport, dance, outdoor camps)

Format (e.g., weekly group sessions, weekend camps, school-based program)

How will youth with lived experience co-design or lead this intervention?

STEP 3 — MAP YOUR FEASIBILITY

Use the four integration pillars to assess what's already in place and what barriers you'll need to address.

Pillar	Facilitators	Barriers
People Who will run and support it?		
Resources What do we need to do to make it happen?		
Community Fit Will young people actually engage with it?		
Future Growth Can this last and reach more youth?		



Recommendations for Action

Generated from the Action Toolkit

Research

- Conduct longitudinal studies to assess the long-term mental health impacts of physical activity.
- Investigate the biological, psychological, and social mechanisms linking physical activity and mental well-being.
- Develop culturally relevant approaches for evaluating physical activity interventions across diverse settings.
- Explore how digital technologies can enhance engagement and outcomes.

Practice

- Integrate physical activity and mental health support within youth-centered programs.
- Train educators, coaches, healthcare providers, and youth workers to promote mental well-being through movement.
- Engage young people as partners in designing, delivering, and evaluating programs.
- Expand affordable, accessible, and inclusive opportunities for physical activity.

Policy

- Embed physical activity within youth mental health policies and strategies.
 - Increase dedicated funding for physical activity-based mental health initiatives.
 - Strengthen collaboration across health, education, sport, and community sectors.
 - Promote safe, inclusive, and supportive environments that encourage active participation.
- 



“The future of youth mental health is not just in clinics and counseling rooms, but on the playing fields, the trails, and in the shared joy of movement. ”

Babu Seenappa, workshop presenter and youth leader

