

Youth Hubs and Self-Reg: A Unified Approach to Supporting Mental Health and Community

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the critical role of youth hubs in addressing the increasing mental health challenges youth and young adults face. As mental health issues within this demographic continue to escalate, youth hubs provide a vital support system that effectively cater to their unique needs. I will discuss how the youth hub, operated by our non-profit organization, Youth2Youth Global, with support from the Vaughan Con Foundation, is adopting a distinctive approach by integrating Dr. Stuart Shanker's Self-Reg® framework. This initiative highlights our commitment to enhancing youth development with innovative strategies that emphasize how individuals manage stress in various forms and recover from the energy exerted during this process.

In addition, I discuss the implementation of the Shanker Method® as a five-step approach within our youth hub to enhance self-regulation among children, youth, and young adults. The steps include 1) reading the signs of stress and reframing behaviour, 2) recognizing stressors, 3) reducing stress, 4) reflecting on enhancing stress awareness, and 5) restoring energy. This approach enables us to evaluate self-regulation and stress across five interrelated domains: biological, emotion, cognitive, social, and prosocial. My experiences in the youth hub have shown that stress can manifest overtly or subtly within these domains. Through comprehensive services and tailored interventions, youth hubs effectively address immediate mental health needs while fostering the long-term development of confident and compassionate youth. Ultimately, these initiatives equip young individuals with the essential skills needed to navigate the complexities of contemporary life.

Introduction

As a dedicated advocate in the field of equity and inclusion, I have spent the last few years striving to dismantle the pervasive stigma surrounding mental health issues in schools and within the border community. I currently sit on the Board of Directors as Chair for Youth2Youth Global, a non-profit organization dedicated to reducing barriers and misconceptions surrounding mental health. I am also the founder of the Vaughan Con Foundation, an initiative dedicated to promoting community well-being. The foundation is committed to supporting the most vulnerable members of our society, ensuring they receive the assistance and resources they need. Both organizations provide inclusive spaces where participants can explore their artistic talents, engage in workshops, and collaborate on projects that promote well-being and self-expression. Through various programs and events, we aim to foster a sense of belonging and empowerment among participants, emphasizing the therapeutic benefits of creativity.

My journey began with a profound recognition of the societal barriers that hinder open dialogue and understanding about mental health. This personal commitment has

driven my current work with Dr. Stuart Shanker's Self-Reg® framework, a comprehensive approach designed to deal effectively and efficiently with stressors. Through this framework, I aim to contribute to a broader societal shift towards acceptance and support for individuals suffering from mental health challenges. My volunteer-based team and I are engaged in several projects integrating empirical research and science with innovative community-based interventions. Youth2Youth Global is dedicated to supporting young individuals facing mental health challenges while actively working to eliminate the stigma associated with these issues. Our mission is to create a safe and inclusive space where youth can access resources, share their experiences, and receive peer support. By fostering open dialogue about mental health, we aim to empower young people to seek help and express their emotions without fear of judgment.

We fulfil our mission through a community youth hub, which provides adolescents and young adults with the opportunity to drop in twice a week for activities, resources, or simply to relax and enjoy our amenities. These include a multi-purpose room, craft space, fitness area, quiet tutoring rooms, lounge, kitchenette, and technology zone. Our youth hub serves as a vital environment that fosters social interaction and community engagement, critical components in mitigating mental health stigma and promoting well-being (Brown & Clark, 2018). The Youth2Youth Global team has designed the hub's programs to encourage participation in a variety of activities, from creative arts to peer-led discussions, aligning with findings that highlight the benefits of structured and informal interactions in mental health promotion (Thompson & Green, 2021). As we continue to develop and refine our approach, we draw upon the extensive body of literature advocating for integrative frameworks like Self-Reg®, which emphasize pathways to improved mental health outcomes (Shanker, 2016). Through these efforts, we are committed to fostering a culture of acceptance and support, where every young person can thrive.

The Self-Reg framework, developed by Dr. Stuart Shanker, aligns seamlessly with Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario's mandates, which seek to provide supportive environments for young people to develop their social-emotional skills and mental health. Each hub collaborates with local service providers and community partners to bring together existing services in new ways and deliver high-quality, developmentally appropriate, and community-based services to youth and their families (Henderson et al., 2023). The collaborative nature of youth hubs, involving various stakeholders—including educators, mental health professionals, and community organizations—reflects the multi-faceted approach advocated by Shanker. This holistic perspective ensures that the comprehensive needs of young people are met, empowering them to succeed both personally and academically (Shanker, 2016; Shanker & McPherson, 2020). Youth Hubs Ontario aims to create integrated community spaces where youth can access resources, participate in activities, and engage with peers in a safe environment. This aligns with Shanker's assertion that effective self-regulation is rooted in supportive contexts that acknowledge the stressors affecting individuals (Shanker & McPherson, 2020). In essence, youth hubs strive to provide an environment that facilitates self-regulation, allowing young individuals to process their emotions and experiences in ways that contribute to their overall well-being. "Building a supportive community around children is vital to their development and well-being. It allows them to feel secure, understood, and capable of managing their emotions and interactions with others" (Shanker, 2016).

The core principles of Self-Reg® highlight the importance of understanding individuals' physiological and emotional states, emphasizing the need for self-awareness and self-management, skills which are crucial for effective functioning in both social and educational contexts (Shanker, 2016). The structured support that youth hubs provide encourages adolescents to engage in guided self-regulatory practices, such as mindfulness and emotional check-ins, which are integral components of the Self-Reg® model. By incorporating activities that promote self-awareness and coping strategies, youth hubs can help young people navigate their emotional landscapes more effectively (Henderson et al., 2023). As such, integrating the Self-Reg framework within the operational strategies of Ontario's youth hubs not only enhances the support offered to youth, but also aligns with broader educational mandates aimed at fostering healthy, resilient, and self-aware communities (Henderson et al., 2023).

Mental Health Crisis

In society, mental health challenges among adolescents and young adults are on the rise, driven by a multitude of intricate social, environmental, and technological influences. Indeed, the prevalence of mental health issues among young people has become a growing concern (Stats Can, 2023). In 2019, 16% of girls aged 12 to 17 reported their mental health as "fair" or "poor," which was more than double the rate for boys at 7%. By 2023, these figures rose to 33% for girls aged 16 to 21, compared to 19% for boys in the same age group (Stephenson, 2023, p. 1). Additionally, Stephenson (2023) noted that among the 88% of youth who rated their mental health as "good," "very good," or "excellent" in 2019, roughly 21% experienced a decline to "fair" or "poor" by 2023 (Stephenson, 2023, p. 3). The fast pace of modern life, with ongoing technological advancements and social media's influence, brings about pressures and stresses that past generations didn't experience (Robinson et al., 2020).

According to (Twenge, Joiner, Rogers, and Martin, 2019), there has been a notable increase in mental health disorders among adolescents since 2015, correlating with the rise of digital technology and social media use. This digital era, while offering unprecedented connectivity, has also introduced challenges such as cyberbullying, social comparison, and an overwhelming influx of information, all of which can contribute to anxiety and depression in youth (Hoge, Bickham, & Cantor, 2017).

In addition to technological influences, several social factors contribute to the worsening state of mental health among young individuals. The academic pressures to excel and the competitive nature of college admissions have significantly increased stress levels in students (Robinson, Sareen, Cox, & Bolton, 2020). Simultaneously, economic instability and uncertainties regarding career prospects in an evolving job market further compound these stressors. Young people are often caught in a cycle of worry about their future, which affects their immediate mental health and well-being (Sawyer, Azzopardi, Wickremarathne, & Patton, 2019).

Moreover, family dynamics and environmental stressors play a crucial role in shaping the mental health of young people. Changes in family structures, such as parental separation or economic hardship, can lead to emotional turmoil and instability, impacting

mental health negatively (Sanders, Ralph, Sofronoff, Gardiner, Thompson, Dwyer, & Bidwell, 2019). Increased urbanization and reduced green spaces also limit opportunities for physical activities and leisure, essential for maintaining mental health (Volk, Kerin, Lurmann, Hertz-Picciotto, McConnell, & Campbell, (2017).

Additionally, many young people are struggling with mental health issues because of the COVID-19 pandemic (McCoy et al., 2021). The pandemic brought about extended periods of isolation, disruptions to daily routines, and uncertainty about the future, all of which have significantly impacted mental well-being (Robinson et al., 2020). Increased feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness are common as many youths cope with changes in their social lives, education, and family dynamics (Robinson et al., 2020). Stephenson (2003) noted that to support young people through these challenges, it is essential to prioritize mental health education and resources in schools and communities, however, such support is often hindered by the stigma that still surrounds mental health, which can prevent young people from seeking the help they need (Stephenson, 2023). Given these complex challenges, it is essential to create supportive environments where young people can access the resources, they need to maintain their mental well-being.

Given these multifaceted challenges, youth hubs can provide crucial support by offering mental health services tailored to these unique stressors. By fostering communities where young people feel safe and supported, these hubs can mitigate some of the adverse effects of modern societal pressures and serve as a valuable resource in promoting mental well-being.

Definitions of Self-Regulation

The expanding body of literature on self-regulation encompasses many perspectives on what constitutes valid measurement, and, as Burman et al., (2015) explained, self-regulation has multiple meanings, all of which differ from one another. And, as described above, there is increasing concern about the mental health and resilience of today's students (e.g., McCain, Mustard, & Shanker., 2007). Difficulties with self-regulation in the context of human development are linked to various issues, including educational outcomes, cognitive difficulties, internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety, externalizing behaviours like aggression, and physical health challenges (McCain et al., 2007; Shanker, 2007). These challenges highlight the importance of addressing self-regulation to support overall development and well-being.

Burman and colleagues (2015) refined the definition of self-regulation, highlighting the significance of clarity in this concept. Their perspective suggests that a clearer understanding can result in more targeted and effective educational practices that enhance students' overall academic and personal development. Similarly, Ross Greene (1998) approached self-regulation strategies from a new perspective that reframed behaviour, communication, and flexible thinking in terms beyond behaviour control. In this way, the approach evolved from radical behaviourism and beyond cognitive approaches into a neurophysiological approach considering aspects of evolutionary psychology and neuroscience (Greene, 1998). Stanley Greenspan redefined child development and early intervention by emphasizing self-regulation as a foundational

element for subsequent developmental stages, such as self-regulated learning and self-control (Greenspan, 2007; Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; Greenspan & Shanker, 2007). Building on these foundational ideas, it is essential to consider the work of Dr. Stuart Shanker.

Dr. Shanker defines Self-Reg® as the body's ability to respond to and recover from stress (Shanker, 2012, 2016). Shanker's approach to self-regulation emphasizes understanding and managing stressors, which is critical in fostering an environment where youth can thrive (Shanker, 2016). According to Shanker (2016), self-regulation is not about self-control but about understanding and responding to stress. His five-step framework, deeply rooted in neurophysiology, emphasizes the need to reframe behaviour, identify and reduce stressors, reflect on one's stress response process, and recover the energy spent managing these stressors (Shanker, 2016). Shanker's Self-Reg® framework (2016) not only contextualizes the differences between traditional self-regulation, self-control, and other traditional definitions, programs, or frameworks, but also provides a five-step process (reframe, recognize, reduce, reflect, respond) across various domains (biological, emotion, cognitive, social, prosocial). This approach comprehensively supports mental and physical well-being (Shanker, 2016). Similar to the principles outlined in Self-Reg®, youth hubs play a crucial role in promoting community building and fostering positive mental health among young individuals. The essence of Shanker's philosophy lies in the belief that supportive connections are foundational to self-regulation and overall well-being. Shanker explains that when a child feels safe, their brain is open to learning and engagement (Henderson et al., 2023). By creating supportive environments where youth can engage in meaningful activities and access necessary resources, these hubs align with the Self-Reg® approach to cultivate community resilience, connection, and overall emotional wellness. As Shanker (2016) emphasizes, "When we help children manage their stress, we're not just improving their behaviour; we're helping them develop the capacity to self-regulate" (Shanker, 2016, p. 78). As we explore the impact of youth hubs further, it becomes evident that they embody the essence of Self-Reg by empowering youth to thrive both individually and collectively.

Youth Hubs: A Foundation for Positive Mental Health and Meaningful Relationships

Youth hubs, which are community-based centres for adolescents and young adults, offer a variety of services, including mental health support, recreational activities, and educational programming. They are crucial in tackling mental health challenges and reducing the associated stigmas (Henderson et al., 2023). These hubs serve as secure and nurturing environments where youth can cultivate positive relationships and enhance their self-esteem. By focusing on creating inclusive and equitable spaces, these hubs actively promote diversity, ensuring that every young person feels valued and respected regardless of their background (Henderson et al., 2023). Programs and activities are designed to celebrate diverse cultures and perspectives, encouraging open dialogue and mutual understanding. Such initiatives empower youth by recognizing their unique identities and preparing them to engage constructively in a diverse world. Through these efforts, the hubs play a crucial role in shaping confident, empathetic, and socially responsible future leaders (Henderson et al., 2023).

Youth hubs' structured yet flexible environment offers a haven where young individuals can explore their identities and express themselves openly, leading to improved mental health. These hubs can provide the necessary conditions for youth to develop resilience and coping strategies, effectively improving their mental well-being. In addition, youth hubs are instrumental in building meaningful relationships with peers and mentors, which are crucial for social and emotional development.

Youth hubs are instrumental in strengthening communities by fostering collaboration among local organizations, schools, and families. By serving as a focal point for community engagement, these hubs facilitate partnerships that leverage resources and expertise to benefit all who seek support. Research indicates that community involvement plays a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of youth programs (González et al., 2019). By partnering with schools and local agencies, youth hubs can offer integrated programming that addresses both educational and mental health needs. Such collaboration ensures that young individuals receive comprehensive support, enhancing their well-being. Furthermore, engaging local organizations creates a network of services that respond promptly to youth needs, promote community cohesion, and share responsibility for youth welfare (Shannon & Johnson, 2020). Youth hubs play a vital role in fostering positive mental health and relationships among young people. [By providing access to mental health services (e.g., crisis intervention, peer support groups, workshops, counselling, and different forms of therapy), recreational activities (e.g., yoga, baking, painting, dancing) and social opportunities (e.g., volunteering opportunities, youth lead initiatives, safe space environment and mentoring programs).] These centres support youth in developing strong emotional connections with peers and adults. Positive relationships are fundamental to mental health, providing youth with essential support systems during challenging times (Bowers et al., 2018). Additionally, youth hubs often incorporate programs to build self-esteem and confidence, which are crucial for enhancing overall well-being. For instance, programs focusing on team-building and communication skills can help youth form healthy relationships, ultimately leading to better mental health outcomes (Smith & Williams, 2021).

Moreover, creating a positive environment within youth hubs allows for the development of life skills that are essential for managing stress and promoting resilience. Holland & Andre, (2020) explain that activities such as leadership training and peer mentoring not only equip youth with practical skills but also contribute to building a sense of belonging in the community. When youth experience positive interactions and supportive networks, they are more likely to engage in healthy behaviours and seek help when needed, reducing the stigma associated with mental health challenges (Holland & Andre, 2020).

Youth hubs are designed to be inclusive spaces that serve young people across a diverse age range, from early childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood. These community-based centres provide a variety of programs and services tailored to meet the unique developmental and social needs of different age groups. By offering activities that are specifically designed for various age brackets, youth hubs ensure that they remain relevant and valuable for all participants.

Inclusion, equity, and diversity are guiding principles of youth hubs, ensuring that all young individuals, including those from marginalized groups, have access to resources and opportunities. Research indicates that inclusive programs can foster social

integration and improve the quality of life for youth with diverse needs (e.g., Cavendish et al., 2021). Youth hubs are uniquely positioned to create inclusive environments where all youth feel welcome and valued. For instance, by offering adaptive programs and tailored resources, these centres can effectively accommodate the needs of individuals with disabilities and support their participation in social, recreational, and educational activities. Furthermore, inclusive youth hubs promote understanding and empathy among peers, breaking down stereotypes and fostering acceptance. By engaging youth from diverse backgrounds, these hubs help create a culture of respect and inclusivity. This, in turn, benefits not only the individuals involved but also the broader community by encouraging diversity and equity (Dunn et al., 2019).

As communities become increasingly diverse, recognizing and addressing systemic barriers that marginalized groups face is paramount. Beyond working with youth from diverse backgrounds, youth hubs often implement programs designed to actively promote social justice and cultural competence actively, helping all youth develop an appreciation for their own identities and those of others (Harris & Goodall, 2022). Research shows that inclusive practices, such as engaging families from various cultural backgrounds, significantly enhance the effectiveness of youth programs (Brooks & Smith, 2020). Additionally, by addressing inequities in access to services, youth hubs create pathways for success for all youth, particularly those from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. This commitment to equity not only improves mental health outcomes but also helps cultivate a generation of socially conscious individuals who are prepared to contribute positively to society (Siegel et al., 2021). With this background in mind, I aim to demonstrate that by applying Shanker's Self-Reg® framework, youth hubs can do more than just serve as safe spaces; they can empower young individuals to regulate their emotions and stress, leading to enhanced mental health and stronger, more positive community relationships. Such an approach would not only benefit the youth but also strengthen the community by building a more empathetic and connected society.

The Shanker Method Is A Five-Step Method For Enhancing Self-Reg®

As this Self-Reg® diagram conveys (see Figure 1), the five steps are not a linear sequence. Rather, there are multiple entry points, and Self-Reg® can be pursued in any order. Proficiency in each step grows by working on all the others. This cyclicity is the key to how Self-Reg® becomes custom-tailored to suit every individual's distinctive stress-reactivity and needs. According to Shanker, the first step of Self-Reg® is always to 'dig deeper' because you cannot reframe a behaviour until you understand it (Shanker, 2016).



Figure 1. What is Shanker Self-Reg® The MEHRIT Centre

There are five steps in The Shanker Method of Self-Reg®:

- Reframe the behaviour
- Recognize the stressors
- Reduce the stress
- Reflect: Enhance stress awareness
- Restore energy

Read the Signs of Stress and Reframe the Behavior: Our staff might notice an individual frequently withdrawing from group activities in a youth hub setting. Instead of interpreting this withdrawal as antisocial or disinterested behaviour, it can be reframed as a possible sign of feeling overwhelmed by sensory overload (Shanker, 2016). By understanding the behaviour through this lens, staff can engage with the youth to identify triggers and provide appropriate support.

Recognize the Stressors: Our youth hub creates an ideal environment for adolescents to identify personal stressors effectively. For example, we recognize that a young person might feel stressed by high noise levels during peak activity times. Staff work one-on-one with individuals to help them pinpoint these stressors, enabling them to understand and anticipate the conditions that cause discomfort. This proactive approach empowers youth to manage their sensory experiences more effectively, fostering a sense of control.

Reduce the Stress: Once stressors are identified, our youth hub is committed to offering strategies that effectively reduce them. We have created designated quiet zones where participants can retreat when overwhelmed. Furthermore, we provide noise-cancelling headphones for those sensitive to sound. By structuring activities to accommodate varying levels of participation and comfort zones, we ensure that each person can engage in ways that suit their individual needs, enhancing their overall experience.

Reflect: Enhance Stress Awareness: Facilitators lead reflection sessions in our hub, encouraging youth to explore how specific stressors affect their mood and energy

levels. Through guided journaling and group discussions, participants deepen their self-awareness and learn to recognize patterns in their emotional responses. This reflective practice fosters a greater understanding of their experiences, promoting emotional growth and resilience.

Restore Energy: Our youth hub offers various activities to restore energy and promote well-being. These include mindfulness sessions and yoga classes, which allow participants to engage in physical movement and relaxation techniques. We also incorporate creative outlets like art projects and baking sessions, providing a space for self-expression as well as emotional release. Youth can replenish their mental and physical energy by participating in these restorative activities while returning to a calm and centred state. Ultimately, these offerings help cultivate a positive and nurturing environment conducive to personal and social development.

Self-Reg® is designed to deal with all the ups and downs and variations and fluctuations of daily life. Dr. Shanker (2022) explains that a person's response to stress continually evolves, as do the stressors themselves. But once we immerse ourselves in Self-Reg® and live it, our understanding of stress and our ability to manage energy flow transforms. We become increasingly sensitive to the signs of being over-stressed and better equipped to turn negative situations into positive growth experiences (Shanker, 2022).

Integrating The Five Domains of Self-Reg®: Transformative Practices in Our Youth Hubs

Shanker Self-Reg® emphasizes the connection between self-regulation and stress across five domains: Biological, Emotional, Cognitive, Social, and Prosocial. Understanding these domains is essential for creating an environment that fosters emotional, cultural, relational, and physical safety. Shanker (2016) notes, “When we look at the five domains of self-regulation, we begin to see how stress affects every aspect of our lives and how managing these stresses is key to fostering a safe and supportive environment” (Shanker, 2016, p. 34).

Research demonstrates that stressors can arise from multiple sources, including sensory overload, inadequate support systems, and emotional distress, which can hinder an individual’s ability to self-regulate (Shanker, 2016). Consequently, adopting a holistic approach to self-regulation enables educators and community practitioners to create supportive frameworks tailored to individuals’ unique needs. By fostering open dialogue and implementing relaxation and attentiveness strategies, we can enhance overall well-being (Shanker, 2016).

Incorporating principles of Self-Reg® in community services like youth hubs allows young individuals to strengthen their self-regulation skills, ultimately contributing to their academic and personal development. Shanker (2016) asserts that “the goal is not only to improve behaviour but to help individuals develop the capacity to self-regulate” (Shanker, 2016, p. 45). By promoting resilience and empathy, we empower youth to navigate the challenges of their environments effectively.

Biological Domain. Stressors in the biological domain impact our physiological systems, disrupting optimal bodily function. These stressors include environmental factors such as loud noises, strong smells, visual overstimulation, insufficient physical

activity, and lack of sleep (Shanker, 2016). Recognizing this, in our youth hub, we have established a quiet, sensory-friendly room designed to help individuals manage sensory overload. This dedicated space features soft lighting, calming scents, and comfortable seating arrangements, creating a relaxing environment. Participants can retreat to this area whenever they feel overwhelmed by noise or visual stimuli, promoting a sense of calm and enabling them to regain focus. This approach aligns with Shanker's assertion that managing biological stressors is essential for self-regulation and overall well-being.

Emotion Domain. The emotional domain pertains to recognizing, understanding, and expressing positive and negative emotions. Stressors in this domain often intersect with challenges in the other four domains, exacerbating overall stress (Shanker, 2016). To support emotional development within our youth hub, we offer regular Emotional Literacy workshops, providing participants of all ages with tools to articulate their feelings. Activities within these workshops include journaling, art projects, and role-playing exercises designed to facilitate discussions about emotions. By fostering an environment where participants feel safe to express their emotions, we help them develop healthy coping mechanisms. As Shanker (2016) notes, promoting emotional awareness is critical for building resilience and improving mental health outcomes.

Cognitive Domain. Stress in the cognitive domain primarily arises from difficulties in processing information and organizing thoughts. Stressors such as learning new concepts, making decisions, and dealing with boredom significantly impact cognitive functioning (Shanker, 2016). Within our hub, we provide tutoring and resume-building sessions, which assist youth in organizing their academic work and focusing on tasks more effectively. These resources also include the development of efficient study strategies and guidance for preparing for future opportunities. By offering support that addresses cognitive stressors, we enable youth to feel more confident and equipped to handle academic demands, ultimately fostering a greater sense of self-efficacy. This aligns with Shanker's emphasis on the necessity of a multi-faceted approach to stress management.

Social Domain. The social domain encompasses the challenges of interpreting social cues and understanding the impact of one's behaviour on others. Stressors in this domain—such as peer pressure, bullying, public speaking anxiety, and social exclusion—can significantly affect a young person's experience (Shanker, 2016). Our youth hub functions as a safe space where individuals can express their authentic selves, offering numerous opportunities to connect with peers in a fun, supportive environment. Through designed activities and group interactions, participants can practice social skills and build meaningful relationships, which enhance their emotional intelligence. Indeed, Shanker (2016) highlights the importance of nurturing social connections, as they play a critical role in the overall well-being of youth.

Prosocial Domain. Stress in the prosocial domain relates to a child's difficulty in managing the stress associated with other people's emotions and behaviours. Signs of prosocial stress can manifest as challenges in sharing, honesty, and understanding ethical concepts (Shanker, 2016). Our hub organizes various community service projects that encourage participants to volunteer and forge connections within the broader community. These initiatives provide valuable lessons in empathy, collaboration, and shared responsibility. By engaging in these activities, participants not only contribute to community well-being but also learn to manage the stress that can arise from teamwork

and different perspectives. Likewise, Shanker (2016) emphasized that fostering prosocial behaviour contributes to developing a compassionate and interconnected community.

The youth hub creates a comprehensive framework for developing Self-Reg® skills through strategies that address each of these domains. This holistic approach not only supports the individual growth of participants but also cultivates a positive community environment where all youth are encouraged to thrive socially, emotionally, and academically. As Shanker (2016) emphasizes, “The more we understand our stressors and the way they affect our energy, the better equipped we will be to help ourselves and others” (Shanker , 2016, p. 45). This insight explains the importance of a well-rounded Self-Reg® framework that addresses individual needs and strengthens community connections.

Self-Reg® in Action: Transforming Challenges into Opportunities At Youth Hubs

Running the youth hub has been one of the most rewarding ventures I've undertaken, and it wouldn't be possible without the incredible support from volunteers, local professionals, and our dedicated student ambassadors. We operate two days a week, providing a range of engaging activities for school-age children and young adults. For the younger group, aged 10 to 17, we focus on fostering creativity and personal growth through the arts. We host dance sessions, painting classes, music lessons, and baking workshops. These activities aren't just about developing skills; they're about giving kids a creative outlet and a space to express themselves freely and reduce stress. We emphasize career and personal development for young adults aged 18 to 24, offering resume-building sessions and job-finding workshops. Our hub is more than just a service provider; it's a welcoming space where young adults can hang out, connect with others, and access resources like free Wi-Fi and computers to work on personal projects. Our team is committed to making our space inclusive and accessible to everyone, ensuring that all young people feel supported on their personal journeys.

I'm also excited about our journey to become certified by Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario (YWHO). With this certification, we'll be able to provide immediate mental health support and physical care to those in need. YWHO's Integrated Youth Services initiative fills service gaps in youth mental health and substance use sectors across Ontario, and being part of this network would mean expanding our offerings even further. Their model pushes for increased access to rapid, low-barrier services, reducing the need for youth to navigate complicated systems. By co-developing programs with youth, YWHO ensures that services meet their direct needs. The core components of YWHO align with the Self-Reg® framework by creating a reduced stress environment that offers a safe space for youth. Both approaches emphasize the importance of reducing stressors to foster well-being and provide comprehensive support tailored to individual needs, thus promoting overall mental health and resilience in a nurturing setting.

The Six Core Components of YWHO are...

Youth & Family Engagement:

Engagement empowers youth and families to make decisions about their care by embedding their voices at all levels.

Integrated Governance & Partner Collaboration:

Strategic collaboration between youth and service provider networks to manage resources and organize service delivery.

Accessible:

A comprehensive array of services accessible to youth under one roof to meet their individual needs.

Inclusive & Culturally Diverse Services:

Services that respond to the health, belief, practice, cultural, and linguistic needs of diverse youth.

YWHO Integrated Service Delivery (IYS) Model:

Co-located and integrated service across a continuum of care, accessible through a single, youth-friendly access point.

Measurement-based Care (MBC):

Standardized screening tools, equity data use, and clinical outcome monitoring to improve care for youth.

Equitable and culturally responsive programming is essential to how we deliver services locally. By doing so, we aim to implement more accessible and innovative methods of meeting the needs of young people and their families. Personally, I am committed to integrating Self-Reg® strategies into our approach, ensuring that we create environments where negative stress is recognized and reduced allowing for youth to thrive. Together, we strive to make a positive impact on the lives of those we serve by focusing on individualized and inclusive support.

Beyond the Classroom: The Influence of Self-Reg on Youth Development

The Self-Reg® framework within our youth hub has led to significant positive changes and outcomes, notably enhancing our participants' overall happiness and well-being. Our students consistently express genuine enjoyment in attending the hub, evidenced by the overflowing feedback check-in box filled with positive weekly comments. For instance, one individual shared, "I am usually bullied at school, and this place helps me forget about my troubles and make new friends" (Participant 1, 2024). Another participant remarked, "I feel more relaxed at home and school after learning some new strategies here" (Participant 2, 2024). These testimonials underscore the profound impact our approach has on their lives.

The welcoming environment at our youth hub, characterized by an open-door policy and a commitment to provide support without the pressure of attendance or expectations, creates a unique space where individuals can de-stress. The fact that new individuals join us each week, seeking a safe and supportive environment, suggests that our approach is meeting a critical need in the community. By harnessing the principles of self-regulation, as outlined by Shanker, we facilitate a space where young people can "restore their energy and find calm" (Shanker, 2016). As such, this foundation not only promotes emotional regulation but also empowers participants to develop resilience and coping strategies that benefit them both within and beyond the hub.

Comments From our Feedback Check-in Form.

To protect the identities of the individuals, we will share their comments anonymously. These reflections highlight the transformative impact of our youth hub and underscore the effectiveness of our self-regulation approach:

- "I am now thinking about what makes me upset instead of just reacting."
- "I'm making lots of friends here and putting myself out there, something I don't do at school."
- "My family could not afford extracurricular activities, so this hub is the most exciting part of my week."
- "I'm learning how to focus better, even when I'm overwhelmed."
- "I've become more patient with myself."
- "I enjoy painting here; it's a great way to express myself and relax."
- "The food here is amazing."
- "The strategies I'm learning here are helping me manage my stress at home."
- "I've gained confidence in speaking up and sharing my thoughts."
- "I feel understood here, which makes me more comfortable expressing my feelings."
- "I really appreciate the homework support; it helps me understand the material better and feel more confident in school."
- "Coming to the hub is like pressing a reset button on my bad days."
- "I find it easier to calm down now when I'm anxious or upset."

These comments illustrate our youth hub's profound impact on fostering self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and resilience among participants, validating the effectiveness of our Self-Reg framework in a community setting.

Breaking Through Overpowering Barriers: Empowering Youth Against Persistent Obstacles

At Youth2Youth Global, we are deeply aware of the barriers and challenges that youth wellness hubs in Ontario face in providing practical support to young individuals. Accessing our services can be difficult for many youths due to geographic limitations, transportation issues, and a lack of awareness about the resources available to them. As a non-profit organization, we also grapple with funding limitations that hinder our ability to offer a full range of programs and maintain adequate staffing, both of which are essential for building meaningful connections with the youth we serve. The stigma surrounding mental health remains a significant obstacle; many young people are hesitant to seek help because of the fear of judgment. Moreover, fostering collaboration between various agencies can be challenging due to differing goals and communication barriers. Recognizing that our participants come from diverse backgrounds, we must provide culturally responsive services that meet their unique needs. Alongside these hurdles, we strive to engage families in our initiatives, understanding that their involvement is vital for success. For example, parent support groups that facilitate peer interaction, resource distribution to provide essential information, and feedback surveys to gather family insights. Additionally, mentorship programs featuring certified life coaches offer guidance, while family learning activities, such as game nights, foster bonding and collaboration. While these initiatives

are designed to foster meaningful family engagement, we continue to struggle with achieving full participation due to transportation issues and work conflicts. Many families face logistical barriers that prevent them from attending events or accessing resources, which limits their involvement in the youth hub. Despite these challenges, our commitment to empowering youth remains unwavering, and we continuously seek innovative solutions to create a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Summing Up: The Significance of Self-Reg® in Building Supportive Communities

Youth hubs are critical in addressing the multifaceted mental health needs of young people by fostering community involvement, positive relationships, inclusion, and equity. These community-based centres offer essential services beyond conventional mental health support, providing integrated programs catering to the social, emotional, and educational needs of all youth. By embedding Dr. Stuart Shanker's Self-Reg framework into their strategies, youth hubs can more effectively create environments where self-regulation is prioritized and stressors are managed constructively. Shanker asserts that self-regulation is not a matter of exerting more willpower but rather understanding stress and how it affects the brain and body, illustrating the importance of a supportive framework that acknowledges and addresses the underlying causes of stress and mental health challenges (Hopkins, Shanker, & Leslie, (2017).

Youth hubs that implement Self-Reg® initiatives can promote increased resilience by teaching young individuals how to recognize and respond to their stress patterns, which is a crucial aspect of maintaining mental well-being. Within these hubs, young people learn to form meaningful relationships with mentors and peers, an approach that Shanker highlights as essential, stating that relationships play a vital role in human development, essential for building resilience and promoting growth (Hopkins, Shanker, & Leslie, (2017). The structured yet flexible atmosphere provided by youth hubs empowers young people to explore their identities, build self-esteem, and engage in community life, all while developing critical coping strategies.

As communities increasingly confront the realities of youth mental health issues, the role of youth hubs becomes more vital. These centers address immediate concerns and establish a foundation for long-term well-being among young people. By employing the Self-Reg® approach, youth hubs can cultivate an environment where adolescents develop the skills needed to navigate modern life's complexities with confidence and empathy. Dr. Stuart Shanker (2016) articulates that “self-regulation is the ability to manage stress and recover from it,” which fosters resilience. Additionally, he states, “The goal of education is to develop self-regulating students,” highlighting the importance of preparing young individuals for future success. By actively contributing to the holistic development of youth, these hubs ensure that they are equipped to face challenges and thrive in their communities. Ultimately, youth hubs serve as essential pillars of community support, providing comprehensive care and nurturing engaged, compassionate citizens ready to contribute positively to society. Shanker (2016) further emphasizes that “it takes a village to raise a child,” reinforcing the need for collective efforts in supporting the mental health of young individuals.

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Location: Youth 2 Youth Global Hub

Top Row: (Left) Michael Tibollo- Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, ON (Right) Dr. Jo Henderson- Executive Director of Youth Wellness Hubs, ON

Bottom Row: (Left) Bruno Bilotta- Chair of the Board of Directors for Youth 2 Youth Global and Founder of the Vaughan Con Foundation (Middle) Ida-Maria Carriero- Founder of Youth 2 Youth Global (Bottom Right) Cathy Carriero: Executive Director of Youth 2 Youth Global

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