CREATING ONLINE SAFETY AND RESILIENCE

OVERVIEW: NAVIGATING AND ENGAGING ONLINE SAFETY
With online communication being a leading form of how young people socialize, it is important that we take steps to create safe environments and interactions online. The following sections are designed to bring light to important considerations, educate, and provide a starting point to make next steps protecting against online exploitation.

EXTERNAL FACTORS
Even though there are numerous dangers online, many of which will be covered in the following sections, online communication can also be a major source of safety for young people, especially in this time of isolation.

Access to the internet
One’s access to the internet and/or a stable and inexpensive phone plan is a huge safety factor. This is often the means of connection needed to find a safe place to stay, access to resources and critical communication with friends and family. Even young people with their physical needs met may be using online means of connection to meet spiritual/emotional needs. This is an intensified need in this time when resources for mental health support are limited. Before we address all that may happen once online, we must look at the safety of simply having access to the internet and explore ways that we can help meet that need. Having access to the internet in the first place is an important external factor of online safety that we must not take for granted.

Unsafe monitors
Another external factor of online safety, particularly when working with youth, is the awareness of unsafe monitors. Youth may have their online activity monitored by someone who lives with them. This can be challenging and scary if that monitoring impacts a youth’s ability to be physically, socially, and emotionally safe. A young person may not feel like it is safe for them to reach out for help because of fear of consequences if they get caught. They may also be withdrawn or uncomfortable sharing information from this environment if they do not want the unsafe individual to hear what they are really thinking or feeling. Being aware of unsafe monitors or individuals in the environments of young people is critical in understanding their situations and working towards safety.

ONLINE VULNERABILITY & HOW EXPLOITATION OCCURS
Rewards (i.e. Likes, Follows, and Shares) from social media
Social media is designed to be constantly giving us rewards --“Likes, Follows, Comments, and Shares.” This causes an increase in dopamine, as the attention we are receiving acts as a social reward. Because of this, we can easily become addicted and obsessed with receiving those rewards. Individuals who want to
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exploit others are very aware of this reality and use it to their advantage. Although this is a vulnerability for anybody on social media, vulnerability is greatly increased when people are not receiving attention and similar social rewards in-person in other areas of their life.

Posting information that makes one more vulnerable
Another thing that can increase vulnerability greatly is what we post on our social media accounts. Although people should be able to use these platforms to express themselves, try to find help, and simply tell their friends and family that they are having a hard day, this can often lead to further vulnerabilities. Exploiters look for information in posts that would identify people as more vulnerable and target those individuals because of their potential weaknesses.

Exploiters on social media
If a young person posts often about their unstable housing situation or family problems- even things like posts about always staying with friends may signify to exploiters that they do not have a stable place. With this information, they have an opening to manipulate the young person by offering the stability and attention that they need. This manipulation often starts with seemingly innocent conversation, scattered with compliments, and offers for future interactions that might seem great. This is part of a “grooming” process that involves building trust with a youth, and then using it to control and exploit them.

Online manipulation
The problem is not vulnerability itself. Everyone deserves to feel what they feel even if that is lonely, vulnerable, and insecure. The problem is that exploiters are going to use that to their advantage to manipulate people. Everyone has hard days, everyone is absolutely allowed to have hard days, but how can we make sure that a hard day does not lead to victimization because an exploiter just happens to catch us that day? This is not a matter of acting like we are always confident and secure when we are not, but we must not let exploiters take advantage of us or those around us. This means staying vigilant and compassionate so that exploiters might lose their ability to manipulate. Exposing the reality that what they are doing is not okay and they cannot continue to harm people in this way.

PREVENTION & INTERVENTION
After looking at the dangers of social media it can be overwhelming to see how it has been such a casual part of everyday life. What we need is more education, more caring community, and more self-compassion. Becoming aware of the realities of online exploitation is protection in of itself. People do not like to be manipulated and arguably especially young people.
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Educate
Education puts the power back in the hands of young people, to expose and deny the manipulation of exploiters. This preventive action stops exploiters in their tracks and promotes safe relationships in general. Vulnerabilities and the social rewards that exploiters take advantage of are present and powerful, but education on online safety can protect against those factors and empower people to stay vigilant and safe.

Create community
Education is important and a critical part of educating people is creating a caring community. This means valuing the education of all people in the community including young people, and further than education it means looking out for each other. Having open dialogue about this problem and identifying and changing shaming language to language that honors survivors and victims are both important parts in making an impact. With education and caring communities, online communication can become safer and safer.

Promote self-compassion
The last thing we would like to cover here as a central prevention and intervention tool is self-compassion. As survivors, leaders, mentors, young people, case managers and advocates, we must extend self-compassion to be imperfect in this and value ourselves and others. When we genuinely value ourselves, exploiters lose some of the power they had because we do not have to rely on them for worth. Vulnerabilities are often painful and hard to face, but with self-compassion we can work towards protection and healing instead of exploitation.

SAFETY PLANNING: HAVE THE CONVERSATION
The Online Safety Guidance and Planning Tool aims to give actionable steps for online safety and help to facilitate conversation with young people about creating and maintaining safe online communication. This does not need to be completed all at once and should be used to serve young people where they are at, being tuned into their situations and feelings.

1. **Educate** staff and youth on online grooming, exploitation, and safety.
2. Make **individual action plans** WITH youth- explore vulnerabilities and safe options in a strength-based way (opposed to fear based).

Sample questions for discussion with the youth/young adult:
   a. How can you know if someone is trying to take advantage of you having a hard day?
   b. Think about if someone starts messaging you and is making you uncomfortable (i.e. Displaying excessive flattery, trying to persuade you of something, making grand gestures and/or promises). To make sure they are not trying to take advantage of you, what would you want to be aware of? How would you want to proceed?
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c. If you are feeling especially lonely and isolated one day but do not want to fall victim to the dangers of online exploitation, what can you do to find social connection? Who is a safe person you can contact? (Brainstorm ideas together and reference Identifying Safe and Unsafe People and Places)

   i. Ideas: plan an online party/ event and invite friends, create a piece of art to share with friends (spread a positive message, find an inspirational quote etc.). If staff/volunteers are working on a project for the organization, involve young people and ask them for insight in that project. Other ideas on engaging young people in a virtual world.

d. If a friend tells you about a conversation with someone online that sounds sketchy or makes you feel uncomfortable, how can you support them in creating/maintaining safety? What is one thing that you have learned or that has impacted you that you would want to share with them?

e. What are three boundaries you have or want to create for yourself regarding online communication? (not sending pictures of yourself, not sharing personal information, avoiding using certain platforms that you do not feel comfortable on etc.)

3. Plan online activities and meetings. Simply providing a healthier and safer option is a protective factor against online exploitation.

SOCIAL MEDIA SELF-CARE

We are online now, perhaps more than ever and we must make space for self-care in this new environment. Social media gives us the power to speak up and spread powerful messages, but it can also be draining, triggering, and harmful. Being drained, triggered, and hurt are vulnerabilities that add to our need for safety online. Self-care is a way we show ourselves self-compassion, and it is crucial in this time.

   • Find things to follow that bring you joy and cut things out of your social media feed that are harmful.
   • Make time to express how things you are seeing on social media make you feel (call someone, journal).
   • Remind yourself you can make a difference and that social media is not the only way to do that.
   • Be aware of your triggers and do not be ashamed if you need to take a step back from social media, even if you believe it is a powerful way to spread information.
   • Unplug! Plan things for yourself that involve putting social media away for a while and give yourself space to be without it.