

LEADER'S GUIDE



OPENING UP 2021

*Grades 6–12 SEL Playbook for
School Reopening and Recovery*

OPENING UP. 2021

Grades 6–12 SEL Playbook for School Reopening and Recovery

Leader's Guide

**Presented by
Youth Communication
with
Geoffrey Canada**

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Dear Educator,

In a year of a global pandemic, lockdowns, social justice issues, and economic hardship, our youth have faced unprecedented trauma and anxiety. There has never been a time so critical as now to support students' social and emotional learning needs and bring them back to productive academic learning. Millions of students'—and educators'—lives were disrupted as schools across the country faced the challenge of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. And now as schools begin to open back up, we ask, "How do we begin again? How do we support the healing that students need?"

I'm honored to introduce to you *Opening Up.2021*, a Grades 6-12 Playbook for School Reopening and Recovery, created in partnership with Youth Communication. *Opening Up.2021* features social and emotional learning sessions to support educators and students in rebuilding connections and school communities by having rich discussions about what students have experienced over the past year.

At the heart of this curriculum are ten authentic stories by teen writers. Each story is the foundation for one of the program's ten sessions. Each session also focuses on a particular social and emotional learning competency, which is illuminated by the writer's experience. From Laya Yagersys's story of how she copes with her increased anxiety to Christina Li's experience with racism and Asian hate, each writer's powerful story brings to light themes, emotions, and choices that students can relate to their own lives. Each story creates a safe context for students to open up and talk about their own experiences over the past year.

The need for a supportive curriculum to get students back to in-person learning is great, and with *Opening Up.2021*, you have a playbook for reopening and recovery to help take those first steps forward. I am excited for you to join me in this journey of healing.

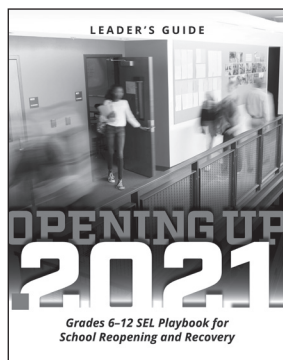
Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Geoffrey Canada', written in a cursive style.

Geoffrey Canada

OPENING UP.2021

Resources



Leader's Guide for Group Leaders or Teachers

(downloadable; available in English and Spanish)

Ten 45-minute sessions designed to develop the social and emotional skills students need to navigate a return to in-person learning, following a disruptive year inside and outside of their school communities. Using Youth Communication's story-based approach, each session includes the following routine:

- Opening activity
- Read aloud and discuss the story (with interactive read-aloud questions)
- Interactive explore the ideas activity
- Closing circle
- Writing extension
- Leader reflection

The guide includes support for how to lead a Youth Communication group and point-of-use tips for facilitating.

Story Collection

(downloadable; available in English and Spanish)

In this student component, ten young writers from a variety of backgrounds and life experiences reflect on an experience they had during the past year and how it helped them grow in some way. Selected to open dialogue about your group members' conflicts, experiences, and strengths, the writers' stories are the backbone of the curriculum and serve as models for how to build resilience in the face of tragedy.



Professional Development

Six mini-podcasts support successful implementation of the curriculum and provide group leaders with answers to frequently asked questions. These podcasts are just a few minutes each, which allows leaders to listen to them on the go or right before a session. The podcast topics are as follows:

- What Are Group Agreements?
- How Do I Create Group Agreements?
- How Do I Use Group Agreements to Teach SEL?
- How Do I Encourage Youth to Read?
- How Do I Balance Participation?
- How Do I Ask Follow-up Questions?

Introduction

In the coming months, as schools and afterschool programs return to full-time in-person learning, teachers and youth workers will meet students who have faced unprecedented loss, isolation, mental health crises, reduced support systems, and increased distress due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter viral response of last summer sparked a new awakening to racism in the United States. Navigating these challenges is overwhelming for anyone, adult or youth, but a supportive network and social and emotional tools can begin to support recovery and intentional rebuilding of school communities.

The activities and teen-written stories in *Opening Up.2021* provide opportunities for you to help youth reflect on the past year and move forward by identifying their strengths and becoming more aware of the resources available to help them, starting with you and their peers. *Opening Up.2021* is a social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum designed to spark rich discussion and deep reflection. With these goals in mind, the curriculum aims to help educators and students:

- Build strategies for reconnecting with those they have lost connection to during the pandemic
- Discuss how their relationships changed during the pandemic
- Reflect on how adverse events can lead to self-discovery and increased confidence
- Understand the mental health challenges that have arisen during the pandemic and identify supports in their community
- Describe how social inequities impacted marginalized communities during the pandemic
- Discuss the process and benefits of being allies and advocates against racism
- Understand the role advocacy can play in helping gain control in an out-of-control situation
- Set goals for the academic year and internalize why goals matter for achievement

Here are some key elements of the program:

A strengths-based approach to learning—The *Opening Up.2021* curriculum is based on true stories in which young people show how they manage and overcome challenges. While the stories acknowledge the adversity that young people may face, the major focus is on how the writers harness internal and external resources to overcome obstacles. The stories highlight teens' strengths—strengths that too often remain hidden from adults, and even from the teens themselves. The stories will help your group members recognize and name the strengths they can use to get through tough times.

Youth voice at the core—Using a story from *Opening Up.2021* is like bringing a reflective, supportive, and self-aware peer into your group. Your group members will be more likely to connect to the theme of each story because the source is a young person they can recognize.

We supplement each story with learner-centered, inquiry-based activities and discussions that prompt participants in your group to explore the story themes. The sessions do not steer participants to simple right or wrong answers. Neither should you. Rather, they help you establish a setting in which young people can find their own voices, consider diverse perspectives, and share strategies for managing difficult challenges. This process helps young people become more confident and self-aware and prompts positive changes in attitudes and behavior.

Promotes social justice—Our approach should complement any social justice work already going on in your group members' schools or communities, helping bring the big ideas of social justice into their everyday lives. However, while we fervently hope that all youth have access to education about social justice, the goal of this program is to help young people strengthen their healthy sense of identity and personal skills. We don't comprehensively address the many systemic forces at work against marginalized people, or recommend specific policies, but we hope this program plants the seed for group members to become social justice advocates.

Empowers youth—The stories and lessons here will help youth form positive identities as young people by recognizing and embracing the power within themselves and their power to make constructive choices about their own behavior. At the end of the curriculum, we hope your group members will be able to say loudly and with resolve: "As a young person, I have worth, I have a voice, I have choices, I have a contribution to make, and I have the ability to shape my own future."

Building community and relationships—Reading and discussing the stories in this curriculum will help you to build stronger relationships in your classroom community. By listening to the connections participants make, and actively seeking out their opinions, you will show them that their voices matter. When young people know they're listened to, they are more likely to speak up and share what's on their mind. When young people share with you and with their peers, it builds trust and strengthens the bonds among everyone in the group.

This happens because each story is a gateway or entry point into a discussion about an important topic or challenge that is on the minds of your group members, but that they may not feel comfortable sharing. Reading a story by a peer who experienced a challenge and found a way to manage it will help your group members feel less alone and more optimistic. By listening openly and being discreet about giving your opinion, you will create a space where young people will feel safe and even eager to talk about their challenges and explore new strategies to solve them.

Support for social and emotional development—Each session is aligned to the social and emotional competencies defined by CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Reading, discussion, and activities help participants see how SEL competencies contribute to a successful transition back into school.

Sequencing and spiraling of the SEL competencies—There are many SEL skills needed to feel confident and succeed in a diverse world, so we organized the sessions so that participants will encounter each SEL competency multiple times through the writer’s experience and through activities that surround the teen stories. Each time the competency (re)presents itself, previous learning is activated and comes in contact with new information and scenarios. Group members will build solid skills that are useful in school and beyond.

Opportunities for youth reflection—At the close of each session, the Closing Circle gives group members an opportunity to reflect on what they learned while reading and discussing the story.

Opportunity for teacher/facilitator reflection—Also, at the end of each session, you’ll find two reflection questions for you. We encourage you to think, write, or talk about them with colleagues to further your own personal and professional growth. Perhaps the best way to help young people strengthen their social and emotional competencies is to model them for the young people you work with. Reflecting on your practice will help you not only with leading your groups with this curriculum, but also in your other work with youth.

Use the Leader Session Reflections worksheet beginning on page 119 to capture your observations after each session and to reflect on how your group members grow throughout the curriculum. At the end of the curriculum, consider having a discussion with other group leaders to talk about how you can continue supporting youth as the year goes on.

The Youth Communication Approach

Social and Emotional Learning

The key component of all Youth Communication curricula can be summed up in one phrase: social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL means figuring out how to recognize and manage our emotions, care for and empathize with others, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations constructively. There are certain skills, attitudes, and knowledge that are part of understanding SEL. However, it's important to emphasize the “learning” part, since SEL is an ongoing, lifetime process of understanding ourselves and others. This program approaches SEL in several ways:

Writers show SEL in their stories—First, the teen writers model social and emotional learning for readers: The writers show how they developed a better awareness of their own emotions and strengths, how they handled conflict constructively, and how they spoke up for themselves and others. The endings aren't always happy—these are, after all, the real-life experiences of teens—but readers will connect to their peers' stories and absorb the lessons within them.

Leaders model SEL for their groups—The second way youth will strengthen their SEL competencies is by watching you model those skills as you lead the group. The professional development that accompanies *Opening Up.2021* will prepare you to lead pro-social groups that support empathy, self-awareness, and openness to diverse opinions. Additionally, the Leader Reflection activities at the end of each session will help you deepen your own social and emotional learning.

Group members practice SEL in activities—Finally, your group members get opportunities to practice SEL competencies in every session. Activities are explicitly structured to help them reflect on their emotions (a key part of self-awareness) and empathize with each other and the writers of the stories (social awareness). The sessions will also help them cooperate, manage conflict constructively (relationship skills), and think of positive ways to handle difficult emotions and situations (self-management and responsible decision-making).

While most sessions touch on several areas of SEL, each session plan is labeled with one of the five SEL competencies from CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning):

- **Self-awareness:** In this area, youth will work to recognize their emotions and how they influence behavior. By discovering their interests and values, they will become more skilled at assessing their strengths and challenges. They will work toward developing a well-grounded sense of self-confidence and hope for the future.
- **Self-management:** Growth in this area means being better able to regulate emotions (such as managing stress), control impulses, and persevere through obstacles. Youth will get practice in setting and working toward personal goals.

- **Social awareness:** Group members will practice looking beyond “me” to see other people’s perspectives and empathize with them. Youth will work on recognizing and appreciating similarities and differences in diverse groups. They will also learn how to recognize and access resources and supports at work, home, and in the community.
- **Relationship skills:** Group members will develop the skills needed to establish and maintain healthy, rewarding, and cooperative relationships. This includes interpersonal communication skills such as active listening, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help.
- **Responsible decision-making:** Youth will explore the likely consequences of various courses of action and build respect for others. Young people will become more motivated to make positive contributions and to make decisions that support the well-being of themselves and others.

Literacy Development to Engage All Readers

The heart of every Youth Communication session is a facilitated group reading of a true story written by a teen. Reading the stories aloud boosts literacy for everyone. It is especially effective for struggling readers and English language learners, who become engaged in reading because the peer-written stories feel so relevant to them.

Making meaning through a group read-aloud—We emphasize reading aloud because it is a developmentally appropriate and research-backed strategy that promotes both reading comprehension and connections among peers. It ensures that everyone has access to the text and can engage with it, regardless of their reading level. This fosters a supportive community experience with the story, which in turn helps group members connect with one another and the text.

To facilitate a successful read-aloud:

- Ask group members to sit in a circle.
- Consider starting the reading yourself. You can be a model for the group and help them stay connected to the story.
- Go around the circle, giving everyone a chance to read as much or as little as they would like. Group members may also pass. (You can jump in if needed.)
- Talk supportively with your most reluctant readers outside of the session. Encourage them to volunteer to read. Alternatively, give them a small task to be responsible for, such as reading the story title and teen writer’s name aloud at the beginning, which will allow them to participate and build reading confidence. You can also tell them which part of the story you’d like them to read before the session begins, which will give them a chance to rehearse.

Other literacy-building strategies—Reading aloud is central, but the sessions build literacy in other ways, too. We have intentionally designed each session, from beginning to end, to bolster literacy development.

- Pre-reading activities activate background knowledge and set an emotional tone that encourages respectful engagement.
- Read and Discuss the Story includes open-ended questions for the session leader to ask at intervals during the reading, which encourage active reading as participants make connections, question, predict, infer, and share multiple perspectives. We often include “turn-and-talk” questions among these. During a turn-and-talk, group members pair up and take turns responding to a prompt that asks them to make a personal connection, share questions they have about the story, or visualize what’s happening in the story.
- Post-reading activities encourage group members to make personal connections to the story, build their understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

In addition to these strategies, there is one last, important piece: *you*. As the group leader, you can ensure a safe and supportive space in which all readers can grow their confidence. This is easier than it sounds. By participating in the group, you show a positive readerly identity by modeling—and repeating—the idea that reading is a rewarding and crucial skill for better understanding yourself, others, and the world around you.

Connecting to the Common Core

Session plans in this guide help learners develop many of the literacy skills identified in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Reading the nonfiction texts engages readers and helps them analyze what they read and think critically about the ideas in the text. The sessions support this growth through speaking and listening, written expression, and reading comprehension activities.

In creating the session plans, we’ve kept in mind that your group will likely comprise diverse learners who may require differentiated instruction across blended ages and skills. We have offered ways to meet group members where they are.

Teens participating fully in the group sessions should demonstrate growth towards the standards listed on page 136.

Leading a Youth Communication Group

Being an Effective Leader

To facilitate an effective Youth Communication group, it is important to be prepared and to establish consistent routines. During each session, keep the story at the center of the learning, focus on strengths, make space for youth voice, and take time for reflection. If you follow these guidelines, your groups will thrive.

Be prepared

- Consider your space. Decide how you will set up the room so that everyone can see everyone else—a circle, if possible.
- Read the story ahead of time to gauge your own emotional response and anticipate how the group may respond.
- When you notice hot-button issues in the story, talk to a colleague and strategize about your approach. Be mindful of maintaining a safe space for all group members. You are an environment setter—you are responsible for creating the conditions for group members to share openly and safely. But you are not expected to be the expert in the room; the expert in the room is the writer. Treat points of tension or conflict as opportunities for students to share their thoughts and experiences and to learn from one another.
- Gather all materials and prepare any chart papers ahead of time.
- Plan transitions between activities. The session plan is written to guide your facilitation. Pay close attention to the rhythm and flow. Posting an agenda for each session will help you and group members be aware of transitions.
- The Explore the Ideas Activity is designed to provide flexibility. When preparing to lead a session, read and review the steps. If you don't have time, you can skip this activity or return to it the next time your group meets.

Establish consistent, predictable routines

- Sit in a circle when possible and especially for the story read-aloud and Closing Circle. In a circle, everyone is seen, heard, and included, and everyone has an equal voice (including the leader). It is easier to be present and listen actively when everyone can make eye contact.
- Keep an eye on time. Sessions are designed to provide enough time to engage in the work while keeping things moving and reaching closure at the end.
- Follow the session plan. It was designed to help you lead an effective session.
- Keep the story at the center of the learning.

- For most group members, it will be easier to talk about the writer than to talk about themselves. That's okay: They are still doing important personal reflection and learning even if not speaking from "I." Your questions will inevitably prompt group members to make connections between the stories and their own experiences.
- Never skip the story read-aloud. If you have to adjust the session plan because of time, we recommend you skip or reschedule the Explore the Ideas Activity.

Focus on strengths

- Listen for, name, and honor strengths—of both the writers and your group members. Many young people are very aware of their deficits. Be the caring adult who acknowledges their assets.
- Model a positive readerly and writerly identity by reading aloud with the group and by writing during the Freewrites and Journal Jots. This modeling shows them that reading and writing are skills that matter.

Make space for youth voice

- Support peer-to-peer dialogue. Remember that you are not the expert on these topics. The writer is the expert. Rather than give your opinion, ask for and encourage group members to share their thoughts.
- Practice active listening by paying attention to both your verbal and nonverbal communication (mirror back what you heard, don't interrupt, etc.). Remember, you are modeling the kind of positive interpersonal communication you want group members to practice.
- Practice non-judgmental communication. It is okay to call out a behavior as unsafe or disrespectful, but do not make a young person feel judged because of a poor decision or a situation they shared in the group. If you have to say something, make your comment about the behavior, and not the individual. Nurturing a non-judgmental space is a guaranteed way to get young people to open up and build trust.

Take time for reflection

- Use the Leader Reflection prompts at the end of each session to start a discussion with a colleague, do a freewrite, or simply sit and think. This reflection time will help you grow as an individual and as a leader.

How to Use This Leader's Guide

Your Leader's Guide includes ten session plans that take about 45 minutes each. The sessions are intended to be done near the beginning of the school year, but the pacing options are flexible to fit any school or group schedule. Some pacing options include the following:

- two sessions a week for five weeks
- two or three sessions a week for four weeks
- one session a week for ten weeks

You and your group will get the most out of *Opening Up.2021* if you follow the order of sessions and individual session plans closely. Each session plan has an intentional flow that will encourage empowerment and boost literacy and SEL. The session plans include specific directions for how to prepare for the session and smooth transitions between each activity.

Preparing for the Session

The information on the first page of each session plan is just for you, the leader, and should not be presented to the group. (This includes the session title, core SEL competency, story summary, learning objectives, materials, and preparation sections.)

Take note of the **SEL Focus**, which appears under the session title.

The **Learning Objectives** section outlines specific outcomes that group members will work toward in both the SEL and literacy domains. The literacy objectives are aligned with the language and concepts of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

In the **Materials** section, find a list of everything you'll need for the session. If some materials aren't available, make substitutions. For example, if you don't have chart paper, you may write on a whiteboard instead. We strongly encourage you to provide each group member with a journal. Support their use by handing out, gathering, and storing them. Try to find journals with blank covers for group members to decorate. Personalized journals encourage ownership of the writing process. Emphasize that their journals will be kept confidential and will not be shared, unless they want them to be.

Read the **Preparation** section and give yourself enough time to read the story, gather materials, make copies of any handouts, and do the reflection at the end of each session. Anything you need to write on chart paper ahead of time is in boldface within the session plan. Reading the session's story in advance is an important part of getting ready because it gives you an opportunity to think about your own emotional responses and to anticipate how your group will respond. Reading the story aloud to yourself is especially helpful to identify vocabulary or ideas that may be challenging for your group and which you may need to break down for them during the session.

Before the session begins, review the **Explore the Ideas Activity**. Because we know your group time can be limited, we have structured the session plans to give you the option to do these post-reading activities during that session, the next one, or not at all (although they're really great). We encourage you to plan and prepare for the activity regardless, so you are able to be flexible in the moment.

Getting Started establishes a consistent rhythm and routine will help your group smoothly transition into each session. Display the session agenda on chart paper. If necessary, revisit your Group Agreements set before Session 1. Use this as an opportunity to remind the group of their commitments to each other. You may choose to revisit an agreement that the group did really great with—or struggled to uphold—during the last session. Discuss together why it is important and what specific ways everyone can contribute positively to the group's success.

	Session 6 Some Have It Harder		
SEL Focus	SEL FOCUS SOCIAL AWARENESS Story: "We Work the Hardest and Suffer the Most" by Edwin Mendez Story Summary: Edwin's immigrant family became more vulnerable to financial stress and eviction from their home during the pandemic, which leads him to realize his family has to work harder than non-immigrant families to meet their basic needs.		
Learning Objectives	LEARNING OBJECTIVES Youth will build their SEL by: - Recognizing that events don't affect everyone in a community in the same way - Discussing the mental challenges of seeing people you care about struggle - Explaining systemic causes for differences in access to resources and opportunities for different people in a community Youth will increase their literacy by: - Speaking ideas clearly and actively listening during collaborative discussions - Making meaning of a text through group read-aloud and discussion - Writing to express personal connections and insights	MATERIALS - Group agreements and agenda, posted - Opening Up.2021 Story Collection, one for each group member - Flip chart paper - Journals or notebook paper and pencils PREPARATION - Read the story and session plan ahead of time. - Prepare the session agenda. - Create an open space in the room for the Concentric Circles activity. - Write up steps for Concentric Circles activity (in bold) on chart paper (optional). - Write the Dear Teen Writer guidelines (in bold) on chart paper.	Materials Preparation
Getting Started	GETTING STARTED Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted): Agenda: Some Have It Harder - Opening Activity: Concentric Circles - Read and Discuss: "We Work the Hardest and Suffer the Most" by Edwin Mendez - Explore the Ideas Activity: Dear Teen Writer - Closing Circle		

During the Session

Each session plan has five parts: Getting Started, Opening Activity, Read and Discuss the Story, Explore the Ideas Activity, Closing Circle, and Writing Extension.

Opening Activity: Prompts and questions draw on group members' personal experiences and background knowledge as a way to set a positive emotional tone for the session. We encourage you to reflect on your own responses to any questions posed in the Opening Activity, which will remind you how young people may be feeling. Thinking about the themes from their perspective will help you connect to the story and the group.

Read and Discuss the Story: The most important work of the session happens here. Reading aloud and discussing the story within the circle is a safe way to explore complex or difficult thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This is why it is essential that you ask the read-aloud discussion questions within the story. However, if a discussion starts to veer too far afield, guide the group back by saying:

- "Let's return to the story and see what happens next or what the writer has to say."

Reading the story to yourself in advance and anticipating your group members' responses can make the discussion seem more natural and less like a structured school-day lesson.

Opening Activity

SESSION 6

OPENING ACTIVITY — CONCENTRIC CIRCLES ⌚ 8 minutes

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

- After reviewing the agenda, tell participants that they are going to do an activity in which they will share their opinions with others.
- While the group is still seated, read aloud the activity procedure on chart paper:
 - You will form two circles, one inside the other.
 - Each person will be facing a partner.
 - I will read questions aloud, and everyone will have a chance to respond while their partner listens.
- Divide group members into two equal groups. One way to do this is to have group members count off by twos. (If you don't have two equal groups, you can join one.)
- Have the 1s move into the open space you cleared and form a circle facing outward.
- Have the 2s form a second circle around the first one, facing inward.
- Then, explain to the group that the person they're facing will be their partner.
- Review the specific steps of the activity with the group (you can use these steps on chart paper for group members' reference):
 - You will take turns responding to a question that I ask.
 - When one person speaks, the other listens.
 - When I say "switch," the speaker and the listener switch.
 - When time is up, I will ask one circle to rotate and everyone will be a new partner.
- Have partners greet each other by saying "hello."
- Ask the group:
 - What does it mean to really understand someone else's experience?
- After both partners have answered the question, ask the 1s to move to the right while the outside circle remains still. Then, have group members greet their new partner.

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- Time permitting, repeat the process using these prompts:
 - When is a time you were concerned about someone you care about?
 - How can a person's access to resources and opportunities affect what they can do in challenging times?
- Have everyone return to their seats, and thank group members for sharing.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY

 ⌚ 20 minutes

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

- Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person who notices that immigrants, including his own family, did not experience the pandemic the same way as others.
- Set expectations for reading the story:** Establish a reading purpose to focus group members' attention on the text. Tell them they will read to understand how individuals can experience the same event in very different ways. Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.

→ Tell the group to turn to p. 26 in their *Opening Up.2021 Story Collection*. (See the leader's copy with discussion questions beginning on the next page.)
- Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

Read and Discuss the Story

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Explore the Ideas Activity: In these post-reading activities, group members will build their understanding of the story while rehearsing behaviors that strengthen social and emotional learning skills. Group members reflect on what they read through writing or drawing while identifying and exploring the social and emotional learning skills exhibited by the teen writer. During these activities, group members also extend their literacy learning through written expression or speaking and listening.

Closing Circle: The Closing Circle is a wrap-up and a check-in for group understanding. In this go-round share, you ask the group to respond to two prompts. The first asks each group member to identify what stood out to them about the story and the session’s activities. This gives you important clues about themes or emotions the story elicits from them. It is also a good way for you to check participants’ understanding of lesson objectives.

The second prompt targets a key learning objective and highlights the SEL focus of the story. It helps to think of this question as the “last word” in the room. Listening carefully to the responses to this second question can also give you valuable information about your group members as learners and as people.

Writing Extension: The optional Writing Extension provides additional literacy practice in connection with the session learning objectives and gives students the opportunity to tell their own personal narratives.

Explore the Ideas Activity

SESSION 6

**EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY —
DEAR TEEN WRITER** ⌚ 12 minutes

During this post-reading activity, group members will make personal connections to the story and build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group:
 - “Now that we’ve read the story, we’re going to write a letter to the writer’s story. They shouldn’t worry about spelling and grammar.”
 Remind the group that the goal is to communicate their idea to the writer’s story. They shouldn’t worry about spelling and grammar.
2. Explain to group members that they should refer to the story as “Dear Edwin.”
3. Read the Dear Teen Writer guidelines aloud from the chart prepared:
 - Greeting: “Dear Edwin, I just read your story, “We Work the Hardest and Suffer the Most.”
 - Tell about the part of the story that made you think or feel a certain way.
 - Make a connection with the story.
 - Share an idea you have for how our society can treat it better.
 - Closing: “Sincerely, (Your Name)”
4. Pass out journals or notebook paper and pencils.
5. Give group members seven minutes to write their letters. Monitor the room offering encouragement and support.
6. When seven minutes are up, tell group members to finish their letters and put their pencils down.
7. Explain to the group that they are now going to do a Group Share.
8. Ask a few volunteers to share parts of their letters with the group.
9. Thank group members for sharing.
10. Then, invite group members to reflect on what stood out to them and share with the group.

LEADER TIP
Take note of participants who worry about the future as it relates to their educational and career opportunities, and privately suggest talking with a school or career counselor.

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Opening Up.2021 • Grade 6–12 Playbook for School Reopening and Recovery

CLOSING CIRCLE ⌚ 5 minutes

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

- What stood out for you in Edwin’s story, “We Work the Hardest and Suffer the Most,” and our activities today?
- Finish this sentence: “One positive thing I can do to understand someone else’s perspective is...”

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives participants the opportunity to tell their own personal narratives and provides additional literacy practice.

Write an opinion about something in your experience or something you have observed that you believe to be unfair or unjust. Include your thoughts about why it is unfair and what could be done to fix it.

In your first draft, don’t be too concerned about proper grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- Learning about social inequality can help us gain perspective about opportunities and privileges. What insights did your group members gain as a result of discussing the writer’s challenges and their own observations of the world around them?
- Think about your own challenges, opportunities, and privileges. How has someone helped you achieve a goal that seemed out of reach? How can you help someone else?

If you liked this session, visit [youthcommunication.org](https://www.youthcommunication.org) to learn more about how Youth Communication can help you support the social and emotional learning (SEL) of youth using real, teen-written stories. Our professional development and curriculum programs for grades 6-12 center the perspectives of young people and promote meaningful discussions around topics such as identity, relationships, and more.

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Closing Circle

Writing Extension

Leader Reflection

After the Session

Leader Reflection: Within a day of leading a session, take time to reflect on how it went. The first reflection prompt asks you to look outward, reflecting on your observations of the group. The second prompt asks you to look inward, with questions about your feelings or experiences relating to the theme or SEL focus of the session. The dual approach will help you reflect on your own social and emotional learning, classroom management, program implementation, and the individual needs of your teens. Both questions will help you develop positive and healthy relationships with group members.

Ways to Support Writing

Writing can be a source of anxiety for teens, so it might be helpful to explain the difference between formal writing done in academic classes and the informal writing that is part of *Opening Up.2021*. Our expressive writing activities are not meant to evaluate group members' writing abilities. Rather, they are a way for them to share who they are and what they believe with each other. Expressive writing enables a creative process of discovery and learning and benefits from a supportive and non-judgmental environment. The tips below can help you support both eager and reluctant writers in your group.

- Always write with them. Model by doing your own writing, rather than hovering over and directing them to write. This sends the message that it is about writing for meaning.
- Invite teens to share their writing, but let them be in charge of what, how much, and when they share.
- From time to time, share your writing, including reflecting on what the experience of writing was like for you.
- Listen to what teens are trying to communicate in their writing and reflect back what you hear, as in "It sounds like you're saying...."
- If teens are really stuck, become their scribe. Have them talk out their ideas and responses while you write the words down. Then read it back. Over time, do this less. For example, get them started by recording a line or two and then hand it over to them to keep going independently.

Session 1

Finding Common Ground

SEL FOCUS RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Story: “A Basic Recipe” by Jenny Zheng

Story Summary: Jenny learns the joy of cooking while at home with her family during the COVID-19 pandemic. This activity helps her find joy, gives her a little bit of control over her life, and brings her closer to her mother.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Describing how events affect relationships over time
- Discussing strategies for communicating effectively with others

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Discussing and negotiating ideas in a small group
- Speaking ideas clearly and actively listening during collaborative discussions
- Making meaning of a text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Creating and performing a role play using character motivations as the basis for character actions

MATERIALS

- ☐ *Opening Up.2021* podcasts: *What Are Group Agreements?*, *How Do I Create Group Agreements?*, *How Do I Use Group Agreements to Teach SEL?*
- ☐ Group agreements and agenda, posted
- ☐ *Opening Up.2021* Story Collection, one for each group member
- ☐ Flip chart paper and markers
- ☐ Drawing paper and pencils

PREPARATION

- Listen to the *Opening Up.2021* Group Agreement podcasts in advance to get ready to establish group discussion rules and responsibilities.
- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Create a model for the Changing and Staying the Same activity.
- Write the Role Play prompt (**in bold**) on chart paper.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Start the first session by creating Group Agreements. Then review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: Finding Common Ground

- Opening Activity: Changing and Staying the Same
- Read and Discuss: “A Basic Recipe” by Jenny Zheng
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Role Play
- Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — CHANGING AND STAYING THE SAME ⌚ 8 minutes

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell participants that they are going to do an activity to consider what aspects of an important relationship might stay the same and which might change over time.
2. Using a sheet of drawing paper, model for the group how to fold the page in half and then open it back up.
3. Next, model for them how to label one half of the paper “Might Change” and the other half “Stay the Same.”
4. Ask group members to consider aspects of an important relationship they think *might change or become less important over time*. These will go in the “Might Change” column.
5. Next, ask them to consider aspects of the relationship they think *will not change over time*. These will go in the “Stay the Same” column.
6. Explain that on each half of the paper, group members should list as many things as they can.
7. Pass out drawing paper and pencils. Have everyone fold their paper and label it using the group leader’s as a model.
8. Give the group a few moments of silent thinking time. Then tell them to begin writing. Move around the room offering support and encouragement.
9. After a few minutes, tell group members to share their lists with a partner. Each member of the pair should take a minute to share. Use a timer or wait until the hum of the conversation dies down before closing the activity.
10. Thank group members for participating, supporting, and sharing.

Might Change	Stay the Same

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY 20 minutes

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing the story as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person who uses cooking as a way to find her voice and strengthen her relationship with her family, especially her mother.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Establish a reading purpose to focus group members' attention on the text. Tell them they will read to understand and describe the writer's relationship with her mother. Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 3 in their *Opening Up.2021* Story Collection. (See the leader's copy with discussion questions beginning on the next page.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text **(in bold)**. Ask the group this question, and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

A Basic Recipe

By Jenny Zheng

During previous summers, it felt like my mom was irked by my very presence at home. So at the beginning of quarantine, I was constantly arguing with my parents.

After huge fights, once our anger dissipated, one of them might plop a bowl of chestnuts on my desk and throw in a line about their nutritional value. They did this to quietly poke themselves back into my life via food, as if these gestures could substitute for verbal communication.



READ-ALOUD QUESTION “Jenny says her parents would ‘quietly poke themselves back into [her] life via food.’ What do you think this means? What problem is Jenny facing?”

One morning, Mom promised to make one of my favorite dishes: sweet and sour pork ribs. I danced around and showered Mom with applause. Their recent go-to dishes of clear broths and jellyfish salads were particularly bland. My parents often made similar dishes for weeks on end, until a pretty vegetable or irresistible deal at the supermarket spurred them to change things up.

Come afternoon though, the plan fell through, and I found it hard to unfurrow my brows. Mom decided she didn’t want our frying pan to spit oil all over her newly cleaned kitchen, which happens when we fry pork ribs because our pan sucks. The joy that I’d been storing and building up for lunchtime suddenly vanished.

To make matters worse, my sister-in-law and her tasty cooking, full of spices and sauces, disappeared last June, when she and my brother moved out. Hooray for their newfound independence, but that meant an unfortunate future for my taste buds.

It was about time the couple moved out, though Mom and Dad wouldn’t have minded if my brother and I lived with them till the grandchildren popped out.

“If you stay here during college,” Mom sometimes said to me, “Mommy can cook for you every day, wash your dishes, and fold your clothes. What a paradise, hm?”



READ-ALOUD QUESTION “How do you think Jenny feels about her mother encouraging her to keep living at home as she grows older? What do you think this says about their relationship?”

I found solace on YouTube—first watching videos on how to make marshmallow-filled chocolate chip cookies and hot pot filled with pork, eggs, celery, and cauliflower. Then, I stuck to more simple tutorials, so as to not torture myself dreaming up the culinary possibilities available to me if I had my own place and money.

When I grew tired of drooling at the world of flavor on my screen, I tagged along with Mom to the supermarket and succeeded in convincing her to buy some of the ingredients that I needed for Korean fried rice (a recipe I'd watched that seemed impossible to screw up): ketchup, oyster sauce, Spam.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “Turn to a partner and share your thinking in pairs: Jenny explores the world of cooking during the pandemic. What’s one thing that you’ve explored or discovered over this past year?”

“I can feel your eyes on me,” I said. “Scary!”

Mom backed away but soon enough drifted near again, leaning around and peeking over my shoulders, as I again moved to block her. It was a few days after our shopping trip, and I was dicing carrots into half-centimeter cubes.

“Hurry up,” was her grand statement before stalking off. Our huge kitchen became mine again.

To be honest, I didn’t know why I’d taken half an hour to dice the white onions and carrots. Thankfully, the Spam cut fast and easily. Green onions went into the pan first, according to the video. Mom had cut some for me from our garden earlier in the morning.

As they started to sauté, Mom returned and began interjecting.

“The meat should go in first. It takes the longest to cook,” she said.

“I’m frying the flavor out of the green onions for the meat to soak up later!” which I totally made up, but quickly came to believe.

The video said to add the meat after the onions start to smell nice. I sniffed my chopsticks. Caramelized green onions smelled just like raw onions, but stronger and with the scent floating everywhere.

Once the Spam browned, I added the vegetables. Growing impatient, Mom stomped her feet. I blocked her view of the stove, snow-angeling with my arms until she gave up. Then, I dumped in leftover rice from dinner the night before, some of which flicked out of the pan amidst my hurried stirring. Mom passed over our wooden spatula.

“This should work better,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Done?”

“No. Need flavors.”

“It’s been an hour,” she sighed.

“Stop exaggerating.”

“I’m hungry!” she said, as she tried, but failed, to wrestle the spatula from me.

“You promised me, this is my cooking time. You do not interfere—don’t even touch anything!”

I added a spoonful of ketchup, then another of oyster sauce. The video called for either oyster sauce or soy sauce, but I thought one measly spoonful of oyster sauce can’t possibly flavor an entire pan of rice, so I sprinkled in some soy sauce.

Mom, still watching, yelled, “Is this dish worth an hour of anticipation, this sorry state of my kitchen, and the cost of all those ingredients?”

“This is my first time cooking!” I yelled back, stomping a foot.

Despite my protests, Mom prematurely nabbed a spoonful from my pan, with a grimace. I watched in suspense. My kitchen privileges may be unfairly abolished based on the results of this one attempt. How can ketchup and white onions taste good with rice anyways?

“Oh?” Her eyes widened. She had just been screaming at me. “Pretty good.”

“Really? I thought it was going to be super bad.” I giggled, then roared in laughter. I had gotten confirmation from my stickler mom that my cooking was awesome. *Maybe I’ll be able to cook a pork pot recipe next week*, I thought. “But wait, let me add an egg.”

“Yes, fried rice should have eggs in it,” Mom confirmed.

I forbade Mom from eating more until this chef finished cooking. She obeyed.

I gathered the rice and eggs into a matching pair of bowls. Mom hyped me up. Her previous unrelenting frustrations had turned into a string of compliments. And I agreed. My fried rice was better than anything I'd ever tasted.

Mom and I ate the Korean fried rice throughout the rest of the summer, until we both got tired of it. Along the way, we tinkered with the recipe. Mom and I agreed replacing Spam with pork was healthier. Mom still didn't think it was necessary for our meat to brown ("Unhealthy!" she'd shout, objecting over the extra time it takes). I preferred cooking slowly, since taking my time was therapeutic. And as long as I started cooking earlier in the day when she didn't need the kitchen, she'd let me.



READ-ALOUD QUESTION "Turn to a partner and share your thinking in pairs: How has a common interest helped to improve Jenny's relationship with her mother?"

Sometimes when ingredients were missing (usually the round onion), Mom still encouraged me to go for it. Korean fried rice was hard to screw up. Still, with such a basic recipe, you shouldn't leave out anything.

Before my fried rice success, I felt that Mom had no confidence in my cooking skills; she treated me like I was a brat messing with her property. But now I see in her a capacity for fair judgment, and she has grown more willing to listen and take suggestions in and out of the kitchen.

It is a miracle neither of us are erupting at each other with all the time we are spending together during the pandemic. Cooking helped us not fight so much. It also feels excellent being able to control some of the things going into my stomach.



READ-ALOUD QUESTION "What has the pandemic caused Jenny to realize?"

.....

Jenny Zheng is a recent graduate of Stuyvesant High School. Zheng lives in Flushing, New York, and enjoys computers and cooking.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — ROLE PLAY ⌚ 12 minutes

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group:
 - “Now that we’ve read the story, we’re going to perform role plays connected to the situation that Jenny writes about.”
 - “First, we’ll brainstorm some of the struggles in Jenny’s relationship with her mother. Then, you will act out one of them in small groups.”
2. Read aloud the prompt that you’ve prepared on chart paper:
 - **Jenny was upset that her mother tried to control her time cooking in the kitchen. What are some ways Jenny could communicate with her mother that wouldn’t result in arguing?**
3. Ask group members to brainstorm ideas as a whole group. Record ideas on the chart paper.
4. After you have a list of four or five ideas, divide participants into pairs.
5. Explain that each person will have a specific role and motivation:
 - Jenny wants the freedom to explore cooking and new foods in the kitchen.
 - Jenny’s mother wants to control what happens in the kitchen.
6. Give the group members 5 minutes to select one of the ideas they brainstormed with the whole group (or one that they’ve thought of on their own), plan their role play, and rehearse. Move around the room to offer support and encouragement.
7. Bring everyone back to the group and facilitate a quick discussion about how the Group Agreements apply to role plays like this. (For example, audience members should practice close listening and support one another with encouragement.)
8. Ask partners to perform their role play for the group. After each role play, ask everyone:
 - How does understanding the perspectives of Jenny and her mother help you understand their relationship?
 - How do Jenny and her mother each compromise? How can compromising help to improve relationships?
9. Thank group members for performing, supporting, and sharing.

CLOSING CIRCLE 5 minutes

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

- What stood out for you in Jenny's story, "A Basic Recipe," and our activities today?
- Finish this sentence: "One way I can strengthen a relationship with someone I care about..."

LEADER TIP

Take note of group members who may not have family support. Do not force them to share about a relationship with an adult if they do not want to. The group is new to everyone, so be sure peers are being supportive of others' home situations as well.

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives participants the opportunity to tell their own personal narratives and provides additional literacy practice.

Write a story about a time when you strengthened or changed a relationship through a shared interest. Describe what happened and how it made you feel. Include ways you worked together to communicate more effectively or solve a problem. If you have one, give a detailed example of how your common interest strengthened the bond you share.

Include descriptive details, dialogue, and scenes in your story. In your first draft, don't be too concerned about proper grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

LEADER TIP

Use the Leader Session Reflections worksheet on page 119 to record your answers and to begin a journal of your observations from each session.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- What did today's discussion about relationships reveal about your group members' abilities to collaborate with others? What are some areas they may need to improve in? How can the strengths and weaknesses you've discovered help your group moving forward?
- Think about how relationships have changed in your life since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Write a journal entry as you think about the following questions: How did this time strengthen or weaken your relationships? How has someone helped you grow? What examples can you share with participants in order to help communicate during these sessions?

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Session 2

Taking Care of Me First

SEL FOCUS SELF-MANAGEMENT

Story: “I Had My Anxiety Under Control, and Then Coronavirus Came” by Laya Yagersys

Story Summary: Laya had found effective ways to deal with her anxiety, but her challenges were aggravated during the COVID-19 pandemic. With help from a therapist and her family, Laya learned positive ways to cope during an uncertain time in the world.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Describing the mental health challenges people may experience during times of stress
- Describing ways to manage emotions and stress

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Responding thoughtfully to and seeking to understand diverse perspectives
- Making meaning of a text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Writing informally about their opinions

MATERIALS

- ☐ Group agreements and agenda, posted
- ☐ *Opening Up.2021* Story Collection, one for each group member
- ☐ Flip chart paper and markers
- ☐ Journals or notebook paper and pencils

PREPARATION

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Write the prompt and steps for the Inside Out activity **(in bold)** on chart paper.
- Write the prompt for the Journal Jot activity **(in bold)** on chart paper.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: Taking Care of Me First

- Opening Activity: Inside Out
- Read and Discuss: “I Had My Anxiety Under Control, and Then Coronavirus Came” by Laya Yagersys
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Journal Jot
- Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — INSIDE OUT ⌚ 8 minutes

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell the group that they are going to do an activity in which they will share how they are feeling at this moment. This will give you an idea of how participants are feeling and help prepare them for the emotions that may come up when they read the story.
2. Point to the chart paper, and read aloud the prompt:
 - **Use words, your body, or a facial expression to show how you are feeling at this moment.**
3. Then review the steps on the chart paper:
 - **Each group member will share their emotions one at a time.**
 - **You can use words, your body, or a facial expression. (You may also say a few sentences to explain what you've shared.)**
 - **Look and listen while your group members are sharing.**
4. Model the activity by sharing an emotion you are feeling.
5. Have group members share one by one.
6. Guide a brief discussion with these questions:
 - What is one emotion that someone else shared that you identify with?
 - How can you support other group members by sharing your own emotions?
7. Thank group members for sharing.

LEADER TIP

At this point the group is still very new, so be sure all participants are being sensitive to peers' challenges. This might be an ideal time to build empathy within the group.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY 20 minutes

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing the story as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person who is learning how to cope with increased anxiety during the pandemic.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Establish a reading purpose to focus group members' attention on the text. Tell them they will read to learn how anxiety can affect someone's daily life and different ways to manage emotions and stress. Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 8 in their *Opening Up.2021 Story Collection*. (See the leader's copy with discussion questions beginning on the next page.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text **(in bold)**. Ask the group this question, and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

LEADER TIP

As you get more comfortable with the session formats and reading the stories with your group, refer to the following podcasts for tips to enhance the experience for group members:

- *How Do I Encourage Youth to Read?*
- *How Do I Balance Participation?*
- *How Do I Ask Follow-up Questions?*

I Had My Anxiety Under Control, and Then Coronavirus Came

By Laya Yagersys

One day last year, during my sophomore year, I was locked in an elevator at school with about 12 people. It was like being in a cage where I did not know if we were going to get out, and I was worried that we might run out of air. Claustrophobia had always made it difficult for me to breathe.

We were trapped in the elevator for about 30 minutes. But no one else seemed to be bothered by it—everyone was laughing, teasing, and joking—while I was in a corner, scared and breathing heavily. Remembering that moment still makes my heart race.

The elevator finally started again, and we landed on the first floor. Walking out, I was shaking, and from that day on, I climbed six flights of stairs to my classes every day. I decided I needed to seek help from the school psychologist.

I told her about the fear that I had developed about elevators and other enclosed spaces. I could not even enter a subway train anymore. She gave me advice like trying to find a distraction on the train, whether it be reading a book or listening to music.

? READ-ALoud QUESTION “What are the main challenges Laya is facing? How does she reach out for help?”

After a few weeks, this distraction technique helped me. She also taught me how to control my breathing, which became an important basis for calming me down and reducing my anxiety levels. This eventually helped me reduce my fear of elevators.

This year, my anxiety started to feel more under control. In general, I was calmer, going up an elevator was easier, and the breathing exercises were a great help while riding the subway.

I became less carried away by fear. For the first time since moving here from Venezuela two years ago, I was able to sleep better, was more determined, and became more confident in learning and speaking English. I was no longer living day to day surrounded by constant worries.

? READ-ALoud QUESTION “Turn to a partner and share your thinking in pairs: What techniques did Laya use to control her anxiety? Why were they effective?”

But then, the pandemic weakened my grasp on controlling my anxiety.

When I first heard news of the coronavirus, I tried to stay calm. I knew that worrying too much could worsen my anxiety.

But over time, with more countries reporting more cases, my fear increased. When the virus came here, the train became a torture chamber again. I knew it could be a great source of contamination due to the amount of people who ride it daily.

With the number of infections rapidly rising in March, classes were suspended. The last day we had school, March 13, was also the last day that I went outside for over a month. Not seeing sunlight was not good for my mental health. I thought that the best thing to do was just wait for things to improve, but that didn't help.

Not knowing the future became chilling, and being at home locked up with fear-caused insomnia, which I had struggled with before. I hardly ate, I had headaches, and my anxiety levels became high again.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “Why do you think the pandemic aggravated Laya’s anxiety?”

I didn't watch a lot of news because it only made me sad and afraid to see what was happening in the world. I often thought about how a simple phrase like, “I will see you on Monday,” in a matter of days became, “maybe I'll see you in June.”

During this time, talking to my psychologist every Monday in a videoconference has become the best remedy. The first weeks of homeschooling were difficult, but I began practicing meditation, which has also helped calm my anxiety. Usually, I do the meditation and breathing exercises in the morning, to get a good start to the day. Some fear still exists, but keeping my mind calm and clear is important to my progress.

Even before the pandemic, living with anxiety made it difficult to go through a day without any negative thoughts. Days were full of senseless sadness that I never shared with anyone. But I've learned that many young people go through anxiety, and I would now like to express to them that not everything is dark.

With help, we can make ourselves feel better, although it can be difficult. I achieved this with the help of my psychologist and my family, who keep me engaged by watching movies or playing board games with me and give me little encouragements throughout the day.

I would like other kids to know that going through anxious moments can be difficult, but looking for help is a good thing, not a sign of weakness. Seek support in your family, and don't be afraid to talk to them or engage in activities with them to keep your mind busy. Don't stop doing the things you like, be it painting, writing, or exercising. I've found that any activity and routine helps my mind stay calm and not become overwhelmed with distracting thoughts.

In particular, writing poetry and stories have been a great help to me. During this time I wrote a phrase that keeps me inspired: “There is no greater loneliness than the one we impose on ourselves.” Sometimes we are not alone. Support from important people is there if we seek it, but we often make ourselves believe that we are alone. That’s when anxieties and fear can grow.

? READ-ALoud QUESTION “Turn to a partner and share your thinking in pairs: Laya shares a lot of strategies that might help other people. What do you think about her strategies? What strategies would you share with Laya?”

My psychologist also motivates me by saying, “This won’t be forever,” and it helps to keep that in mind. This is a very uncertain time for the world, but I have confidence this pandemic will pass. We have to use this experience and our good conscience to fix what we have done wrong, in relation to healthcare, treatment of the poor, and other overlooked people. Many have also realized how important it is to be with their loved ones, to enjoy nature, and to have peace of mind. We shouldn’t take these aspects of life for granted.

? READ-ALoud QUESTION “How does Laya use self-management skills like positive thinking and doing things she enjoys in order to manage her anxiety and fears about the future?”

Laya Yagersys is a recent graduate of Brooklyn International High School. Yagersys lives in Brooklyn, New York, and is a fan of soccer.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — JOURNAL JOT ⌚ 12 minutes

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

LEADER TIP

If any participants have difficulty describing their own emotions or if they have trouble coming up with a time they were challenged, suggest that they write about someone else they observed.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group:
 - “Now that we’ve read the story, we’re going to do a journaling activity about how the pandemic affected our emotions.”
2. Tell group members that this is a chance to express their thoughts and feelings without worrying about spelling and grammar. Let the group know that the expectation is that everyone writes without stopping for the full time.
3. Read aloud the prompts from the chart paper you’ve prepared:
 - **Think about a time during the pandemic that you were challenged with managing your emotions. How did you feel?**
 - **How did you handle these emotions?**
4. Pass out journals or notebook paper and pencils.
5. Give group members five to six minutes to journal.
6. When time is up, tell group members to finish their last thought and put their pencils down.
7. Explain to the group that they are now going to do a Pair Share. Ask group members to turn to the person next to them and take turns sharing parts of their responses that they feel comfortable sharing.
8. Give each group member about two minutes to share. Cue partners to switch roles after the first minute. Use a timer, or wait until the hum of conversation dies down before closing the activity.
9. Thank group members for sharing.

CLOSING CIRCLE ⌚ 5 minutes

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

- What stood out for you in Laya’s story, “I Had My Anxiety Under Control, and Then Coronavirus Came,” and our activities today?
- Finish this sentence: “One way I’ll try to manage my emotions and fears is...”

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives participants the opportunity to tell their own personal narratives and provides additional literacy practice.

Write an instruction guide to help others manage their emotions. Give examples from the story you read today. What strategies does the writer use to manage her anxiety and think positively? You can also include your own ideas for ways to manage stress. Include suggestions to help with controlling emotions as we move forward after the pandemic. Try to keep your language positive and inspiring.

In your first draft, don’t be too concerned about proper grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- Some group members may be struggling with mental health challenges. Take note of these participants and be mindful of their feelings. Refer them to your school or organization’s mental health professionals.
- What strategies to manage emotions did your group members gain from the session? What did the group discussion suggest to you about group members’ readiness to discuss sensitive or personal topics? How are group members doing in supporting each other?
- How has the pandemic affected how you manage your own emotions? Do you have any strategies you used that you can share with participants?

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Session 3

Appreciating Family, Appreciating Me

SEL FOCUS SELF-AWARENESS

Story: “Our Close Call with COVID” by Shadman Rakib

Story Summary: Shadman’s family was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic when his grandmother had to be hospitalized one month into the pandemic because of lung disease. Her absence, combined with the added complications of the pandemic, deepened his appreciation for his family and his health.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Discussing the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on families
- Recognizing strengths and using them during challenging times

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Writing informally about their opinions
- Making meaning of a text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Speaking ideas clearly and actively listening during collaborative discussions
- Responding thoughtfully to, and seeking to understand, diverse perspectives

MATERIALS

- ☐ Group agreements and agenda, posted
- ☐ *Opening Up.2021* Story Collection, one for each group member
- ☐ Flip chart paper and markers
- ☐ Scrap paper, pencils, and large waste basket, box, or bin

PREPARATION

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Write the Toss One, Take One prompt **(in bold)** on chart paper.
- Write and post the four chart papers for the Gallery Walk, using the prompts **(in bold)** in the session plan.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: Appreciating Family, Appreciating Me

- Opening Activity: Toss One, Take One
- Read and Discuss: “Our Close Call with COVID” by Shadman Rakib
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Gallery Walk
- Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — TOSS ONE, TAKE ONE ⌚ 8 minutes

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell the group that they are going to do an activity that gathers everyone's ideas and allows them to hear multiple viewpoints.
2. Pass out pieces of scrap paper. Tell group members not to write their names on the papers. This is an anonymous activity.
3. Ask them to write a response to finish the following sentence, which you have written on chart paper:
 - **One way my family was impacted because of the COVID-19 pandemic was...**
4. Give group members three minutes to think and write their responses.
5. After group members have written their responses, tell them to crumple them into paper balls and toss them into the wastebasket, box, or bin in the middle of the circle.
6. Then tell each of them to retrieve an anonymous response from the container and return to their seats. As an alternative, walk around the circle with the container and have each group member blindly pick a paper ball. (If a group member happens to choose their own response, it's OK because no one will know.)
7. Before having the group read their responses aloud, invite them to listen for similarities, differences, or personal connections.
8. Either by going around in a circle or by asking for volunteers, each group member reads the response on their paper.
9. After all responses have been read, facilitate a brief discussion about the group members' responses to what they heard.
10. Thank group members for sharing.

LEADER TIP

Take note of how participants react to the anonymous responses that are shared, particularly responses that might cause others in the group harm or to be upset. If support around certain topics is needed, be sure to provide it.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY ⌚ 20 minutes

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing the story as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person whose family was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic when his grandmother had to be hospitalized a month into the pandemic.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Establish a reading purpose to focus group members' attention on the text. Tell them they will read to understand how the writer finds strength to face a difficult situation. Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 12 in their *Opening Up.2021 Story Collection*.
(See the leader's copy with discussion questions beginning on the next page.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question, and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

Our Close Call with COVID

By Shadman Rakib

It was the third day of Ramadan and about one month into the coronavirus pandemic. The ear-piercing racket of ambulance sirens resonated constantly throughout my New York City neighborhood of Jamaica, Queens.

But another sound troubled me even more. My 76-year-old grandma was gasping for air. She sat slouched on her bed, leaning against the wall. The heaviness of her breath tugged her down. “What happened?” I asked.

“I’m fine. I just took a shower,” she said.

“No you’re not. I’m telling mom. Why didn’t you listen to her?”

My grandma has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or COPD, a lung disease. Humid air, like from a hot shower, can cause her symptoms to worsen. She had already been hospitalized four times in the past six months.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “How do you think Shadman feels about what is going on around him?”

Before the pandemic, my parents took her to the hospital without hesitation. But in April 2020, as the city was on lockdown, my parents worried that she could develop pneumonia if she wasn’t hospitalized. And if they took her to the hospital now, we thought she might contract COVID.

“I couldn’t stand not showering for three weeks,” she said.

“Well, it’s better than going to the hospital,” I replied.

Later that night, my grandma developed a fever and couldn’t sleep.

“Should we take her to the hospital?” my mom said.

“Should we?” my dad questioned. “What if she gets the coronavirus there?”

I saw on the news that the cases were exponentially growing, and the hospitals were so full they had added tents to accommodate the surge in patients. Many hospitals lacked beds, machines, and medical supplies like personal protective equipment. Still, my grandma’s condition seemed to be worsening by the minute, and I didn’t know if she would recover without being treated in a hospital.

“You can’t keep her home like this,” I said.

My dad called the doctor, who prescribed medicine to help treat her. He went to the pharmacy and bought the medicine and a nebulizer—which helps patients by making medication inhalable.

My grandma wasn't getting any better, though. The rumbling sound of mucus in her airway echoed throughout the apartment. Her restlessness increased. I had never seen her like this because my parents generally took her to the hospital right away when she got this bad, and there, she received the care she needed.

My mom and I sat up with her all night. I didn't want to lose her. She's the only grandparent I have. She always helped around the house, even if it was exhausting for her, and tried to help relatives far off in Bangladesh. She gave away a lot of her money, even when she barely had any.

The next day, my parents called her physician again, and he recommended they take my grandma to an urgent care facility. So, my parents and my older brother drove her there.

I didn't know if I would see her again, and that frightened me.

I spent the day by the phone with my sister, answering calls from concerned relatives. They sent us their thoughts and prayers. Their calls were comforting and made me hopeful.



READ-ALoud QUESTION "What strengths does Shadman use to help out with the challenge he and his family are facing?"

But when I wasn't on the phone, I became preoccupied with my thoughts and neglected my daily chores of sweeping the floor, making the beds, and dusting the furniture. I couldn't eat; my belly rumbled from emptiness. The chrome-plated clock in the living room ticked louder and louder, almost driving me mad as I waited for updates about my grandma.

I decided to kneel for a set of prayers in the living room with my sister. When my family finally came home, I continued to pray. My mom was sobbing with her face buried in my brother's arms. When she raised her head, I saw her red, watery eyes and faint streams of tears on her cheeks. Right away, my sister broke her prayer and embraced my mom.

“What happened?” I heard my sister ask. My mom swayed her head and her mouth trembled. My father was outside parking the car.

Should I break my prayer? I thought.

The pandemic deprived us of Ramadan congregation activities like praying in a mosque and volunteering. Still, praying at this time of day was important to me. I rushed through my daily prayer.

I raised my hands and positioned them together, so that my hands created a valley. I lowered my gaze onto my hands and begged: “Oh Allah, help my grandmother. Keep her safe. Keep all of us healthy during this time. Please cure our sicknesses. Please forgive us for our sins. Help my grandmother. Help my grandma. Help my nana.”



READ-ALoud QUESTION “How do you think prayer helps Shadman?”

Then, I folded the soft, bright red praying mat and put it away in my grandma’s room, where my family stored the prayer mats. There, I found my mom sitting on grandma’s bed weeping.

My mom told me she and grandma had waited inside the car until they called my grandma’s number. As soon as the nurse examined her and found dangerously low blood oxygen levels, she called 911.

My mom begged them not to take my grandma. She said she would buy everything necessary to take care of my grandma at home, regardless of the cost. But they insisted she needed hospitalization.

For the rest of the day, whenever I entered my grandma’s room, I felt a void inside of me. I no longer saw her sitting there, cracking betel nuts and quarreling with my sister. It reminded me of when I was 10 years old and my grandma left for Dubai. I remember pressing my face into my pillow and crying myself to sleep for a whole week because I missed her so much.

Now, she was once again absent from my life. With her in the hospital, I cried myself to sleep again because I didn’t know if she would leave me forever this time.

But then my prayers were answered. My grandma didn’t have COVID. She had a COPD exacerbation. They gave her steroids and supplemental oxygen.

My grandma didn't have a phone with her at the hospital, and no one was allowed to visit her there. Thankfully, the nurse in charge was nice and let my grandma use her phone. When I talked to her, she told me how busy the hospital was and how eager she was to leave.

My grandma got better and was discharged from the hospital a week later.

A few months before, I would never have expected a pandemic to force us into quarantine. I would never have thought that going to a hospital could be dangerous.

Until the majority of Americans are vaccinated, I've decided I need to spend more time with my family; I do not know what the future holds for us. My grandma still suffers from COPD, but there haven't been any more close calls because she has been more careful to avoid anything that can cause exacerbations.

Ramadan is about appreciating what we have and giving back to the community. This pandemic certainly has made me appreciate my family and my health. In a way, we can all give back to the community by quarantining, possibly saving countless lives. The pandemic has not ended, so we should continue to follow safety protocols like wearing masks and social distancing. We must all do our part.

? READ-ALoud QUESTION "Shadman mentions that the pandemic has made him appreciate his family and his health. What has the pandemic made you appreciate?"

Shadman Rakib will be a senior at Stuyvesant High School in 2021. Rakib spends his free time volunteering and learning about engineering

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — GALLERY WALK 🕒 12 minutes

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

LEADER TIP

During the activity, circulate around the room, looking for participants who need help entering the conversation. While you don't want to pressure individuals, they may need encouragement in order to feel confident enough to speak up.

1. Tell the group that they are going to do an activity where they consider how their personal and cultural strengths can help them cope with challenges.
2. While the group is still seated, review the directions. Tell them:
 - “I have posted four posters around the room, each with a prompt on it.”
 - “You will spend two minutes at each poster in small groups, discussing and writing your responses to each question on chart paper.”
 - “When I call time, you will rotate one poster clockwise with your group. At your new poster, read what has been written.”
 - “Add your ideas and comment on what’s already there with new thoughts or questions.”
 - “Wait for more instructions when you have completed a full lap and returned to your first poster.”
3. Read the numbered signs in each corner aloud, checking for understanding about each choice:
 - 1 - When faced with challenges, my feelings affect my behavior by...**
 - 2 - Being optimistic during a crisis can help because...**
 - 3 - I felt proud when I helped my family or support system...**
 - 4 - Strengths help us deal with challenges by...**
4. Divide the group into four groups by having them count off 1 to 4, directing each group to its numbered poster (1s go to poster 1, etc.).
5. Hand out one or two markers per group. Tell them to discuss their responses to the prompt at their poster and take notes while you keep track of time.
6. While the small groups write and discuss, move around the room to listen and support them.
7. In two minutes, or when the hum of conversation dies down, regain everyone’s attention, and tell all groups to rotate on spot clockwise.
8. Repeat steps 6 and 7 until groups have traveled to all posters.
9. When groups are at their first poster again, regain their attention. Tell them:
 - “Walk around the room, and read what your peers have written.”
10. Time permitting, have group members share points of agreement or disagreement, new ideas, or questions.
11. Have group members return to their seats, and thank them for sharing.

CLOSING CIRCLE 🕒 5 minutes

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

- What stood out for you in Shadman's story, "Our Close Call with COVID," and our activities today?
- Finish this sentence: "One strength I contribute to my family or support system is..."

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives participants the opportunity to tell their own personal narratives and provides additional literacy practice.

Think about a time when your family or a group of people you care about faced a difficult situation. Write a story about how it changed your perspective about them or yourself in a positive way. If you haven't had this experience, you can create a fictional character. Describe what happened and how your perspective changed from the beginning of the situation to the end. Use Shadman's story as a model. Include descriptive details, dialogue, and scenes in your story.

In your first draft, don't be too concerned about proper grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

LEADER TIP

Youth who do not have family support often look to school or friend groups for their support systems. Create an accepting climate in your group with this in mind.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- How well did group members express their perspectives and individual strengths today? Now that you've had a few sessions to get to know them, have you noticed if any group members may need more support from you in the coming sessions? How will you support them?
- Think about your own strengths. How can you model or discuss these strengths with group members to help them become more conscious of their strengths?

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Session 4

Having Empathy and Gratitude

SEL FOCUS SOCIAL AWARENESS

Story: “My Mom Works in a Hospital, and We Are Scared” by Layla Hussein

Story Summary: Layla watches her mother, and only parent, face exhaustion and worry while working as a lab technician at their local hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Discussing the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on families
- Explaining the impact that the pandemic had on people’s attitudes about themselves and others
- Increasing their empathy for others’ experiences

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Writing informally about their opinions
- Making meaning of a text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Speaking ideas clearly and actively listening during collaborative discussions
- Responding thoughtfully to, and seeking to understand, diverse perspectives

MATERIALS

- ☐ Group agreements and agenda, posted
- ☐ *Opening Up.2021* Story Collection, one for each group member
- ☐ Flip chart paper and markers
- ☐ Journals or notebook paper and pencils

PREPARATION

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Write the Freewrite and Pair Share prompt **(in bold)** on chart paper
- Make copies of the Empathy Map handout, one for each group member (p. 56).

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: Having Empathy and Gratitude

- Opening Activity: Freewrite and Pair Share
- Read and Discuss: “My Mom Works in a Hospital, and We Are Scared” by Layla Hussein
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Empathy Map
- Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — Freewrite and Pair Share 🕒 8 minutes

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell the group that they are going to do an activity that will help them personally connect to the story they're going to read.
2. Explain that they're going to do a Freewrite. Remind the group that this is a chance to express their thoughts and feelings without worrying about spelling and grammar. Let them know that the expectation is that everyone writes without stopping for the full time.
3. Read aloud the Freewrite prompt you prepared on chart paper:
 - **What does the word *empathy* mean to you?**
4. Pass out journals or notebook paper and pencils.
5. Give group members four minutes to respond to this prompt. (They can have the option of writing lists and/or drawing with labels. This supports diverse learners.)
6. When three minutes have passed, tell group members to finish their last thought and put their pencils down.
7. Explain to the group that they are now going to do a Pair Share. Ask group members to turn to the person next to them and take turns sharing the parts of their responses they feel comfortable sharing.
8. Give each member of the pair about a minute to share. Cue partners to switch roles after the first minute. Use a timer or wait until the hum of conversation dies down before closing the activity.
9. Thank group members for sharing.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY ⌚ 20 minutes

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing the story as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person who was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic because her mother, and only parent, worked in a hospital during the pandemic.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Establish a reading purpose to focus group members' attention on the text. Tell them they will read to understand the writer's perspective about the pandemic and how it affects her. Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 17 in their *Opening Up.2021 Story Collection*.
(See the leader's copy with discussion questions beginning on the next page.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

My Mom Works in a Hospital, and We Are Scared

By Layla Hussein

My mother works as a laboratory technician at Montefiore Medical Center. She runs tests on blood samples to help doctors diagnose diseases such as cancer, HIV, and diabetes. Her 10-hour days are demanding; she must remain focused so as not to make any mistakes, and she communicates with doctors and nurses about her findings.

Before the pandemic, she always managed to make time for my brother and me on her days off. We often danced and exercised together in our living room. Or we'd just talk and laugh and reminisce.

My earliest memories are with my mother exploring Egypt, Washington D.C., and Ethiopia, or shopping together in Manhattan and attending Six Flags. We are so close that we often sleep together.

My mother is my best friend and a role model. I admire her for maintaining an optimistic, bubbly personality, even after overcoming so many challenges as a child growing up in Ethiopia, and then emigrating here to the United States. She puts a smile on my face because a smile is always glued on hers.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “How does Layla feel about her mother? What experiences is she grateful for?”

But since the pandemic, my jubilant mother is slowly unraveling into a traumatized and frightened being.

Now, when she enters the hospital, she is required to take her temperature. Then she has to put on heavy medical clothes, including a long plastic cap covering her entire face, gloves, and an N-95 mask.

It is excruciatingly hot for her to wear all of that all day. At the end of every day, her face has deep marks from the N-95 masks pressing on it for so long.

Before the pandemic, her results would vary; the blood of patients was positive or negative for different diseases. But these days, so many blood samples test positive for the same disease, COVID-19. This is emotionally draining for her.

When she must leave the lab to talk to doctors about her findings, she passes rooms reading “COVID PATIENTS ONLY.” She takes a glance and sees the space packed with ill patients who appear on the verge of death and doctors with worried facial expressions.

What's more, when she passes rooms with non-COVID patients, she sees people who look like they do not receive much treatment. The patients wait in their hospital beds while many doctors are with other COVID patients. One of her coworkers, for example, was receiving treatments for back pain that allowed her to work. Now, that has rarely been possible and she was out of work for 17 days.

While I've read that conditions at other hospitals are improving, my mom tells me that is not yet the case at Montefiore. When entering and leaving the hospital, she encounters a truck designated to store the dead bodies.

With funeral gatherings forbidden, hospital workers wrap the bodies with special paper to store in the truck. Eventually, they will be buried or cremated.

Her lunch time is no longer a time for her to unwind, freely laugh, and chat with her coworkers in their lunchroom. Recently some colleagues tested positive for the virus, and although they recovered from it, my mother insists on distancing herself from them.

So my mother eats in the staircase and disinfects the floor and the chair. She says it is the only empty space she can find where she feels safe.

Since all her days look like this, she comes home paranoid and exhausted. She cannot even fake a smile. When there is an opportunity for her to spend time with my brother and me, she mostly uses that time to sleep. My positive attitude revolved around my mother, so seeing her like this has been upsetting.

 **READ-ALoud QUESTION** “How is Layla impacted by what her mother is experiencing?”

We live in Co-op City in the Bronx which is listed at number eight among New York neighborhoods with the highest coronavirus death rates. Overall, the Bronx is the hardest hit borough, so while other hospitals may have improved conditions, my mother tells me the conditions at Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx are still deteriorating. I am petrified knowing she runs a greater risk of catching the virus than people who may live and work elsewhere.

Thinking about life without my mother brings tears to my eyes because she is the only person I have in this world to take care of me. She is my only family in America. It is just me, my brother, and my mother in this crazy world.

Thinking of life without her is scary because my brother and I could end up homeless. I rely on my mother so much. I need her to stay strong no matter what, but when I have to accept that my mother is a human being and not some invincible Marvel character, I get extremely worried.



READ-ALOUD QUESTION “What has the pandemic caused Layla to realize about her mother and herself?”

Layla Hussein is a 16-year-old junior at Fordham High School for the Arts whose interests range from journalism and photography to computer science and entrepreneurship. She is the Founder and Executive Director of Journals of Color, a Bronx-based literary magazine that provides a platform for Bronx teenagers to creatively express their voices.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — EMPATHY MAP 🕒 12 minutes

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group:
 - “Now that we’ve read a story in which the writer shares her family’s experience during the pandemic, we’re going to do an activity that helps us understand her perspective. When we step into another person’s experience, we can take on new perspectives.”
2. Pass out the Empathy Map handout (p. 56). Explain to the group that the purpose of this activity is to think about Layla’s perspective in response to how her family was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Review the importance of having empathy for others by saying to the group:
 - “Learning to develop empathy helps us develop positive relationships with the people around us. We also gain a new appreciation for what we have in common with people whose experiences are different from our own.”
3. Go over the directions on the handout with group members, and ask if they have any questions.
4. Explain to group members that they should refer to the story when writing.
5. Move around the room to offer support and answer any questions. Group members should complete this activity independently in six minutes.
6. After six minutes have passed, invite group members to share their Empathy Map responses in pairs.
7. Time permitting, ask for volunteers to share with the whole group.
8. Thank group members for sharing.

LEADER TIP

This might be an emotional exercise for participants who experienced difficult family circumstances during the pandemic. Pay attention to the feelings group members might be having and offer extra support when needed.

CLOSING CIRCLE 5 minutes

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

- What stood out for you in Layla’s story, “My Mom Works in a Hospital, and We Are Scared,” and our activities today?
- Finish this sentence: “One positive thing that comes out of understanding someone else’s perspective is...”

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives participants the opportunity to tell their own personal narratives and provides additional literacy practice.

Write a letter to Layla about how reading her life experience helped you develop gratitude in your own life. Explain how thinking about what she went through changed your outlook on a similar situation you experienced or how it helped you to focus on the positives in your life.

Include a greeting (i.e., “Dear XXXX”) and a closing (i.e., “Sincerely, [Your Name]”). In your first draft, don’t be too concerned about proper grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

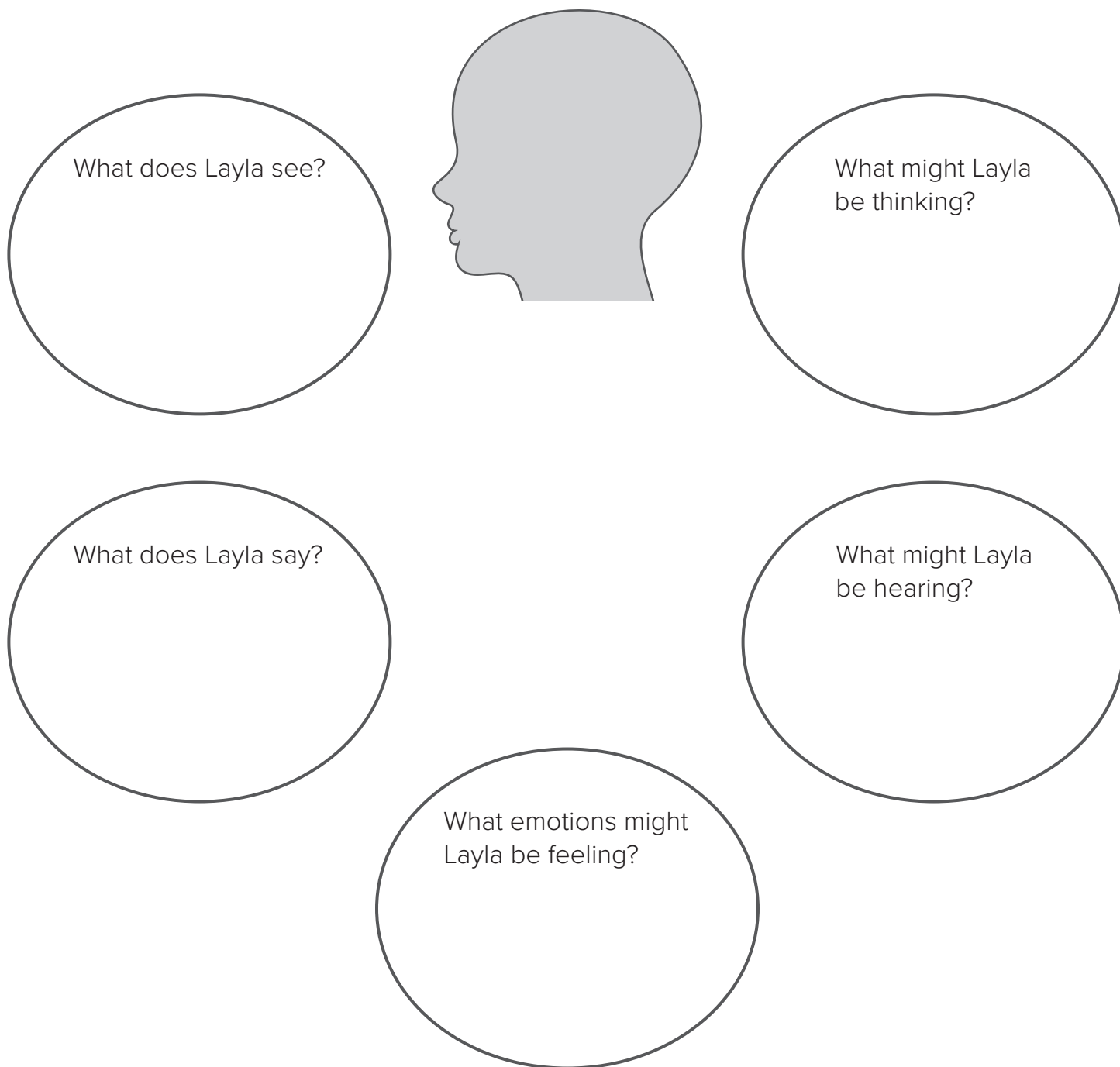
- What did today’s activities reveal about your group members’ social and emotional learning, particularly their social awareness? Did they show empathy for the writer? What areas may they need to improve in?
- Reflect further on the Closing Circle question. How are you proactive in understanding others’ perspectives? What steps do you take to understand the perspectives of your group?

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Empathy Map

Directions: Use an empathy map to better understand Layla’s perspective. Start by describing the situation Layla is going through. Then answer each question. You can use quotes and words, or you can write actions and behaviors you notice in her writing.

Situation _____;



The diagram consists of a central gray silhouette of a person's head in profile, facing left. Surrounding this central figure are five large, empty circles, each containing a question to guide the user's reflection on Layla's perspective:

- Top-left circle: What does Layla see?
- Top-right circle: What might Layla be thinking?
- Bottom-left circle: What does Layla say?
- Bottom-right circle: What might Layla be hearing?
- Bottom-center circle: What emotions might Layla be feeling?

Session 5

I Cope in My Own Way

SEL FOCUS SELF-MANAGEMENT

Story: “Mourning, After” by Jennifer Nghe

Story Summary: After losing her beloved grandmother, Jennifer decides to confront her feelings of grief and honor her grandmother’s memory.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Recognizing the emotions experienced during grief or loss
- Discussing the unique challenges of the process of grieving and the outlets and resources available for help

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Making meaning of a text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Writing to express personal connections and insights

MATERIALS

- ☐ Group agreements and agenda, posted
- ☐ *Opening Up.2021* Story Collection, one for each group member
- ☐ Drawing paper, colored pencils or markers, and tape
- ☐ Journals or notebook paper and pencils

PREPARATION

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Create a model for the Word Collage.
- Make copies of the Teen Talk handout, one for each group (p. 67).

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: I Cope in My Own Way

- Opening Activity: Word Collage
- Read and Discuss: “Mourning, After” by Jennifer Nghe
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Teen Talk
- Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — WORD COLLAGE ⌚ 8 minutes

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell participants that they are going to do an activity that will describe the group's ideas about grief and loss.
2. Put group members into pairs.
3. Give each pair a sheet of drawing paper, colored pencils or markers, and tape.
4. Ask each pair to think of words they would use to describe their experience with grief, how they have coped with loss, or what they have observed about someone else's grief from what they have seen on TV or in movies. The grief may involve losing a loved one, a pet, or other types of loss.
5. Explain that each pair will have five minutes to create a collage of the words on their drawing paper and tape their collage on a wall with the rest of the group's collages to make one large group collage.
6. Once the group collage is complete, spend the remaining three minutes discussing the words the group uses to describe grief.
7. Thank group members for sharing.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY ⌚ 20 minutes

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing the story as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person who realizes that she is having trouble coping with the loss of a loved one and that she needs help.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Establish a reading purpose to focus group members' attention on the text. Tell them they will read to understand the writer's experience with grieving. Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 21 in their *Opening Up.2021 Story Collection*.
(See the leader's copy with discussion questions beginning on the next page.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question, and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

Mourning, After

By Jennifer Nghe

The last time I saw my grandmother was in 2014, when she was 92 and I was 10. It made her so happy to watch us grandkids play in her backyard, having fun. She laughed and giggled like crazy.

My grandmother lived in Minnesota. Unfortunately, we couldn't visit her that often because plane tickets are expensive. But she still had a profound influence on me, and I felt close to her despite the distance.

She had an amazing smile. I still remember the way her eyes squinted and her lips curled up with one slight movement. Although she had aches and pains that accompanied medical issues, she seemed to never let them get in the way of a good time. She was the life of the party at weddings or when we just went out for dinner. She had a bubbly personality and a soft, frequent laugh.

Around the time of that last visit, I had become consumed with being the top student in class. Even on vacation, I worried about my grades. But seeing my grandmother's positive attitude helped me snap out of it. During that vacation, I became less obsessed with test scores.

Grandma taught me other lessons. She told us not to hold grudges or worry so much about what others think of you. That was big for me as I navigated adolescence and the cruelties that often come with it.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “What does Jennifer learn from her grandmother about how to cope with the difficulties we face in life?”

When we visited her, I loved how she constantly checked up on me at night, opening and closing the door silently, turning the heat down when it was too hot, or putting blankets over me when the air conditioning was on. I'd do anything to be able to share those small moments one last time with her.

So, when my grandmother died last September, it was painful. When we first got the phone call, my muscles went numb, my legs felt weak, and I couldn't breathe. Even though she was 97, I refused to think of death as an option for her.

My cousin told my family that Grandma kept gasping for air during her last 24 hours, almost as if she was drowning underwater, desperately trying to survive. I can still hear the loud beeping from my grandmother's ventilator from one of our last conversations over the phone, and then the even louder gasps of air coming from her mouth when she whispered “daughter” to me.

A year later, it still feels like I just learned about my grandmother's death and the aftermath of emotions. Purchasing the black outfits. Getting ready for her memorial service. Driving to the funeral home, and then stepping out of the car, remembering the cold, thick air blowing my hair away from my face, sending chills up my arms. That breeze felt like a sign, like my grandmother knew we were coming and she was making her presence known.

The doors to the funeral home were open, and I looked at the large, flat-screen TV with her name on it. My legs felt like jelly, my body went cold, and I fell into my sister's arms.

We walked through the wide black doors, onto the maroon, diamond-patterned carpet. There was a thick smoke coming out of the room and the strong scent of traditional Vietnamese fortune sticks burning.

I felt a tug in my heart each time her name was said and a prayer was called out.

Despite the pain on that day, the coping process that followed was harder. I didn't want to talk about her death with anyone. I refused to listen to my family talk about her, even if it was about the beautiful memories we had together.

Months later, I still cried a lot. Why did it seem like everyone was accepting her death except me? I kept feeling that it was my fault she left, because I wasn't there that much for her. When she wasn't in my thoughts, guilt took over, like I was forgetting her.

I started pushing away people who offered me help, including my closest friends. I shut down my feelings and gave off bold energy, such as snapping at them for no reason. Behaving this way felt reasonable because putting up this act was easier than having to confront my feelings.

I wasn't following the example set by my grandmother. I decided I needed help.



READ-ALoud QUESTION "How is Jennifer dealing with the loss of her grandmother? How are her actions helping or hurting her?"

My math teacher held sessions after school where students can talk privately about anything. During quarantine, we were on a conference call, and I mentioned feeling like I was starting to lose it. Seeing the staggering amount of lives lost daily due to COVID-19 was not helping me. He emailed me and asked if I wanted to talk more privately. I agreed and we started texting. I began opening up about how I was feeling about my grandmother's death.

He texted words of support, like, "It's OK to be scared, and it's OK to reach out. I'm glad you did. There is strength in making it day after day, having all that going on inside. You're bound to crack every once in a while."

But my teacher also told me, "Covering up your vulnerability isn't healthy. Think about how you might learn to cope with your emotions in a healthier, more positive way."

I don't like talking about my personal life to anyone, my family and I rarely talked about our emotions or feelings. But one night soon after the talk with my math teacher, I had a conversation with my older sister.

It was around midnight. We talked about our memories, my grandma's personality, and how we knew how much she loved her family without the need to say so.

"We knew if everyone was hungry and she was the only person with a meal, she'd give it away in a heartbeat," my sister said.

When she said those words, I felt a tingling sensation down my spine. This was the first time my sister and I had had such a deep conversation. I knew someone was sharing the pain I felt and that was huge. The tears flowing down our faces, like the light sprinkles at a waterfall, felt peaceful and healing. I no longer felt like I was going through this alone.



READ-ALoud QUESTION "How did opening up to her math teacher and her sister help Jennifer to gain control over her grief?"

Talking to my sister definitely helped me feel better, but what's helped the most is writing in my journal. It's helped me realize that my grandmother's death wasn't my fault. Writing has helped me understand that when dealing

with the loss of a loved one, it will be hard in the beginning. If I feel like I need to cry, I cry. Listening to music has been another huge reliever; certain songs spark many memories I had with my grandmother.

Most of all, I learned that when you're too afraid to ask for help, writing is something that can help you release pent-up thoughts. You don't have to share it with anyone at first or at all, but at times it can feel like talking to the person you're missing.

Recently I wrote this to my grandmother.

It's been a year since you left us, but it feels like forever. Part of me accepts that you left, but part of me is still stuck in that seat at your funeral. Sometimes, I wish you were still here with us, so I could tell you how much you mean to me and how hard every day has been without you. I keep wishing and hoping that this was just a nightmare and I'll wake up soon, but I know it isn't. I know someday I'll see you again, but I don't know when that day will come. It just so happens that your wings were ready, but we weren't. The day you left us was the day I made a promise. A promise to make you proud. Thank you for loving me and cherishing me the way I will forever love and cherish you. Grandma, this one's for you.



READ-ALOUD QUESTION “Turn to a partner and share your thinking in pairs: It took Jennifer a year to realize that she was not dealing with the loss of her grandmother in a healthy or productive way. How could talking or writing help you to cope with your fears and emotions?”

Jennifer Nghe will be a senior at Sunset Park High School in 2021. Nghe lives in Brooklyn and enjoys writing poetry and creative writing.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — TEEN TALK ⌚ 12 minutes

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce this activity by saying to the group:
 - “Now that we’ve read the story, we’re going to participate in small group discussions where we share our personal connections to the issues experienced by Jennifer in her story.”

Remind group members that it is important that everyone agrees what is said during this discussion is not shared outside the group.
2. While the group is still seated, review the directions. Tell them:
 - I will put you into groups of three or four.
 - Each group will find a comfortable place to sit together and form a small circle so everyone can easily listen to one another.
 - Once groups are seated, I will give each group a handout with questions to guide discussion.
 - One member of each group will volunteer to facilitate the discussion. They will read a question aloud and make sure everyone has an opportunity to respond before reading the next question.
 - You do not need to discuss every question. You should move on to another question whenever your group feels ready.
3. After checking for understanding, have group members gather with their assigned small group and find a space in the room to talk.
4. When all groups are seated in circles, distribute the question handouts you’ve prepared (p. 67).
5. Help each group choose a facilitator and get started.
6. As groups discuss, move around the room as a silent observer. Do not join in the discussion. If you notice that a group needs support, guide them back to the questions.
7. After about ten minutes, and with a one-minute time check beforehand, ask everyone to come back together as one large group.
8. Briefly check in by asking group members to share what the experience was like and what stood out for them in the activity.

LEADER TIP

Note that some group members may need additional support. Take note of participants who indicate that they may be struggling with a past or recent loss and suggest talking to a school counselor.

CLOSING CIRCLE 5 minutes

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

- What stood out for you in Jennifer’s story, “Mourning, After,” and our activities today?
- Finish this sentence: “One piece of advice I’d give to someone who is grieving is...”

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives participants the opportunity to tell their own personal narratives and provides additional literacy practice.

Like Jennifer, write a letter to a lost loved one telling them about how you are working through the process of grieving their death. If you have never lost a loved one, think of a time when you grieved over the loss of a friendship or pet, or you may write from the point of view of someone who has experienced loss. Share your feelings. Include a greeting, “Dear XXXX,” and a closing, “Sincerely, (Your Name).”

In your first draft, don’t be too concerned about proper grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- Learning to cope with and manage grief can be a serious challenge for some people. Think about the types of responses shared during the group activities. Where did participants struggle? How did group members find support from one another as they shared their experiences?
- Think about your own experiences with grief. How have you managed your feelings of loss? What can you do to help others confront and address the range of emotions that occur through the process of grieving?

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Teen Talk

Directions: Read and discuss the questions below with your group. Feel free to skip around. Remember that all responses to questions stay within the group.

1. How have you coped with the loss of a loved one, and do you have any advice on what to do or what not to do?

2. What signs or changes in a person's behavior may tell you that someone is struggling with grief?

3. How can you support a grieving friend or family member?

4. Who would you trust to give you guidance about how to cope with loss or other challenging situations?

Session 6

Some Have It Harder

SEL FOCUS SOCIAL AWARENESS

Story: “We Work the Hardest and Suffer the Most” by Edwin Mendez

Story Summary: Edwin’s immigrant family became more vulnerable to financial stress and eviction from their home during the pandemic, which leads him to realize his family has to work harder than non-immigrant families to meet their basic needs.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Recognizing that events don’t affect everyone in a community in the same way
- Discussing the mental challenges of seeing people you care about struggle
- Explaining systemic causes for differences in access to resources and opportunities for different people in a community

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Speaking ideas clearly and actively listening during collaborative discussions
- Making meaning of a text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Writing to express personal connections and insights

MATERIALS

- ☐ Group agreements and agenda, posted
- ☐ *Opening Up.2021* Story Collection, one for each group member
- ☐ Flip chart paper
- ☐ Journals or notebook paper and pencils

PREPARATION

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Create an open space in the room for the Concentric Circles activity.
- Write up steps for Concentric Circles activity (**in bold**) on chart paper (optional).
- Write the Dear Teen Writer guidelines (**in bold**) on chart paper.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

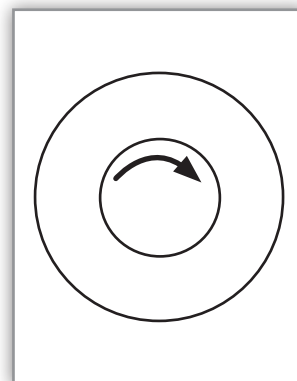
Agenda: Some Have It Harder

- Opening Activity: Concentric Circles
- Read and Discuss: “We Work the Hardest and Suffer the Most” by Edwin Mendez
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Dear Teen Writer
- Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — CONCENTRIC CIRCLES ⌚ 8 minutes

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell participants that they are going to do an activity in which they will share their opinions with others.
2. While the group is still seated, read aloud the activity procedure that you wrote on chart paper:
 - You will form two circles, one inside the other.
 - Each person will be facing a partner.
 - I will read questions aloud, and everyone will have a chance to respond while their partner listens.
3. Divide group members into two equal groups. One way to do this is to have group members count off by twos. (If you don't have two equal groups, you can join one.)
4. Have the 1s move into the open space you cleared and form a circle facing *outward*.
5. Have the 2s form a second circle around the first one, facing *inward*.
6. Then, explain to the group that the person they're facing will be their first partner.
7. Review the specific steps of the activity with the group (you may wish to write these steps on chart paper for group members' reference):
 - You will take turns responding to a question that I ask.
 - When one person speaks, the other listens.
 - When I say "switch," the speaker and the listener switch roles.
 - When time is up, I will ask one circle to rotate and everyone will have a new partner.
8. Have partners greet each other by saying "hello."
9. Ask the group:
 - What does it mean to *really* understand someone else's experiences?
10. After both partners have answered the question, ask the inside circle to move two spaces to the right while the outside circle remains still. When new pairs form, have group members greet their new partner.



11. Time permitting, repeat the process using these prompts:
 - When is a time you were concerned about someone you care about?
 - How can a person's access to resources and opportunities affect what they can do in challenging times?
12. Have everyone return to their seats, and thank group members for sharing.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY 🕒 20 minutes

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person who notices that immigrants, including his own family, did not experience the pandemic the same way as others.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Establish a reading purpose to focus group members' attention on the text. Tell them they will read to understand how individuals can experience the same event in very different ways. Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 26 in their *Opening Up.2021 Story Collection*.
(See the leader's copy with discussion questions beginning on the next page.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

We Work the Hardest and Suffer the Most

By Edwin Mendez

In recent months, I have gained a better understanding of how society attends to people of different classes, especially immigrants in the United States who come from a low-income household. It seems particularly unfair as these are some of the hardest-working people in the city.

The pandemic caused companies, stores, and shops to close down and left many immigrants without jobs. I am the son of two such immigrants.

Twenty years ago, my parents came to the U.S. from the city of Atlixco, Puebla, in Mexico. My mother wanted to explore American culture and its beautiful cities, and make advances in her life. She wanted to provide a place where her kids could grow up safely, with more opportunities to prosper. My father had a similar idea, and he was motivated to give back to his family in Mexico.

Yet the challenges my parents faced—the language barrier, lack of opportunities, and lack of public assistance—kept them from the success they had in mind.

I just graduated high school. But I am beginning to wonder what hope is there for me as I, a U.S. citizen, but still the son of immigrants, enter the real world?



READ-ALoud QUESTION “What has the pandemic caused Edwin to realize about his family?”

I’ve understood since the age of 12 that there are limits to what an immigrant has access to.

Back then, my mother cleaned houses. I recall asking her once why she couldn’t work any other place rather than as house cleaner, and she replied with, “Porque no tengo papeles,” meaning she is undocumented. She told me how there aren’t many opportunities to find a job that doesn’t require you to be a citizen or have a special set of skills.

My mother’s current job at a fish market, about an hour’s commute by train, was taken away as the pandemic increased in severity. Her job was not exciting—she rinsed fish to put them out on display with a price tag.

In April, I asked her if I could get a job since she couldn’t go to hers, but she said no.

“I don’t want to risk you catching the virus and bringing it home to your brothers,” she said.

I felt disappointed. I was being prevented from helping my family and saving up for college, but I hadn't realized the risk of spreading the virus to the rest of my family. I later understood she was trying to protect us.

Despite not being able to work, my mother's first priority remained protecting her family. That was one part of her American Dream she could still have control over. Family.

We were pretty stable until our oven and fridge spontaneously stopped working after the first couple of weeks of the pandemic. The oven wasn't a problem since we didn't use it much, but I can't say the same for the fridge. In order to keep our food fresh, we were forced to store meats, milk, and yogurt in a big pot filled with ice that we bought daily.

Another hurdle was that after the first couple of weeks staying at home, there was still no news of when people could go back to work, which took a toll on my family. At the end of April, my mother, with a tone of surrender, said, "I don't have enough money for rent, and I don't know what I'm going to do. Bills keep coming, and I don't have any money."

I was aggravated that she didn't let me help. I imagined being kicked out of our house, with a disease all around us, left with nothing but suffering. I hated everything. Why did our oven stop working? Why did our fridge stop working? Why did these essentials have to stop working at a time like this?

To make matters more frustrating, my family became aware of the government's stimulus check program. I learned about it through social media, yet it didn't mean that every immigrant family would receive one.

I couldn't understand why my hard-working mother couldn't get a stimulus check. There was never an explanation in the mail or on social media that I could find as to why some immigrants couldn't receive assistance, but I felt like it would obviously be for the same unfair reason: She was ineligible as an undocumented immigrant. Such regulations made it seem as if these immigrants didn't exist or were not even people. In reality, immigrants contribute to our society in many ways: through music, art, economics, and in building our neighborhoods.

It wasn't fair for her to be treated like this, and it felt that the system was betraying my community. It felt as if the economy just drove past some immigrants, like a hitchhiker on the road. To save money, we got daily food donations from the public school about five blocks from our house. We'd buy the cheapest foods, such as spaghetti and bread, and try not to use much electricity.

My father, who lives separately from us, tried to help us out, but he could only do so much after he also lost his job. Bringing us groceries once every two weeks was the best he could do. I worried for his safety, too.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “How does Edwin feel about the opportunities that his family and other immigrants have available to them?”

Around the end of April, I became consumed by the fear of being evicted.

Luckily, the landowner was able to understand our situation since so many families were struggling. But my family is still aware we have to pay the rent that is overdue, and when the state reported some workers could return to jobs, my mother quickly went back to work without hesitation. She worked more than ever before, not only in the fish market, but cleaning houses on her day off, being paid under the table.

I feared for her safety, as she was out long hours in a pandemic with a virus that could be anywhere. With coworkers surrounding her at the market, I thought maybe her mask and gloves weren't enough to protect her. I feared she could bring COVID-19 home on any night to our family, including my six-year old brother.

I watched nightly as she arrived home from a long day of work with a hungry stomach, and she would go straight to the kitchen and eat the best she could with what we had. It wouldn't take long to know she was stressed; she said she only wanted to shower and get a good night's sleep, since she would have to repeat the same cycle the next day.

Seeing my mother working herself over the limit in this environment hurt me, since she had no support and had barely any time to spend with her family. This ongoing pain of not being able to help was one of the hardest things I've experienced.

In the beginning of July, my mom said to me and my brothers, “I can’t stand living here anymore. Paying so much rent every month is not something we had to do back in Mexico. Here, I can only make enough to pay rent and afford groceries. I can’t even afford to buy you guys new clothes.” I felt helpless to her situation.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “How is Edwin impacted by seeing his mother work so hard?”

When the severity of the pandemic decreased a little, I was able to go out and take a walk. Seeing the green leaves hanging on trees, the light blue sky, and feeling a breeze that calmed me down and made me feel better.

But as I kept walking, I noticed that many immigrants were still left with no job opportunities, or they had to create their own, such as setting up stands selling ice cream, cotton candy, or Mexican foods and candies. The sight of the blue and pink cotton candy would leave my mouth watering, and then I’d steadily see more carts with more varieties of snacks, including my favorite chips, Fritos.

Seeing the men and women behind these stands made me realize all of these immigrants, like my mom, have their own struggles. But it also gave me the inspiration I needed during these tough times—to work just as hard as they do, whether it’s helping my family’s stability once I can get a job or succeeding in college. Scorching temperatures or a pandemic won’t keep their resilience down—or mine.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “How do small signs of hope change Edwin’s perspective?”

In the end, the economy leaves some immigrants with no choice but to work even harder than before the pandemic, with barely any benefits or help to cover growing costs at home. Every day, at home and in my neighborhood, I see immigrants fighting to survive.

It leaves me feeling somewhat guilty for the privilege I have of being a citizen. I get public assistance, educational opportunities, and health insurance, which only makes me want to take advantage of it and work hard for myself and my family. But I know those who can only wish to have the benefits a citizen gets, work just as hard for their families.

Attending college and studying biology would represent the success I want for myself and my family. So, I am doing my best to make that happen. I have met with a nonprofit that helps kids apply for college and scholarships. I also still talk with my counselors from school.

Graduating from college would mean I have conquered the troubles an immigrant faces, and it would fulfill my mother's plan to have her children prosper. Making my mom proud of me and herself for fighting hard, even with the lack of support, would be an indescribable moment of accomplishment for us.

At the end of the day, unless you're Native American, we're all immigrants. One day, I hope that society and our system can understand that all immigrants are part of this country too, trying to thrive and contribute as any citizen would.



READ-ALoud QUESTION "What does Edwin notice about the differences between how the U.S. treats citizens versus how it treats immigrants?"

Edwin Mendez, 18, graduated from Sunset Park High School in 2020. Mendez lives and works in Brooklyn, and he enjoys soccer and reading. He plans to continue his education in the near future.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — DEAR TEEN WRITER ⌚ 12 minutes

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group:
 - “Now that we’ve read the story, we’re going to write a letter to the writer telling him something we learned or connected with in his story.”

Remind the group that the goal is to communicate their ideas and responses to the writer’s story. They shouldn’t worry about spelling and grammar.

2. Explain to group members that they should refer to the story when writing.

LEADER TIP

Take note of participants who worry about the future as it relates to their educational and career opportunities, and privately suggest talking with a school or career counselor.

3. Read the Dear Teen Writer guidelines aloud from the chart paper you prepared:
 - **Greeting:** “Dear Edwin, I just read your story, ‘We Work the Hardest and Suffer the Most’...”
 - **Tell about the part of the story that made you think or “feel it in your body.”**
 - **Make a connection with the story.**
 - **Share an idea you have for how our society can treat immigrants better.**
 - **Closing:** “Sincerely, (Your Name)”
4. Pass out journals or notebook paper and pencils.
5. Give group members seven minutes to write their letters. Move around the room offering encouragement and support.
6. When seven minutes are up, tell group members to finish their last thought and put their pencils down.
7. Explain to the group that they are now going to do a Group Share.
8. Ask a few volunteers to share parts of their letters with the whole group.
9. Thank group members for sharing.
10. Then, invite group members to reflect on what stood out to them in the activity and share with the group.

CLOSING CIRCLE 5 minutes

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

- What stood out for you in Edwin’s story, “We Work the Hardest and Suffer the Most,” and our activities today?
- Finish this sentence: “One positive thing I can do to understand someone else’s perspective is...”

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives participants the opportunity to tell their own personal narratives and provides additional literacy practice.

Write an opinion about something in your experience or something you have observed that you believe to be unfair or unjust. Include your thoughts about why it is unfair and what could be done to fix it.

In your first draft, don’t be too concerned about proper grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- Learning about social inequality can help us gain perspective about opportunities and privileges. What insights did your group members gain as a result of discussing the writer’s challenges and their own observations of the world around them?
- Think about your own challenges, opportunities, and privileges. How has someone helped you achieve a goal that seemed out of reach? How can you help someone else?

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Session 7

Finding Myself in the Spotlight

SEL FOCUS RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Story: “From Feeling Safe to Feeling Like a Stereotype” by Christina Li

Story Summary: Before the COVID-19 pandemic, school was a place where Christina felt like part of a community. She never felt singled out for being Chinese American, but now she feels as though she is a target of racism.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Recognizing the mental challenges of discrimination based on race
- Discussing how racial stereotyping impacts self-esteem and relationships in a community

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Discussing and negotiating ideas in small groups
- Making meaning of a text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Writing to express personal connections and insights

MATERIALS

- ☐ Group agreements and agenda, posted
- ☐ *Opening Up.2021* Story Collection, one for each group member
- ☐ Chart paper, pencils, markers, and sticky notes
- ☐ Journals or notebook paper and pencils

PREPARATION

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- For the Group Brainstorm, prepare the prompt **(in bold)** on chart paper.
- Write and post the four chart papers for the Gallery Walk, using the prompts **(in bold)** in the session plan.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: Finding Myself in the Spotlight

- Opening Activity: Group Brainstorm
- Read and Discuss: “From Feeling Safe to Feeling Like a Stereotype” by Christina Li
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Gallery Walk
- Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — GROUP BRAINSTORM 8 minutes

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, give each group member one sticky note. Explain that they will be using the sticky notes in a brainstorming activity. Group members should not write their names on the notes.
2. Point to the chart paper. Read aloud the statement you have written on it.
 - Discrimination is...
3. Review these steps with the group:
 - “On your sticky note, you will write your meaning of the word *discrimination*.”
 - “When you’ve finished, you will post your notes on the chart paper.”
4. Before they begin writing, model the activity by sharing your own response. (Your idea will serve as a guiding example for their own thinking and make the expectations of this activity clear.)
5. Tell participants to post their notes on the chart paper as they complete them.
6. When most or all notes are posted, read each one aloud.
7. Guide a brief discussion using these questions:
 - “What stands out to you about our meanings for discrimination? How are the meanings connected to positive or negative ideas?”
 - “How is discrimination like stereotyping? In what ways is discrimination hurtful to others?”
8. Thank group members for sharing.

LEADER TIP

As group members discuss the questions, listen for opportunities to discuss intent versus impact. Someone’s intent in making a statement, asking a question, or expressing a curiosity may have an impact that is different from what is intended, so they should always be thinking about the impact.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY ⌚ 20 minutes

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing the story as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young Chinese American person who experiences discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Establish a reading purpose to focus group members' attention on the text. Tell them they will read to understand how discrimination affects the writer. Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 32 in their *Opening Up.2021 Story Collection*.
(See the leader's copy with discussion questions beginning on the next page.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question, and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

From Feeling Safe to Feeling Like a Stereotype

By Christina Li

My fondness for the sport was growing. Even though I was just a substitute in our gym class soccer game, I cheered excitedly, watching my teammates try to score a goal.

My voice was hoarse, but I felt like part of the bigger group, a united community. Then, BAM! Suddenly, I didn't.

Pain was shooting up the side of my left leg. Wincing, I looked down and saw a ball rolling at my feet.

“Oh, sorry, can I have that back?” I heard a girl’s voice say.

When I turned toward the voice, I noticed a few kids peering through the gap of the gym wall that separates the junior and the freshmen physical education classes. As soon as she made eye contact with me, she ducked behind her group of friends. One of the boys looked at my face and grinned. Then he shouted, “Corona!”

The group burst into loud laughter. The girl cruelly smirked, and then they were gone before I could comprehend what had happened. I stood there, dazed, wondering if they had thrown the ball on purpose.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “How do Christina’s classmates discriminate against her? How do their words and actions make Christina feel?”

A classmate picked up the ball at my feet, threw it into the freshmen’s side of the gym, then ran back into play.

The game continued.

I stood there, under the white lights of the gym, as my leg throbbed and my class continued to compete and run. My friend, who was standing next to me, tried to engage in small talk, but none of her words registered. It was as if I were underwater. Everything sounded muddled and inaudible. I nodded in response, despite not knowing what I was nodding to.

An uneasy feeling made its way through me.

In early March 2020, people at school started talking about COVID-19. Despite the rise in fear and anxiety, public schools had remained open, and I still attended my classes. Just two hours earlier on my train ride to school, I had watched videos of assaults on Asian Americans on my phone. They showed up all over my Instagram feed, with language like “Asian people deserve this” and “Who told Chinese people to go around eating bats? Now there’s a virus going around, and it’s all their fault.”

I put my phone away, wanting a break from the racism. Then I noticed the man sitting next to me shifting uncomfortably in his seat. When I looked at him, he quickly got up and walked to the other end of the car.

My senses were heightened as I got off the train and walked to transfer to the L-train. I noticed that although the station was crowded, people weren't bumping into me. Then, I realized some were actively making sure not to touch me. It was as if I was an outsider who society was othering or even worse, like I was the virus itself.

I felt scared and ashamed that I was being associated with a virus. Unsettling thoughts about my safety began to creep in. I began to wonder if I would be the next person to be spat on or attacked for walking down the street, just because I'm Asian.

? READ-ALOUD QUESTION "What do you think about the way others treat Christina? How has racial stereotyping affected Asian Americans during the pandemic?"

Throughout my life, I actively sought to find characters like me, but I never saw much of myself in the media, news, or books. It felt as if my race didn't exist.

Now, for the first time in my life, I felt seen.

As a Chinese American, I felt like I never received much attention living in the United States. In discussions about race, in school, online, and among friends, I felt like others viewed me as nearer to whiteness than other minority groups, thus dismissing my own struggles with my identity. This was puzzling because my pursuit for social change stems from my racial identity and understanding how it feels to be marginalized. Still, like many Asian Americans, I didn't feel like I could speak up and add my experiences in a conversation about race.

During science class, my teacher sternly informed us that the pandemic isn't connected to any race, ethnicity, or nationality, combatting my doubts and fears. She told us to wash our hands and cover our mouths when we cough, and then explained the new bathroom procedures implemented by the school, such as refilling the soap every two hours.

“There will be no harassment, physical, verbal, or otherwise, of any kind,” she said strictly. “There is absolutely no tolerance for that.”

Her firmness and her unwavering gaze at the class made me feel safe.

In a school that prides itself on diversity and inclusion, I’ve always been proud to attend Brooklyn Latin. It has a strong, supportive community. During this time, I didn’t feel as if I had to navigate the school community the same way I had to with the outside world, where so much painfully reminded me of my racial identity and the history of oppression that comes along with it. I didn’t have to worry about my classmates perceiving me as “dirty,” or believing that I ate dogs, or assuming that I can’t speak English correctly. My school made me feel as if thinking about my race doesn’t always have to be so painful and confusing.

Yet, I was standing under the gym’s blinding white lights with a bruise on my leg and scars to my psyche after being targeted for my race. I couldn’t hear my friend’s words, and the freshmen that had laughed at me were on the other side of the wall I was leaning on.

It felt like all of the lights in the gym were shining on me. I had a strong urge to close my eyes. I felt blinded by the light. I thought, *How easily the model minority myth can be flipped to the yellow peril.*

How easily feeling safe at school can be flipped to feeling unsafe.

I felt lonely. Even in my diverse high school, where my science teacher tells us through her unrelenting tone, so sure and so confident, that harassment will not be allowed, it is not a safe space.



READ-ALOUD QUESTION “How is Christina impacted by anti-Asian bias?”

The lights are far too bright. For the first time in my life, I see myself everywhere—on the news, in the hate crime videos, and among the cruel comments. I also see myself between the tweets of language, such as “the Chinese virus” from our president, as well as in the shout of “Corona!” and the laughter of students from my school.

I feel like I only exist when people want to use my racial group to pit us against other minorities or to blame us for a pandemic. I realize those are the only two times I have ever really felt seen as a Chinese American.

Waves of sadness and loneliness like I've never known before crashed into me. It threatened to suffocate me. I felt like my heart might break.

"Hey, Christina," my team captain exclaimed, sweaty and tired. "You're in. It's a new game. You're defender."



READ-ALoud QUESTION "Before the pandemic, Christina never experienced this type of discrimination. How have her recent experiences shifted the way she feels about her identity? When hearing her captain speak, how is Christina impacted?"

Christina Li is a recent graduate of Brooklyn Latin School in New York City. Li has won several writing accolades and her work has been praised by leaders such as Chirlane McCray.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — GALLERY WALK ⌚ 12 minutes

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce the activity by telling the group that they are going to do an activity where they consider how to respond effectively to instances of racism and discrimination.
2. While the group is still seated, review the directions. Tell them:
 - “I have posted four posters around the room, each with a prompt on it.”
 - “You will spend two minutes at each poster in small groups, discussing and writing down your responses to each question.”
 - “When I call time, you will rotate one poster clockwise with your group. At your new poster, read what has been written.”
 - “Add ideas and comment on what’s already there with new thoughts or questions.”
 - “Wait for more instructions when you have completed a full lap and have returned to your first poster.”
3. Read the numbered signs in each corner aloud, checking for understanding about each choice:
 - 1 - If I see someone being targeted by discrimination, I can...**
 - 2 - If I hear people using stereotypes, I should...**
 - 3 - If I see racial discrimination on social media, I should...**
 - 4 - If I am a target of racism, I can...**
4. Divide the group into four groups by having them count off 1 to 4, directing each group to its numbered poster (1s go to poster 1, etc.).
5. Hand out one or two markers per group. Tell them to discuss their responses to the prompt at their poster and take notes while you keep track of time.
6. While the small groups write and discuss, move around the room to listen and support them.
7. In two minutes, or when the hum of conversation dies down, regain everyone’s attention, and tell all groups to rotate on spot clockwise.
8. Repeat steps 6 and 7 until groups have traveled to all posters.
9. When groups are at their first poster again, regain their attention. Tell them:
 - “Spend a few minutes walking around the room and reading what your peers have written.”

10. Time permitting, have group members share points of agreement or disagreement, new ideas, or questions.
11. Have group members return to their seats, and thank them for sharing.

CLOSING CIRCLE ⌚ 5 minutes

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

- What stood out for you in Christina’s story, “From Feeling Safe to Feeling Like a Stereotype,” and our activities today?
- Finish this sentence: “Listening to people who have been discriminated against can help me to...”

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives participants the opportunity to tell their own personal narratives and provides additional literacy practice.

Write a speech about appreciating rather than discriminating against people from different backgrounds. The speech should be inspiring but also include practical advice on how to dispel racial myths and stereotypes.

In your first draft, don’t be too concerned about proper grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- How did group members respond to the writer’s feelings of fear and isolation in the story? During the activities, did any members share their own stories about being the targets of discrimination? If so, how did other members respond?
- Think about any personal or witnessed experiences you have had with racial discrimination and consider sharing them with the group. What advice and resources would you suggest to someone who was the target of racism or witnessed it happening?

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Session 8

Finding Purpose Through Pain

SEL FOCUS RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING

Story: “Can I Do More?” by Rose Bell-McKinley

Story Summary: Rose sees the devastation the COVID-19 pandemic has caused to many people’s lives and responds by working with her family to create a food bank. Rose also realizes the need for a larger, more systematic approach to addressing the economic inequality that the pandemic has highlighted.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Discussing how becoming an advocate for others can help you take responsibility in situations that you and your community are facing
- Reflecting on their own role in improving their community

YOUTH WILL INCREASE THEIR LITERACY BY:

- Speaking ideas clearly and actively listening during collaborative discussions
- Making meaning of a text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Responding thoughtfully to, and seeking to understand, diverse perspectives
- Writing to express personal connections and insights

MATERIALS

- ☐ Group agreements and agenda, posted
- ☐ *Opening Up.2021* Story Collection, one for each group member
- ☐ Chart paper, drawing paper, pencils, and waste basket, box, or bin
- ☐ Journals or notebook paper and pencils

PREPARATION

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Create an open space in the room for the Opinion Continuum activity.
- Post “Agree” and “Disagree” signs on opposite ends of the room.
- Create a model for Letting Go, Holding On.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: Finding Purpose Through Pain

- Opening Activity: Opinion Continuum
- Read and Discuss: “Can I Do More?” by Rose Bell-McKinley
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Letting Go, Holding On
- Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — Opinion Continuum ⌚ 5 minutes

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell participants that they are going to do an activity where they listen, see, and respect where others stand.
2. While the group is still seated, review the directions. Tell them:
 - “On either end of the room, there are signs that read *Agree* and *Disagree*.”
 - “I will read a statement and then you will decide whether it’s true for you (agree) or not (disagree). You will move somewhere in between the two signs that reflects your opinion. If you’re unsure, you should stand somewhere in the middle.”
 - “Once everyone has moved, I will invite volunteers to share why they chose to stand where they are.”
3. Next, ask the group to stand up and move to the center of the open space you prepared.
4. Read the first statement, and ask group members to move to a spot between the two signs:
 - “Being an advocate for others is something we are each called to do.”
5. Once all group members have moved, ask them to notice where other group members are standing. (You can support minority positions by moving closer to someone who is alone at one end of the continuum.)
6. Ask for volunteers to share why they are standing where they are. Ask at least one group member from each side of the continuum. Tell group members they may change their position if they are influenced by another group member’s opinion.
7. After each question, have everyone return to the middle.
8. Repeat for the other three statements:
 - “The pandemic affected everyone the same way.”
 - “Seeing the suffering of others can inspire change.”
 - “People should not rely on the generosity of others.”
9. Have everyone return to their seats, and thank group members for sharing their opinions.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY ⌚ 20 minutes

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing the story as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person who sees the suffering the pandemic has caused for others and works with her family to help and be a voice for those in need.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Establish a reading purpose to focus group members' attention on the text. Tell them they will read to discuss why the writer is inspired to take action and what she does. Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 37 in their *Opening Up.2021 Story Collection*.
(See the leader's copy with discussion questions beginning on the next page.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question, and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

Can I Do More?

By Rose Bell-McKinley

In mid-March, when COVID-19 hit New York City and all the schools closed, I felt helpless. I watched the nightly news, listened to the radio during breakfast, and was bombarded throughout the day with alerts on my phone about all the different ways the pandemic was ruining people's lives. Here in New York, people were not only losing jobs, but family members, with death tolls rising every day.

I wanted to find a way to help. But I felt like there was nothing I could do, because my family was trapped in quarantine.

One night we were at the dinner table, and I mentioned this to my parents. My mom suggested that we look into food banks near us. She didn't want us to volunteer at the closest center, located in a local church's basement, because we were being extremely careful about our quarantine. So, instead, we started a system where we would host drives for our local food pantry, Goke. We covered our Brooklyn neighborhood in colorful flyers with bold red lettering advertising our weekend drives.

For our first delivery, we filled up almost nine cardboard shipping boxes of donations for Goke. As we loaded the brown boxes stuffed with shiny cans and colorful packages into the car, I beamed with happiness. I felt like this might actually make a difference.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “How has the pandemic influenced Rose and her family to find a way to help others in their community?”

But the more I looked at the boxes, the less they impressed me. How could nine boxes do anything? It felt like we were living through an apocalypse: I had actually thought that nine boxes of non-perishable food was going to make a difference? Suddenly, all the happiness I'd felt a few minutes earlier vanished. I felt defeated and naive for thinking that we were making even the slightest dent.

But when my parents got home from dropping off the goods, they described how happy the people running the food bank were to receive such a large donation. They also talked about how many people—possibly hundreds—were waiting in line to get food for themselves and their families. This made me realize that even though we may not have changed the world, we were still helping our neighbors.

My mood was boosted even further one warm Sunday afternoon in early May when we were running a drive and a young couple walked by. They paused to look at our sign describing what donations we sought. It sat next to the two cardboard boxes filled with canned green beans, Cheerios, and a couple jars of baby formula. Then they smiled and walked away. It was a smaller collection than usual; as the weather was warming up people had been donating less and less. Maybe they had stopped paying attention to our posters on the streetlamps around our neighborhood, or maybe the first hints of summer had made people forget that we were still living through a crisis.

A lot of people came by to read the sign and see what was going on. Sometimes they would take a picture to remember the details and times, but usually we don't see them again.

Half an hour later, my dad and our dog Zeus, (a rescue; we think he's a Basenji hound-German Shepherd mix) joined me to sit on the porch. Then I saw the couple coming back. The short, brunette lady smiled and handed over a crisp check. We barely had time to thank her; they waved quickly and were gone.

They had donated \$100! No one had ever donated that much. I was shocked at such generosity. I imagined how much food the pantry could buy with that and how many families could be fed that week.

After receiving the check, I was excited for the next drop off of donations. My parents were going to film some interviews for a documentary they were making about the coronavirus. But again, the feeling of accomplishment I had felt earlier faded away when a woman in line told me her story.

She was standing in line, waiting on an unseasonably cold day. Through her blue surgical mask, she told us how she had already lost her grandmother and her sister to COVID-19, as well as her job, and now she was relying on a food bank for the first time in her life. She feared for her own safety and the safety of her partner, yet she still had to make trips to the food bank in order to feed them both.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “What do you think of Rose and her family’s food drive and way of helping others during the pandemic? Would you participate in such an event? Why?”

Over the next few weeks, I kept thinking about this. How are some people able to make such generous donations, yet other people are experiencing the hardest times of their lives? Why was a global pandemic having such varying impacts on people who literally live blocks away from each other? Everyone was certainly struggling, but to wildly different degrees.

This made me think more about the depths of economic inequality in our society. Shouldn't people be able to rely more on their government for assistance in times of crisis? Even the stimulus checks that were supposed to go to everyone did not seem to be fully distributed. Three weeks after my family was supposed to have received theirs, it hadn't arrived.

If that stimulus check was somebody's only source of income and it was three weeks late, what would they do? Is \$1,200 even enough to keep you afloat, especially living in New York City, where everything from groceries to rent is usually more expensive than anywhere else in the country? By late July, there had been 19 straight weeks where unemployment claims totaled at least 1 million. In June, there were 15 million fewer American jobs than in February. Clearly, the stimulus checks were very important.



READ-ALoud QUESTION "What does Rose realize about the depths and magnitude of economic inequality in the United States?"

I was born in Vancouver, Canada. My family and I immigrated to the United States in 2009. The rest of my family still lives in Canada, and I have noticed that the Canadian government works very differently.

For instance, here in the U.S., the early pandemic plan was for the government to distribute a one-time economic stimulus payment of \$1,200 to each adult earning less than \$75,000. In Canada, the government is giving unemployed or furloughed workers \$2,000 each month for four months. While the Canadian dollar is worth less than the American dollar (approximately \$0.75 USD=\$1CAD), Canada is giving out a larger sum over a longer period.

This is largely due to Canada's higher tax rate and the larger social safety net higher tax rate creates, which most Canadians accept for the social good of all. But in America, whenever a politician proposes higher taxes, there is usually outrage, backlash, and anger—as if the government wants the money to go gambling, instead of protecting the weakest among us.

In addition to the tax rate, where governments choose to distribute money plays a large role as well. According to the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, the U.S. spends half of its annual federal budget on the military and defense.

Legislative action here in the U.S. can play the biggest role in reducing economic inequality. If our national budget was redistributed and there was a higher tax on those who make the top 1% of income, that would go a long way to ensure financial stability for everyone.

However, this is not to say that individuals cannot make a difference as well. This experience of running food drives has taught me it is possible for individual action to make a positive impact within a community. Every cereal box and can of tomatoes added up and fed someone in need, even just for a day. Helping my hungry neighbors, and experiencing the generosity of the woman with the \$100 check, helped ease my own feelings of helplessness. This is not to let the government off the hook—they should be doing much more—but when people help others, they often feel more connected, less isolated, and as if they are helping in some way to create the world they want.



READ-ALOUD QUESTION “Turn to a partner and share your thinking in pairs: What is Rose’s point of view about how the government and individuals can make a difference?”

Rose Bell-McKinley will be a senior at Beacon High School in 2021. She enjoys the arts and volunteering her time with non-profit causes.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — LETTING GO, HOLDING ON ⌚ 15 minutes

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group:
 - “Now that we’ve read the story, we’re going to do an activity where we consider how we can let go of the things we can’t control and hold on to the things we can change.”
2. Using a sheet of drawing paper, model for the group how to fold the page in half and open it back up.
3. Next, model for them how to label on half of the paper “Letting Go” and the other half “Holding On.”

Letting Go	Holding On
4. Tell group members that there are some situations that are beyond their control. Ask group members to consider situations in their community that need attention and change, but whose changes are out of their control. These situations need to be let go so that the focus can shift to the things they can change.
5. Now, ask group members to consider the situations in their community that they can change and would like to hold on to.
6. Explain that on each half of the paper, group members should list as many things as they can.
7. Pass out drawing paper and pencils. Have everyone fold their paper and label it using the group leader’s as a model.
8. Give the group some silent think time, and then tell them to begin writing. Move around the room offering support and encouragement.
9. After about five minutes, tell group members to rip the page in half, separating the two sides.
10. To symbolize “letting go,” have group members crumple up that half and toss it into a basket in the middle of the circle.
11. Next, ask group members to look at their “holding on” list and share some of the items on their list with the person next to them.
12. Each member of the pair should take about a minute to share. Use a timer or wait until the hum of conversation dies down before closing the activity.
13. Thank group members for participating, supporting, and sharing.

LEADER TIP

Pay attention to what group members wrote in the Letting Go and Holding On columns. Items in the Letting Go column may be things that members are struggling to let go, and they may need support or advice on how to let go. Items in the Holding On column could be used as conversation starters about projects group members could put into action.

CLOSING CIRCLE ⌚ 5 minutes

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

- What stood out for you in Rose’s story, “Can I Do More?,” and our activities today?
- Finish this sentence: “I can be an advocate for others and help them by...”

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives participants the opportunity to tell their own personal narratives and provides additional literacy practice.

Write a proposal to your mayor (or other town leader) suggesting that action needs to be taken to help those who are still suffering the economic and emotional effects of the pandemic. State what the current situation is, a thorough description of your suggested solution, and the impact your proposal will have.

In your first draft, don’t be too concerned about proper grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- Being an advocate is more than helping people. It is recognizing that someone or a group needs help, support, and a voice. How did group members react and respond to the activities and questions in the story? How did group members support or not support the idea that individuals can make a difference and that speaking up for others helps us feel more in control of the situations that surround us?
- Rose saw the suffering of those around her and responded by taking action to be part of a solution. Have you had similar experiences where you answered a call to action and sought to bring attention and change to an issue? How did you feel in your efforts to help others?

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Session 9

Inspired to Take Action

SEL FOCUS RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING

Story: “Emmett. Kalief. Josiah. More Than Just Names” by Josiah Alexander

Story Summary: Josiah recalls how his first experience with racism led him to research several famous Black Americans who suffered at the hands of the criminal justice system. Their stories and the inspiring words of Bryan Stevenson influence Josiah to become a mentor and to join the fight against racism and discrimination.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Recognizing that negative experiences can motivate people to make positive changes
- Demonstrating open-mindedness to suggest solutions for personal and social problems

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Writing informally about their opinions
- Making meaning of a text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Responding thoughtfully to, and seeking to understand, diverse perspectives

MATERIALS

- ☐ Group agreements and agenda, posted
- ☐ *Opening Up.2021* Story Collection, one for each group member
- ☐ Chart paper, pencils, colored pencils, and markers
- ☐ Journals or notebook paper and pencils

PREPARATION

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Write the Freewrite and Pair Share prompt **(in bold)** on chart paper
- Make copies of the Change Your Inner Thinking handout (p. 108), one for each group member.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: Inspired to Take Action

- Opening Activity: Freewrite and Pair Share
- Read and Discuss: “Emmett. Kalief. Josiah. More Than Just Names” by Josiah Alexander
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Change Your Inner Thinking
- Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — Freewrite and Pair Share ⌚ 8 minutes

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell the group that they are going to do an activity that will help them personally connect to the story they're going to read.
2. Explain that they're going to do a Freewrite. Remind the group that this is a chance to express their thoughts and feelings without worrying about spelling and grammar. Let them know that the expectation is that everyone writes without stopping for the full time.
3. Read aloud the Freewrite prompt you prepared on chart paper:
 - **What are some actions we can take when we see injustice in the world?**
4. Pass out journals or notebook paper and pencils.
5. Give group members four minutes to respond to this prompt. (They can have the option of writing lists and/or drawing with labels. This supports diverse learners.)
6. When three minutes have passed, tell group members to finish their last thought and put their pencils down.
7. Explain to the group that they are now going to do a Pair Share. Ask group members to turn to the person next to them and take turns sharing the parts of their responses they feel comfortable sharing.
8. Give each member of the pair about a minute to share. Cue partners to switch roles after the first minute. Use a timer or wait until the hum of conversation dies down before closing the activity.
9. Thank group members for sharing.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY ⌚ 20 minutes

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing the story as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person who transforms a negative experience with racism into positive change and action.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Establish a reading purpose to focus group members' attention on the text. Tell them they will read to understand what the writer experiences and how it changes him. Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 42 in their *Opening Up.2021 Story Collection*.
(See the leader's copy with discussion questions beginning on the next page.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

Emmett. Kalief. Josiah. More Than Just Names

By Josiah Alexander

“Hey Emmett!” a White kid yelled at me as we were playing dodgeball during my 6th grade gym class. I didn’t think much of it. I didn’t even know what the insult meant, but some kids on the other side of the court started snickering and repeated it. They also made jokes about my whistling. Our gym teacher didn’t hear what was going on, so it continued until the period ended.

Later that day when I arrived home, I looked up “whistling and Emmett” and learned about the Emmett Till lynching in 1955. I was obviously aware that Black Americans faced a history of racism, but not entirely aware of how it affected people today. My own experience made that racism real, and it shocked me.

I live in a culturally diverse neighborhood and have gone to predominantly Black schools, so this was my first racist experience. To think that kids thought it was OK to make fun of the lynching of Emmett felt awful to me.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “How does Josiah’s experience with racism shock him?”

Following this incident, I looked up Black figures like Nanny of the Maroons, Marcus Garvey, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. MLK is a man I greatly respect due to his calm demeanor and his goal for Americans of all races to be at peace. Through him, I learned about the civil rights movement, which then led me to learn more about America’s criminal justice system.

I was shocked to read statistics like one from the NAACP, which states Black men are incarcerated at a rate of five times that of White men. In several states, the disparity is more than 10 to 1. Then I read about the tragedy of Kalief Browder, a 16-year-old boy from the Bronx who was accused of stealing a backpack. He was jailed on Rikers Island for three years because he didn’t have enough money for bail—mostly in solitary confinement.

Knowing that someone this young—close to my own age—had such a terrible experience, made me reflect somberly as I began relating to his story. Watching this young boy have one violent fight after another on the jail’s surveillance video frightened me because it was too close to home. I know men in my neighborhood who have served time and returned with a defeated, almost lifeless look in their eyes.

It’s tempting to look away. But Bryan Stevenson, an activist and lawyer who has become an inspiration to me over the years, says to get proximate—close enough to those that are suffering—instead of seeing ourselves as separate and different. The thought that someone so young could spend three years in jail without being convicted of a crime, I believe, is at the heart of what is wrong with our criminal justice system.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “Why is it important to Josiah to not ‘look away’?”

Bryan says that the opposite of poverty is justice, and the true measure of our character as a nation is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned. Kalief would not have spent so many years in prison if he were from a wealthy family who could afford bail and had access to lawyers who saw him as someone worthy of representation.

In Stevenson’s book, *Just Mercy, A Story of Justice and Redemption*, I read about Walter McMillian, who was falsely accused of a crime and sentenced to die. It made me think more critically about what it means to not just be Black in this country, but poor too. Walter McMillian, Kalief Browder, and Emmett Till were more than Black males, they were males without economic privilege.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “How does reading about racial injustice make Josiah feel? Is it helping him? Why or why not?”

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement began in 2013 after George Zimmerman was acquitted in the murder of Trayvon Martin. BLM has pushed many across America to face the systemic oppression of Black people via police brutality and the setup of the criminal justice system. Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and most notably George Floyd have become recent symbols of this oppression.

Although the death of George Floyd took place 65 years after the murder of Emmett Till, I see a similarity. Till was brutalized, but his mother left her son’s coffin open to show what racism had physically done to her son and as a symbol of what other Black people in America experience. The same could be said about the video of George Floyd’s death. Both incidents forced many people to see the racist horrors taking place in their raw forms. One difference may be that the national outrage seen for George Floyd’s death feels to me as if America is now awakening to the extent of police brutality.

While racism and discrimination may not be solved overnight, the first thing I can do to prevent them is to help work towards reform. I am a chapter leader of My Brother’s Keeper, an organization dedicated to helping young men of color gain access to the resources and mentors necessary to thrive. Our goal is to keep young men in school and build a brotherhood, and so far, we’ve been successful.

For example, before schools were closed this year, I was mentoring a Black sophomore in my school, showing him the ropes around certain classes and tutoring him in Algebra II. Although the school year was cut short, we developed a wholesome bond, and I still help him and talk to him. My Brother's Keeper helped establish a healthy environment for young men in my school.

I am also a mentor and student with Youth Justice Court, a program which allows teens to rule on petty cases and provide an alternative response to youth crime in their community. My Brother's Keeper and the Youth Justice Court help young people of color reach their full potential by supporting them and making them feel valued and heard.

By working for both of these organizations, I hope to assist other young people of color to dream big, meet those expectations, and even exceed them. That's my goal, to encourage and nurture, in a way that fosters creativity and growth, one person at a time. By empowering myself and other young Black men, I want to help create a world where people like Emmett Till, Michael Brown, and George Floyd will never again be murdered with impunity.



READ-ALoud QUESTION "How is Josiah's response to racism benefiting himself and others? Turn and talk to a partner about how Josiah's work as a mentor makes a difference in his life and the lives of others."

.....
Josiah was a high school senior when he wrote this story.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — CHANGE YOUR INNER THINKING 🕒 12 minutes

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Tell participants that they are going to do an activity in which they practice changing negative inner thinking into something positive.
2. Pass out the “Change Your Inner Thinking” handout and a pencil to each participant. Read aloud each section’s title and the related question.
3. Tell group members to think of a situation where they or someone else was mistreated for some aspect of being themselves (race, gender, religion, etc.).
4. Explain that they will analyze the situation by responding to the questions in each column of the handout.
5. After about five minutes, call on volunteers to share how changing their inner thinking led them to realize positive outcomes to a bad situation.
6. Have group members discuss something they learned from another person’s ideas for being part of the solution to the mistreatment of others.
7. Thank group members for sharing.

LEADER TIP

Before group members begin the handout, point out that people who mistreat others based on their race, gender, or disabilities often have personal underlying reasons for doing so. They are not good or valid reasons, but understanding that these reasons exist can help us to fight this type of discrimination.

CLOSING CIRCLE 5 minutes

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

- What stood out for you in Josiah's story, "Emmett. Kalief. Josiah. More Than Just Names," and our activities today?
- Finish this sentence: "When I experience negative situations, I create positive outcomes by..."

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives participants the opportunity to tell their own personal narratives and provides additional literacy practice.

An ode is a poem that praises a person, place, or object. The poem addresses the object of praise, using "you." Write an ode to a person who has inspired you in a positive way or has been a mentor and a positive influence in your life. Be sure to include your feelings in the poem. Remember that poems do not have to rhyme.

In your first draft, don't be too concerned about proper grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- Learning to find positive outcomes in the midst of bad situations is tough. How did group members respond to being asked to find something positive in a bad situation? What kinds of things did group members say they could do to fight the mistreatment of others?
- Think about how you respond to adversity. What strengths or weaknesses in this area do you have to share with others? How can you lead those around you by example?

If you liked this session, visit youthcomm.org to learn more about how Youth Communication can help you support the social and emotional learning (SEL) of youth using real, teen-written stories. Our professional development and curriculum programs for grades 6-12 center the perspectives of young people and promote meaningful discussions around topics such as identity, relationships, and more.

Change Your Inner Thinking

Initial Thoughts	Positive Outcome
What were my first thoughts about what happened?	How can I be part of a solution to end the mistreatment of others?

Session 10

Introducing the New Me

SEL FOCUS SELF-AWARENESS

Story: “Acting Brave Made Me Brave” by Shameera Sheeraz

Story Summary: Shameera confronts two natural disasters and discovers strength and courage within herself that she is able to apply to other areas of her life.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Discussing how adverse events can lead to self-discovery and increased confidence
- Evaluating how their strengths can evolve into strategies that can help them throughout their lives
- Explaining how overcoming difficult situations helps create hope for the future

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Speaking ideas clearly and actively listening during collaborative discussions
- Making meaning of a text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Writing to express personal connections and insights

MATERIALS

- ☐ Group agreements and agenda, posted
- ☐ *Opening Up.2021* Story Collection, one for each group member
- ☐ Flip chart paper and markers
- ☐ Journals or notebook paper and pencils

PREPARATION

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Create an open space in the room for the Concentric Circles activity.
- Write up steps for Concentric Circles activity **(in bold)** on chart paper (optional).
- Write the Draw It prompt **(in bold)** on chart paper.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

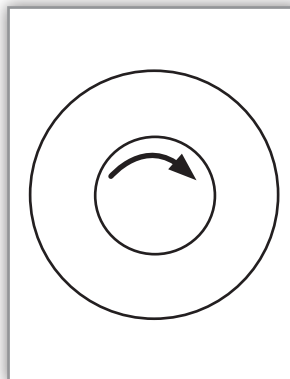
Agenda: Introducing the New Me

- Opening Activity: Concentric Circles
- Read and Discuss: “Acting Brave Made Me Brave” by Shameera Sheeraz
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Draw It
- Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — CONCENTRIC CIRCLES ⌚ 8 minutes

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

- After reviewing the agenda, tell participants that they are going to do an activity in which they will share their opinions with others.
- While the group is still seated, read aloud the activity procedure that you wrote on chart paper:
 - You will form two circles, one inside the other.**
 - Each person will be facing a partner.**
 - I will read questions aloud and everyone will have a chance to respond while their partner listens.**
- Divide group members into two equal groups. One way to do this is to have group members count off by twos. (If you don't have two equal groups, you can join one.)
- Have the 1s move into the open space you cleared and form a circle facing *outward*.
- Have the 2s form a second circle around the first one, facing *inward*.
- Then, explain to the group that the person they're facing will be their first partner.
- Review the specific steps of the activity with the group (you may wish to write these steps on chart paper for group members' reference):
 - You will take turns responding to a question that I ask.**
 - When one person speaks, the other listens.**
 - When I say "switch," the speaker and the listener switch roles.**
 - When time is up, I will ask one circle to rotate and everyone will have a new partner.**
- Have partners greet each other by saying "hello."
- Ask the group:
 - What can facing adverse events teach you about yourself?
- After both partners have answered the question, ask the inside circle to move two spaces to the right while the outside circle remains still. When new pairs form, have group members greet their new partner.



11. Time permitting, repeat the process using these prompts:
 - When is a time your confidence grew because you got through a difficult situation?
 - How can a person's ability to cope with an adverse event give them hope for the future?
12. Have everyone return to their seats, and thank group members for sharing.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY 20 minutes

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing the story as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person who survives two natural disasters and is able to take what she learns about herself and use it in positive ways in other areas of her life.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Establish a reading purpose to focus group members' attention on the text. Tell them they will read to understand what the writer experiences and what she discovers about herself. Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 46 in their *Opening Up.2021 Story Collection*.
(See the leader's copy with discussion questions beginning on the next page.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

Acting Brave Made Me Brave

By Shameera Sheeraz

When I was 7 years old, an earthquake hit my village of Gujarat, Pakistan. I was sitting in my classroom, looking out the window feeling hot, tired, and bored. Then I felt the ground shake. Seconds later, the whole school shook. The teachers immediately began rushing the students out. The screaming and the grown-ups' panic got to me, and I thought it was the last day of my life.

“Get out! Out of the door, now!” my teacher yelled. All I wanted to do was go to my mom because I was so scared. I was shaking and wanted to cry, but I didn’t—even though everyone was frantic and frightened around me. My grandfather, who was the school principal, looked so confident and brave that it made me want to be like him. And by hoping to be like him, I was able to feel brave.

Once we were all outside, we heard a loud boom. Different parts of the school ceiling had collapsed. The students looked frozen as they watched. I thought, “That ceiling could have fallen on us.” We talked among ourselves, mostly saying, “Thank god we left the building in time.”

The earthquake destroyed the parts of the village closest to the main roads, and some houses collapsed and fell on each other. Our house was in the middle of the village where there was no damage. A few people who were near the collapsed buildings had minor injuries, but fortunately, no one died.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “How does Shameera react to the earthquake, and what does she discover about herself?”

I was surprised that I didn’t cry during the earthquake. It made me think maybe I was stronger than people thought I was.

I hadn’t envisioned myself as a brave person before. I am the youngest in my family, and everyone doted on me and treated me like a baby. I was encouraged to be hardworking and responsible, but not strong or courageous.

I had fears, too. I think my biggest fear was giving a presentation in front of a large audience. But after the earthquake, I decided maybe I had the courage to overcome this fear. I didn’t want to be a fearful person.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “How does the way other people treat Shameera affect how she sees herself?”

Little did I know that after this earthquake, another natural disaster was waiting for me. This time, my family and I were in Brooklyn because we had moved here in 2007. A few days before Hurricane Sandy, every news channel was warning people to get supplies like food and water in case of power loss.

That night was full of wind, lightning, and rain. The streets were deserted. My family and I were sitting in the living room watching the news and looking out the window when we saw water pouring through the streets. We guessed that the Rockaway Inlet, which connects to the Atlantic Ocean and is only five blocks from our building, had overflowed.

During this second disaster, I felt the same courage and resolve that I had during the earthquake. I wasn't too scared, and I didn't feel like crying. Instead, I discovered a part of myself that I didn't know existed.

Fortunately, everyone else in my family was also succeeding at staying calm. My brother kept going in and out of the rooms. My older sister was trying to be brave, but by the way she was sitting on the sofa grabbing its sides, I could tell she was scared. My mother is claustrophobic, so when the water was surrounding the building, I could see her sweating and looking out the window again and again. My father sat down quietly next to her and whispered, "Look, our children are so strong." That made me feel powerful.

I looked out the window, watching the water that had already entered our building and had covered the first floor. We were on the second floor. "It's just water" is what I kept thinking. "All of this has to end eventually, so why worry about it?"

I sat next to my mom and said, "Panicking isn't of any use to us. This is out of our control. It'll go away soon." My mom looked at me, surprised. "Don't let this courage of yours go to waste. Always try to hold on to it," she said.

My mom usually talked to me like I was a child, but now she was treating me like I was a grown up. I felt proud. While I checked to make sure the flashlights were working, my brother said, "Looks like someone's having fun. You seem like you want to go outside." I knew this was how it felt to face your fears.



READ-ALoud QUESTION "What strengths or skills does Shameera use to address what's happening around her?"

The thunder rumbled on and on. We had no electricity; the fresh smell of scented candles had filled our apartment, combined with the smell of grass and rain. I could hear people in the hallway crying. My mom, dad, and sister were huddled together on the large sofa while my brother was leaning on it. I continued sitting by myself on the other sofa looking out the window. I prayed for the weather to improve.

The storm gradually faded away overnight, but I don't think anyone in our house slept much that night.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “How is the way Shameera copes with the hurricane different from the rest of her family? Which response do you connect with the most?”

School was out for a week, and everything outside was a mess. Many trees had fallen, windows were broken, people's belongings had floated away in the water, and cars had stopped working. My father is a taxi driver, and he had tried to park his car in a safe place, but the hurricane had damaged it too. It was in the repair shop for a few weeks, so we had to figure out how to get by the rest of the month without much money.

After the storm, I felt different; I felt like the bravest person. I realized I felt the same strength and calm during the hurricane that I had during the earthquake in Gujarat. It made me wonder how I could be so scared of public speaking.

I thought that if I didn't lose my courage to a hurricane and an earthquake, which isn't even in human control, then I shouldn't lose my courage to something within my control—like talking in front of a group. I just needed to believe in myself and my ability to come up with ways not to let the fear control me.



READ-ALoud QUESTION “How do Shameera's experiences with the earthquake and hurricane change her perspective about herself?”

In the past, when I've had to speak in front of the class, my legs start shaking the moment my name is called to present. What goes through my mind is, “Why is everyone looking at me? Look at that girl looking so deeply at me. She's probably judging me. What would happen if I decide to just walk out of class and never come back?”

But this winter when I had to give a presentation in my chemistry class, I came up with three new strategies to overcome my fear. I would take deep breaths and imagine that only my friends were watching me, not the whole class including the teacher. I'd remind myself that I've handled more stressful situations than this. And I'd remember that the more I spoke, the closer I'd get to the end of the presentation. Like being in Hurricane Sandy, I knew the more I thought about the presentation's end the easier it would be for me to handle.

So, I felt ready. The teacher asked who wanted to volunteer, and I mustered the courage to raise my hand. I felt more relaxed than I thought I would even though all eyes were on me. When I started reading from the small book that I had created, I gained more confidence. The more I talked, the more relaxed I became because I knew I kept getting closer to being finished. In two minutes, I was done with my presentation, and everybody was clapping. Inside my brain, I clapped for myself because I had finally done it.



READ-ALOUD QUESTION “At the beginning of the story, Shameera doesn’t see herself as a brave person, but by the end, this changes. What have you experienced in your life that helped you see yourself more positively?”

.....
Shameera was in high school when she wrote this story.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — DRAW IT ⌚ 12 minutes

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group:
 - “Now that we’ve read the story, we’re going to do a drawing activity where we use pictures, colors, and captions to explore an experience we’ve had that is similar to what Shameera went through.”
2. Explain that the purpose of this activity is to express their ideas about how overcoming adversity can give them hope about their futures or help them realize strengths they weren’t aware of before.
3. Read the following prompt from the chart paper you prepared:
 - **In your journal, draw a difficult situation you overcame that resulted in you having more self-confidence or discovering a new strength.**
 - **Add labels, captions, thought bubbles, or other language to the drawing to help with telling your story.**
4. Pass out journals or notebook paper, colored pencils, and markers.
5. Give group members eight to ten minutes to complete their drawings. Move around the room offering support and encouragement.
6. Time permitting, have group members share their drawings. As an alternative, you can place the drawings on a table (or hang them up on the wall) and have group members walk around to look at them.
7. Then, invite group members to share what they noticed about the drawings.
8. Thank group members for sharing and participating.

LEADER TIP

If group members are hesitant to draw their personal experiences or situations, give them the option of drawing from Shameera’s perspective. They may need this emotional distance in order to feel comfortable participating.

CLOSING CIRCLE 🕒 5 minutes

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

- What stood out for you in Shameera's story, "Acting Brave Made Me Brave," and our activities today?
- Finish this sentence: "One positive thing I learned about overcoming adversity is..."

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives participants the opportunity to tell their own personal narratives and provides additional literacy practice.

Write a speech to inspire other young people to use challenges they have overcome in the past to help them visualize a hopeful future. Include an example from your own life if you have one and feel comfortable sharing it. Convince your audience that the same strengths and skills they used to overcome a past challenge can increase their confidence about the future. The speech should be inspiring but should also include practical tips for recognizing strengths and ways of coping.

In your first draft, don't be too concerned about proper grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- Reflect on your experience with the group through the whole *Opening Up.2021* experience. What growth have you noticed in how group members communicate and share with one another? How have they grown in their ability to listen to different perspectives and learn from one another?
- Think about the challenges you have overcome in your own life and how this process fueled your confidence. How can you use these experiences to encourage and support this group as they move forward?

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Leader: _____

SESSION 1

What did today's discussion about relationships reveal about your group members' abilities to collaborate with others? What are some areas they may need to improve in? How can the strengths and weaknesses you've discovered help your group moving forward?

SESSION 2

What strategies to manage emotions did your group members gain from the session? What did the group discussion suggest to you about group members' readiness to discuss sensitive or personal topics? How are group members doing in supporting each other?

SESSION 3

How well did group members express their perspectives and individual strengths today? Now that you’ve had a few sessions to get to know them, have you noticed if any group members may need more support from you in the coming sessions? How will you support them?

SESSION 4

What did today’s activities reveal about your group members’ social and emotional learning, particularly their social awareness? Did they show empathy for the writer? What areas may they need to improve in?

SESSION 5

Learning to cope with and manage grief can be a serious challenge for some people. Think about the types of responses shared during the group activities. Where did participants struggle? How did group members find support from one another as they shared their experiences?

SESSION 6

Learning about social inequality can help us gain perspective about opportunities and privileges. What insights did your group members gain as a result of discussing the writer's challenges and their own observations of the world around them?

SESSION 7

How did group members respond to the writer’s feelings of fear and isolation in the story? During the activities, did any members share their own stories about being the targets of discrimination? If so, how did other members respond?

SESSION 8

Being an advocate is more than helping people. It is recognizing that someone or a group needs help, support, and a voice. How did group members react and respond to the activities and questions in the story? How did group members support or not support the idea that individuals can make a difference and that speaking up for others helps us feel more in control of the situations that surround us?

SESSION 9

Learning to find positive outcomes in the midst of bad situations is tough. How did group members respond to being asked to find something positive in a bad situation? What kinds of things did group members say they could do to fight the mistreatment of others?

SESSION 10

Reflect on your experience with the group through the whole *Opening Up.2021* experience. What growth have you noticed in how group members communicate and share with one another? How have they grown in their ability to listen to different perspectives and learn from one another?

Facilitation Troubleshooting

Youth Communication session plans were written with small groups in mind—fewer than 15 participants—and are meant to take about 45 minutes. Of course, in the real-world application of this Leader’s Guide, not every group will fit neatly into those parameters. We offer suggestions below on how to adapt the session plans to work for your unique setting and participants.

Working with Larger Groups

Larger groups have the advantage of having a bigger variety of perspectives, but the logistics can be challenging. Choose one of these strategies to make session plans work for groups with more than 15 participants:

One big circle: If your setting permits, it is still a good idea to arrange the larger group in a circle. Even a large circle feels more democratic and inclusive than rows of young people facing the group leader. If your room can’t be arranged into a circle, you can still encourage vigorous discussion. Walk around the room so the focus is not always on you at the front. Encourage young people to respond to each other instead of to you. Keep your own comments and questions to a minimum. While the discussion may not be as intimate as in a smaller group, it can still be youth-centered.

Appoint a young person (or two) to lead a separate circle for Read and Discuss: After doing the Opening Activity, divide the group in half for the Read and Discuss portion of the session. You lead one group and a young person (or an aide, if you have a second capable adult in the room) can lead the other. These two separate read-aloud sessions can occur simultaneously. Once they’re done, bring everyone together to share their reactions to the story.

If you want to further build youth leadership, you can appoint two young people to lead. Break the group in half and have a young person lead each group while you circulate between them.

If you like this idea, you should lead two or three sessions as a whole group first, in which you model how to run a discussion. Ask participants to notice what you do and briefly discuss what makes a good group leader. After the first participant-led Read and Discuss activity, check in to ask how it went for your youth-led group(s).

For the Read and Discuss activity, divide the group into teams or pairs, or allow participants to read independently: Ask each team, pair, or individual to read and focus on a particular read-aloud question you’ve prepared ahead of time. Once they’re done, bring everyone together to share thoughts, reactions, and connections with the whole group.

Getting the Timing Right

The sessions in this program have six parts: Getting Started, Opening Activity, Read and Discuss the Story, Explore the Ideas Activity (optional), Closing Circle, and Writing Extension (optional). If you skip the optional activities, you can usually complete a lesson in 30 minutes or less. But other factors can make a lesson run longer or shorter.

When discussion eats up the time: Sometimes the story can elicit a long and thoughtful discussion. This is okay, if the conversation stays focused on the social and emotional competencies modeled by the writer. (If it veers off into “war stories” or unrelated topics, rein it in.)

Keep your eye on the clock. If you decide that the discussion is more valuable than transitioning to a Closing Circle for the last 10 minutes, then just continue the discussion.

If there is so much interest in the topic that you want to continue the discussion further, tell the group that you will pick up where you left off at the next session. At the following session, begin by asking participants to review what they discussed last time so everyone is on the same page (including anyone who may have missed that session). Then, move on to the Explore the Ideas Activity. Between a review of the previous session, the Explore the Ideas Activity, a Closing Circle, and Writing Extension, you may fill another entire session.

When no one will talk: If the Opening Activity and Read and Discuss go very quickly because participants have little to say, you have a couple options. First, you can press them a bit. Perhaps it will take some provocative open-ended questions from you to get them to open up. Consider playing Devil’s Advocate. Or, if you think participants are feeling too shy to speak in the group, break the group up into pairs and ask them to revisit key points in the story or respond to a story-based question with their partner. This should get the conversation flowing. Then they can report back to the whole group.

You can also ask group members to spend two or three minutes writing their responses to a question before asking everyone to share their thoughts. They can pick one word or phrase from their written response to share.

Supporting Reluctant Writers

If your group is reluctant to write during journaling activities, remember that writing can be a source of anxiety for many young people. Remind them that the expressive writing they are doing here is not to evaluate their writing abilities. This is not for a grade. Rather, it’s meant as a way for them to share who they are and what they believe with each other. It can also help them reflect on experiences they’ve had and help them work through problems. Try these strategies to encourage their writing:

Be a model for them: Always write with them. Modeling by doing your own writing sends the message that, rather than hovering over and directing them to write, this is about writing for meaning. From time to time, share your writing, including reflecting on what the experience of writing was like for you.

Maintain a welcoming, low-pressure environment: Invite teens to share their writing, but let them be in charge of what, how much, and when they share. When they do share, listen to what the teen is trying to communicate in their writing and reflect back what you hear, as in, “It sounds like you’re saying...”

Start small and build up: Begin by allowing group members to write for just one minute at a time. Use a timer if you have one. Every few sessions, add 30 seconds or a minute to the writing time so that they become more comfortable with writing at length. Think of writing as building a muscle; you have to start small and increase the time slowly.

Supporting English Language Learners (ELLs)

Support ELLs by taking steps to make the ideas in the story comprehensible and give them an opportunity to respond to the story in ways that make them feel comfortable and successful. There are a few strategies for doing this:

Use multiple means of representation: Find and show images or videos that reflect certain parts of the story they’re reading (e.g., show an image of characters stereotyping each other to help define the term). Make sure group members are hearing the words and seeing them in print at the same time (a read-aloud does this naturally). Use manipulatives (e.g., clay, figurines, etc.), movement, or diagrams to illustrate certain key points.

Give options for participants to show what they know: Let group members draw or act out their thoughts rather than write them down. Accept one sentence or one word from them as indicative of their understanding. Allow them to respond in their native language.

Set up cooperative learning opportunities: Pair group members up with bilingual peers who can help reinforce and rephrase directions or parts of the story that are tricky.

Supporting Group Members with Special Needs

There are many different types of special needs that your group members may have that can affect their behavior, focus, or ability to comprehend the text. While the most effective supports will be tailored to meet the specific needs of each individual, there are some general strategies to help all group members successfully participate:

Maintain an organized space and limit distractions: In advance, make and post an agenda for all to see, which will help keep you organized, minimize down-time, and maintain consistency across sessions. Schedule short breaks to let group members know they have dedicated time to unwind. Think about seating particular group members in areas of the space that minimize distractions, like away from windows, doors, or noisy air conditioners.

Break down instruction into smaller tasks: Use simple, concrete sentences when giving directions or asking read-aloud questions. Consider giving directions in print and verbally. Ask participants to repeat directions to show they understand what you're asking them to do.

Give opportunities for success: Immediately give group members positive feedback when you see them putting in effort and doing what is asked of them. Shout out the positive behavior you're seeing instead of focusing on the negative. Explain and demonstrate appropriate behavior to them instead of expecting group members to pick it up naturally.

Teaching and Learning Strategies

Opening Activities

CHANGING AND STAYING THE SAME supports the social and emotional skills of **relationship skills** and **self-awareness**.

Changing and Staying the Same gives youth the opportunity to consider important aspects of a situation and examine which aspects may stay the same over time and which may change. This quick writing activity allows participants to reflect individually on their own thoughts and then share their thoughts and experiences with one another in brief one-on-one conversations. These conversations are more intimate than whole group-centered activities and affords everyone the opportunity to articulate their ideas without the pressure of addressing the entire group.

CONCENTRIC CIRCLES supports **self-awareness**, **social awareness**, and **relationship skills**.

Concentric Circles gives youth the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences with one another in brief one-on-one conversations. The quick pace prompts free-flowing discussions. It also brings an element of fun by allowing group members to move around.

These brief exchanges help group members know one another better. Make sure you have a large enough space in the room for your group to move around comfortably. You might want group members to rehearse forming two circles and rotating to new partners. This activity may seem complicated, but after doing it once, everyone will become comfortable and understand the task.

FREWRITE supports **self-awareness**.

This short burst of writing helps group members quickly get their thoughts and feelings down on paper.

Freewriting helps participants be more active and engaged, and connect more deeply to the themes of the story. It can spark strong feelings, so be respectful of privacy during the share time. Remind group members that in a Pair Share or Group Share, they get to choose what, and how much, they want to share. Sticking to this protocol will build trust in your group.

Freewrites in a session's Opening Activity can be used to activate background knowledge and introduce the theme of the story. To support diverse learners, you can also allow group members to draw their response to a Freewrite prompt.

GROUP BRAINSTORM supports **self-awareness**, **social awareness**, and **relationship skills**.

This short writing activity helps group members quickly write their ideas and thoughts on paper. Brainstorming helps participants write freely, without thinking too long about a topic, and helps them capture their initial reactions and thoughts. Remind group members that there are no bad ideas in brainstorming.

INSIDE OUT supports **self-management** and **self-awareness**.

This activity helps group members identify and manage their emotions. Participants demonstrate with a word, their body, or a facial expression how they feel in that moment, giving the group leader a sense of the group mood. As an Opening Activity, Inside Out helps prepare group members for the emotions that may come up as they read the story.

OPINION CONTINUUM supports **self-awareness** and **social awareness**.

This activity helps youth listen to, engage with, and appreciate diverse perspectives. As the group leader, you will create an actual continuum by clearing a large area in the center of the room and posting “agree” and “disagree” signs at either end. Be sure to introduce the activity and provide directions before asking the group to stand and move into the center of the space. Then group members will draw on their background knowledge to explain where they “stand” on the issue.

Opinion Continuum gives group members the opportunity to express their views while considering others’ viewpoints. They are invited to quietly change their position if they are influenced by a peer’s opinion. This option underscores the importance of being open to new ideas and being free to change one’s mind. To encourage minority positions, you may want to stand near someone who is alone at one end of the continuum and provide your own brief argument for that position.

Sometimes stories address challenges and dilemmas connected to the larger world. Opinion Continuum is an effective way for group members to express their beliefs and see that other people have different opinions.

PAIR SHARE supports **social awareness** and **relationship skills**.

In a Pair Share, group members turn and talk to the person they are sitting next to (or someone in the group they don't know well). With a partner, they take turns being the speaker and the listener and share responses to a question asked by the leader. This activity will be most effective if you have explicitly taught active listening. It can be used as ongoing active listening practice for the group.

Pair Shares are more intimate than whole group-centered activities, and less intimidating for shy group members. When you want group members to come up with deeper, more thoughtful responses in discussion and writing, a Pair Share is a good option. The Pair Share affords everyone the opportunity to articulate their ideas without the pressure of addressing the entire group.

TOSS ONE, TAKE ONE supports **self-awareness** and **social awareness**.

This activity is a quick and interactive way for group members to anonymously share and hear diverse perspectives. Group members write a response to a prompt on a piece of paper, crumple it up, and toss it into a container to try to “make a basket.” Each group member then retrieves a peer's anonymous response and reads it aloud to the group.

Toss One, Take One offers an easy way to draw on the group's background knowledge and open up different ways of thinking about the story's themes. The anonymous sharing helps group members feel comfortable expressing their ideas.

Encourage your group members to make personal connections to the responses their peers read aloud. It's a way to strengthen relationships within the group without putting one another on the spot. Tossing paper balls into a container can also build community and boost the group's energy.

WORD COLLAGE supports **self-management**.

This activity provides for visual expression of each participant's experience or ideas. Group members work in pairs to create a collage listing the words they would use to describe a specific topic. Word Collage is used as an Opening Activity and helps prepare participants for the story's theme. This activity shows how each person's experience contributes to the whole group. Without each participant's contribution, the work would not be as rich and varied as it is.

Explore the Idea Activities

CHANGE YOUR INNER THINKING supports the social and emotional learning skills of **responsible decision-making** and **self-awareness**.

Change Your Inner Thinking provides youth with a way to change negative inner thinking into something positive. Guided by reflective questions, participants work independently to identify their inner thoughts, reflect on the motivation or reason for a negative thought, and then create a solution for a positive outcome.

DEAR TEEN WRITER supports **self-awareness** and **social awareness**.

Through letter writing, group members have a chance to “talk back” and engage with the teen writer’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences. They don’t have to come directly from a place of “I.” Instead, they can give advice, offer support, or share an alternative perspective. The goal here is for group members to further develop empathy for the writer’s experiences. Still, any personal connections they make are more than welcome. Like in all other Youth Communication writing activities, no emphasis is placed on spelling, grammar, or other writing conventions.

If the group leader wishes, this expressive writing could lead to formal writing practice. Group members could incorporate revisions that emphasize writing conventions, audience, and format.

DRAW IT supports **self-awareness** and **social awareness**.

For reluctant and motivated writers alike, drawing is an effective tool to represent their thinking in another medium. By following drawing prompts and guidelines, group members use imagery, color, and labels to express their ideas and connect to the story’s themes. Sometimes, group members are asked to incorporate specific elements in their drawings, such as thought and speech bubbles. Often, they’re asked to caption their drawings to clarify their thinking.

If group members are hesitant to draw their personal experiences or situations, give them the option of drawing from the teen writer’s perspective. It helps them approach the social and emotional learning from a comfortable distance.

Most Draw It activities suggest sharing through a Gallery Walk. In a Gallery Walk, all drawings are placed on a table and group members walk around the room, noticing the unique ways their peers expressed thoughts, feelings, and ideas through art.

EMPATHY MAP supports **relationship skills** and **social awareness**.

Creating an empathy map allows participants to understand another person's perspective and develop insights that may influence a new perspective of their own. This activity stresses the importance of developing empathy to support positive relationships with others. Group members engage in meaningful discussion that is structured, yet open. Group members can make connections in an authentic way and seek to understand one another's perspectives.

GALLERY WALK supports **relationship skills**, **self-awareness**, and **social awareness**.

This activity allows group members to get up out of their seats and engage with provocative ideas that are raised in the story, as well as their peers' perspectives on those ideas.

Group members will rotate around the room in small groups, answering questions that are posted on chart paper. They will be able to discuss their ideas and write down some of the conversation's highlights at each poster. Then, when they rotate to a new poster, group members will respond to the ideas of their peers.

In the end, group members will return to the poster where they started and share out some of the whole group's best ideas left behind at that station.

When facilitating a Gallery Walk, be sure to circulate and push group members to give specific answers to the questions on the chart paper and provide meaningful comments for their peers' writing.

JOURNAL JOT supports **self-awareness**.

Journal Jot allows group members to personally reflect on and process their experiences more deeply than in a Freewrite. Journaling is more structured and includes specific guidelines. The goal is to sharpen the group's takeaways from the session plan while allowing members time to more fully articulate their emotional responses, questions, and personal connections to the teen writer's story.

Journal entries do not have to be long. What's important is that group members meaningfully reflect on their experiences and emotions. For participants who are writing about challenges in their lives, encourage them to also include their hopes and things they are doing or hope to do to meet their challenges.

When appropriate, group members may use art along with their writing. Incorporate other options that support diverse learners, such as making lists.

After journaling, group members will either participate in a Group Share or Pair Share. Group shares accompany journaling activities where it would benefit everyone to hear one another's thoughts or ideas. Pair Shares accompany most journaling activities because the one-on-one interactions ensure that everyone can participate in the conversation.

If you want to make journaling a part of your group's routine, purchase or create a journal for each group member. Before the first day, organize a system for handing out, collecting, and storing them.

Consider having your group decorate their journal covers before or during one of the orientation sessions. Then pose a high-interest journal prompt that gets them thinking about their hopes for the group. Volunteering to share their responses, and their artistic covers, would fit well in a Closing Circle.

LETTING GO, HOLDING ON supports **responsible decision-making, self-awareness, and self-management.**

This activity begins with self-reflection, moves to personal sharing in a Pair Share, and then can either extend into writing or whole-group sharing. A prompt asks group members to consider a change they are, or could be, making in their lives. When posing the prompt to the group, ask members to consider the attitudes, people, places, and behaviors they would need to "let go of" in their life to successfully make this change. These are the things that hold them back, hurt them, or that they've outgrown. Next, ask them to consider the attitudes, people, places, and behaviors that they want to "hold on to." These are the positive supports that can help them move forward in their lives.

During think time, pass out blank sheets of drawing paper. Direct group members to fold the page in half and label one side "Letting Go" and the other "Holding On." Working independently, they should create a list in each category. When group members are done, direct them to rip the page in half, separating the two sides.

As a symbolic and empowering gesture, group members then crumple up the "Letting Go" half and toss it into a large container in the middle of the circle. Then in a go-round share, everyone shares one thing from their "Holding On" list with the group and explains how it will help them reach their goal.

If you wish to add a reflection piece to this activity, you can have group members write a bit more about those attitudes, people, places, and behaviors that they want to "hold on to" and why.

ROLE PLAY supports **relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and social awareness.**

In this activity, group members will be given a scenario and roles to perform in front of the group. The scenarios relate to an issue or question that was raised in the connected story, and group members will be asked to take on their role and perform an improvised skit in front of the group.

Each character in the role play will have a particular motivation. While facilitating a role play, be sure to emphasize that the goal for each character is to show this need to the “audience” through their words, actions, and body language. If time allows, there should be rehearsal time for role plays, so that group members can practice reactions and dialogue.

Be sure to leave time at the end of all of the performances to have group members reflect on the different behaviors or comments they saw which they think were effective and helpful. This will help to reinforce connections between the story and their own lives.

TEEN TALK supports **relationship skills, self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness.**

This discussion activity helps group members examine their experiences within the intimacy of a small group. It is designed to maximize personal sharing and active listening. In groups of three or four, group members take turns responding to discussion questions on a handout provided by the group leader. Each person has an equal amount of time to respond. One person is in charge of reading the questions from the handout and monitoring the discussion.

When one person is speaking, others give the speaker their full attention and do not interrupt or ask questions. Tell group members that all discussions are confidential, so what’s said in Teen Talk stays in Teen Talk.

When facilitating Teen Talk, move around the room and support student-led conversations. Do not contribute to any discussions. This is a time for group members to assert their autonomy by freely expressing their beliefs and feelings with one another.

Feel free to check in with the group, though, to see how they felt participating in Teen Talk. Do not ask for group members to volunteer highlights from their conversations. The conversations remain private.

Closing Circle

CLOSING CIRCLE is a way for group members to synthesize, and for the group leader to evaluate the social and emotional learning that occurs during a session. This activity supports social and emotional learning in the areas of **self-awareness**, **social awareness**, **self-management**, and **relationship skills**.

At the end of each session, the group leader facilitates a Closing Circle. Group members sit together in a circle and take turns responding briefly to two questions in a go-round share. This allows participants to reflect on the activities and story and to make connections to their lives. While listening to their peers, group members focus on the speaker, actively listen, and manage their attention. As the group leader, you can learn more about your group and their responses, which can help you assess their progress toward meeting learning objectives.

Common Core Connections

The activities in each session plan are designed to engage diverse learners and support their growth toward proficiency in the Common Core State Standards related to reading comprehension, written expression, and speaking and listening. Below are the Grade 8 ELA standards most closely aligned to this program. To view the complete Common Core State Standards by grade, visit: corestandards.org.

READING Standards for Informational Text

Key Ideas and Details

RI.8.1 Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RI.8.2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to supporting ideas; provide an objective summary of the text.

RI.8.3 Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies, or categories).

Craft and Structure

RI.8.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author acknowledges and responds to conflicting evidence or viewpoints.

WRITING Standards

W.8.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

SPEAKING & LISTENING Standards

Comprehension and Collaboration

SL.8.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

SL.8.1.B Follow rules for collegial discussions and decision-making, track progress toward specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed.

SL.8.1.C Pose questions that connect the ideas of several speakers and respond to others' questions and comments with relevant evidence, observations, and ideas.

SL.8.1.D Acknowledge new information expressed by others, and when warranted, qualify or justify their own views in light of the evidence presented.

About Geoffrey Canada

Geoffrey Canada is an internationally recognized educator, social activist, and author known for his pioneering work in the field of education. A leading advocate for children, he created the Harlem Children's Zone in Harlem, New York, an organization dedicated to helping children in areas of concentrated poverty overcome the range of barriers to their success. The organization offers after-school programs, in-school support, parenting classes, community-building, and health and social-service programs, as well as running two charter schools. The Harlem Children's Zone has become a national model for education programs supporting children across the country. In 2011, Canada was named one of the world's most influential people by *Time* magazine and as one of the 50 greatest leaders by *Fortune* magazine in 2014.

About Youth Communication

Youth Communication equips and empowers educators and youth workers with real teen-written stories and a literacy-rich training model to engage struggling youth and build their social and emotional learning skills. Since 1980, Youth Communication's editorial staff has helped thousands of marginalized teens find their voices and write powerful, transformative stories. Educators and youth workers rely on these stories, and accompanying curricula and training, to connect with the youth they serve and transform classrooms into dynamic, encouraging learning environments. For more information about Youth Communication resources and professional development offerings, go to [**youthcomm.org**](http://youthcomm.org).

Credits

The stories in this book originally appeared in the following Youth Communication publications under these titles: “A Basic Recipe” by Jenny Zhang, YCteen Web, January 2021; “I Had My Anxiety Under Control, and Then the Coronavirus Came” by Laya Yagersys, YCteen Web, July 2020; “Our Close Call With COVID” by Shadman Rakib, YCteen Web, March 2020; “My Mom Works in a Hospital, and We Are Scared” by Layla Hussein, YCteen Web, June 2020; “Mourning, After” by Jennifer Nghe, YCteen Web, October 2020; “We Work the Hardest and Suffer the Most” by Edwin Mendez, YCteen Web, September 2020; “From Feel Safe to Feeling Like a Stereotype” by Christina Li, YCteen Web, May 2020; “Can I Do More?” by Rose Bell-McKinley, YCteen Web, August 2020; “Emmett. Kalief. Josiah. More Than Just Names” by Josiah Alexander, YCteen Web, June 2020; “Acting Brave Made Me Brave” by Shameera Sheeraz, YCteen

More Resources from Youth Communication

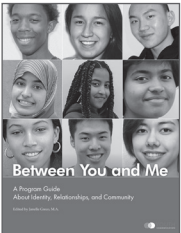
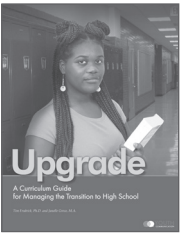
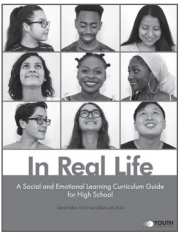
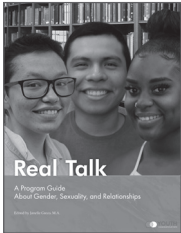
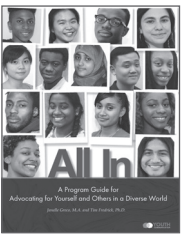
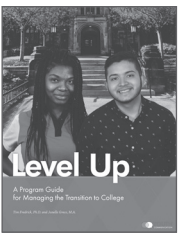
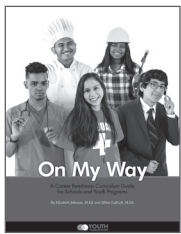
Youth Communication's story-based approach is designed to strengthen the social and emotional competencies of your youth and colleagues. Our stories, curriculum guides, and professional development support your staff in developing young people's self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

STORY-BASED CURRICULUM PROGRAMS

If you liked the sessions in *Opening Up.2021*, here are nine more programs to help young people to strengthen the skills that support academic and life success.

Each program includes:

- One-Day Professional Development Session
- Comprehensive Curriculum Guide
- Anthologies of True Stories by Teens
- Ongoing Coaching

 #trending True Stories About Growing Up Edited by Maria Leticia Tucker	Social and Emotional Learning for Middle School 6th Grade	 Between You and Me A Program Guide About Identity, Relationships, and Community	Self-Management and Relationship Skills 7th Grade	 Stay the Course A Program Guide About What to Choose and How to Stay on Track	Decision-Making 8th Grade
 Upgrade A Curriculum Guide for Managing the Transition to High School	Middle to High School Transition 8th Grade	 In Real Life A Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum Guide for High School	Social and Emotional Learning for High School 9th Grade	 Real Talk A Program Guide About Gender, Sexuality, and Relationships	Gender Identity and Relationships 10th Grade
 All In A Program Guide for Advocating for Yourself and Others in a Diverse World	Diversity, Equity, and Advocacy 11th grade	 Level Up A Program Guide for Managing the Transition to College	High School to College Transition 12th Grade	 On My Way A Program Guide for the School-to-Career Transition	Career Readiness 12th Grade