

HOPEFUL MESS

THE ALGEE FRAMEWORK

To help you turn mental health first aid into clear, compassionate actions you can take in the moment

ALGEE - WHAT, WHEN, WHY?

ALGEE is a practical framework, created by Betty Kitchener and Tony Jorm for the MHFA programme, that helps you support a young person when their mental health feels heavy or overwhelming. These kinds of moments often surface quietly in community settings. In schools, youth groups, creative programmes, sports sessions or mentoring spaces, young people sometimes open up to the trusted adult in the room before anyone else. It might happen in a casual conversation, a throwaway comment, a shift in mood, or simply in the way they show up that day.

Understanding the steps of mental health first aid means you're not caught off-guard when those moments arrive. You would probably follow many of these steps naturally anyway, the framework just gives you a steady structure to lean on, so you can respond with care without taking on the role of therapist or fixer.

Being aware of mental health first aid is especially important in informal or community-based spaces because young people often feel safer expressing emotion when the environment is relaxed and they're not sitting across from someone in a formal setting. They tend to talk more when they're doing something with their hands, when they're moving around, when music is playing, or when they're not required to make direct eye contact. Distress can show up in behaviour, energy or body language long before it shows up in words, and people working in the arts are often uniquely positioned to notice those shifts.

It is also important to support young people through a culturally rooted and culturally competent lens. Young people express distress differently depending on culture, gender, faith, family norms and community expectations. Some may minimise their feelings because they've been taught to "be strong." Others may not have the language for what they're experiencing. Some may trust community elders more than formal services. Culturally competent mental health first aid means you're not just following steps, you're paying attention to the young person's world, their identity and the support systems that actually make sense for them.

ALGEE is just a guide. It can help you hold the moment safely, honour the young person's context and nudge them toward the right support.

ALGEE FRAMEWORK

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**ASSESS FOR RISK OF
SUICIDE OR HARM**

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LISTEN NON-JUDGEMENTALLY

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**GIVE REASSURANCE AND
INFORMATION**

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**ENCOURAGE APPROPRIATE
PROFESSIONAL HELP**

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**ENCOURAGE SELF-HELP AND
COMMUNITY SUPPORT**

ASSESS FOR RISK OF SUICIDE OR HARM

To assess is not the same as to diagnose. It is noticing whether a young person might be at risk of hurting themselves or someone else. You're looking for:

- sudden withdrawal or shutdown
- talk of hopelessness or wanting to disappear
- risky behaviour
- signs of self-harm

Remember:

- You don't need perfect words. A simple: I'm noticing you're not yourself today, are you feeling safe?, is enough.
- Trust your embodied awareness. Creatives often sense emotional shifts long before anyone else.
- You're not responsible for fixing the risk, your job is to notice and pass it on

LISTEN NON-JUDGMENTALLY

Listening is a skill not many people get right. Good listening includes:

- giving them space to speak
- not interrupting
- not reacting with shock
- not minimising (*it's not that bad*)
- not promising things you can't deliver on (*I won't tell anyone*)

Remember:

- Listening can happen while warming up, walking to fill a water bottle, or sitting on the floor.
- Sometimes young people talk more when they're moving or being active.
- You don't need to fill the silence. Silence is information.

GIVE REASSURANCE AND INFORMATION

Your job is to help the young person feel held and supported.

Reassurance can sound like:

- Thank you for telling me.
- You're not in trouble.
- You're not alone in this.
- There are adults who can help.

Remember:

- Reassurance is not promising secrecy or giving advice.
- Reassurance is reminding them that what they're feeling is valid and that support is out there.
- Sometimes reassurance is simply staying calm when they expect you to panic.

ENCOURAGE APPROPRIATE PROFESSIONAL HELP

In a creative or community setting this usually means guiding the young person toward the safeguarding lead, wellbeing coordinator, youth worker, project manager, or the person responsible for pastoral care in the organisation or venue. Make sure you know who this is by name and how to reach them.

You might say:

- I'm going to share this with the safeguarding/wellbeing lead so they can support you properly.

Remember:

- You're not the therapist.
- Encouraging can be gentle: Would you feel okay if we spoke to them together?
- You can also check in with the safeguarding or wellbeing lead afterwards to make sure the young person was followed up.

ENCOURAGE SELF-HELP AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

This is the part most people forget, but it's where community workers and creative practitioners are often the experts. Self-help can look like:

- grounding exercises
- breathwork
- journaling or reflective writing
- creative expression as emotional release
- identifying safe friends or trusted adults
- taking a short break or finding a quiet space

Community support can look like:

- signposting them to a youth club or community centre
- connecting them with a creative group, sports team or cultural organisation
- encouraging them to join a group that aligns with their interests
- introducing them to a positive peer, mentor or supportive adult
- reminding them of the spaces where they feel most themselves

Remember:

- This is where your cultural knowledge matters. Sometimes the right auntie, coach, youth worker, faith leader or community elder is more impactful than any formal service.
- You're not "referring" in the statutory sense, you are widening their circle of care.
- Joy is a massive protective factor. If a young person lights up in your space, that's already self-help.