

2. MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, SOCIAL, AND SPIRITUAL HEALTH POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

The focus of this section is on camp and its campers—thinking about seasonal staff can be found in the section on Staff Mental, Emotional, Social, and Spiritual Wellbeing Guidelines on Healthy Boundaries.

When we think about MESSH policies and procedures, we are looking at a camp's preparedness to recognize and respond to youth with any challenges or issues. It is about creating an environment that is not only prepared for challenges, but also helps ensure that every youth in the environment is supported and thrives. This is about policies and procedures to handle challenges AND how camps can create and maintain a safe, welcoming environment for all campers.

Camps need policy to help guide responses and support youth with mental health challenges or diagnoses, including but not limited to social-emotional challenges, suicidal thoughts, self-harming behaviors, questions about identity, gender, and sexuality, struggles with eating or body image, bullying, social media, trauma, and other crises. This does not mean that one policy will cover every mental health challenge and scenario, but that there are some guidelines to help staff and administrators make decisions, take steps to support and help campers thrive, and know when they can no longer support a youth in this environment. Camps should, at least, have a general policy about MESSH challenges that covers the following steps:

- Ensures the safety of all campers
 - If needed, to contact additional staff for support and help
- Minimize the number of people involved and reduce any additional distractions;
- Attempt to de-escalate by communicating directly (e.g. clear statements, at eye level), calmly (e.g. low volume and calm tone of voice, patient listening), and without distractions (e.g. turn off a walkie talkie)
 - Don't rush a camper to calm down or try to limit or restrict their movements, as long as they are safe, give them space;
 - Work with them to normalize their [breathing](#) and try to understand what might help them in that moment (a walk, a quiet space to calm, a tactile object, etc.)
- Have eyes on the camper at all times
- Report UP for additional support as needed

****For any medical concern, medical treatment should be sought immediately.****

Camps need a staff member or team of staff who can respond to and support MESSH challenges. These staff should have experience handling mental health challenges and be a vital part of the reporting chain at camp. Camps should also consider creating opportunities for campers to engage with and build relationships with MESSH staff outside of moments of crisis or challenge and think about adding in resilience skill building to general camp activities.

Additionally, camps can create policies and procedures to help address MESSH challenges they deal with most frequently and help guide responses to challenges. Even if a camp chooses to have a general response policy for all MESSH challenges, they should create a policy and procedure for crisis response. Crisis response plans should include:

- Step-by-step action and response
- Staff members' specific roles and responsibilities
- Notification chain and timeline expectations
- Contact information for external support/advisors

It is not the intention for these policies to lock camps into a rigid structure, to create a situation that would lead to not accepting certain campers, or to not be flexible and able to adapt to individual needs. Instead, these policies are meant to provide the framework to respond to challenges in clear, confident, efficient, consistent, and caring ways. By having these policies written down, camps can help staff feel more supported confidently in possession of the tools to be able to respond to challenges. Writing policies down also helps to ensure consistent responses. Once the policy is written, camps should consider how they are going to distribute and educate on these policies to the various stakeholders including parents, campers, and staff.

Additionally, it is important that seasonal staff know the boundaries of their role in dealing with MESSH challenges and crises, as well as when and where to report up. Camps should have a clearly defined reporting chain that helps counselors know whom they should go to and when they should seek help. The policies should cover, and staff at all levels should be trained, never to keep a secret or to promise a camper that they will not tell someone else at camp or their parents/guardians.

When it comes to building and maintaining safe environments for campers, it is important that camp leadership consider how campers are being screened prior to arrival:

- What questions are camps asking?
- When is there follow up with families?
- Are there opportunities for follow up with other adults involved in the campers' lives? (Teachers, therapists, clergy, etc.)
- How and what information is being shared with various seasonal staff?

Each of these questions will help camp prepare for potential challenges and opportunities proactively. It will not solve or prevent problems, but it can help to mitigate some crises.

Key to creating and maintaining safe environments is thinking about a camp's programming. When building programs, has camp leadership and staff thought about [making programming inclusive and accessible](#) to all?⁶

⁶ If you are looking for resources to create an inclusive program, take a look at BBYO's Inclusive Programming Guide.

Another key component to building safe environments is how the camp is supporting gender non-binary campers. Do they have all-gender restrooms? Are there private spaces for campers to change? Do they have a policy to respect an individual rooming with the gender with which they identify? How do we communicate with families, especially if a child is not yet sharing information with parents? If your camp seeks to create this space, consider how you are addressing these key questions.

Finally, an essential piece of responding to MESSH challenges is having a system of documentation. Maintaining those documents is essential to protect campers, staff, and the organization. Proper documentation and record-keeping protect youth by laying the groundwork for possible realization of patterns of or signs and symptoms of abuse or mental health challenges; it also allows the agency to show (if necessary) that it followed all the appropriate steps as stipulated by local law and to justify the organization's actions with regards to staff members and program participants. At minimum, documentation should always include:

- Date of information received
- Names of staff involved, dates and formats of conversations, and up-to-date contact information
- Names of youth involved
- Names and contact information for parents/guardians
- Name of any outside agencies contacted, date of calls, contact information for follow up
- Summary of incident/allegation
- Summary of action taken, including any follow-up plans and timeline

It is also important to ensure that these records are kept safe and secure, and to monitor who is given access to information. Additionally, camp leadership must answer:

- Where are the incident reports going to live?
- Which staff are expected to complete them?
- How will those staff fill them out and submit them? Paper or digital?
- How are they being reviewed, how often, and by whom?
- Who needs access to these files? Is downloading access restricted?
- How long will a completed form be kept and where?
- How will they be able to see if something has happened with a youth prior to the incident at hand?
- How will staff be trained on completing these forms?

These concrete plans are vital to smooth implementation and accountability. Having a successful incident report is larger than just the form; it is having an entire system of documentation that ensures the success and safety of all campers and staff.

Key questions to keep in mind:

- *What do staff do with a MESSH concern? Where do they get support, and to whom do they report in various scenarios?*
- *Who is the person or people who are there to support concerns and help staff take next steps? How are these people and their roles introduced to the staff community?*
- *What information is collected before campers arrive at camp? How is it stored and accessed? Are there any proactive pieces put into place to support campers with identified needs?*
- *Are MESSH policies and procedures known to everyone or just a few? Is it written down and documented for institutional memory and accountability, or just something that is spoken about?*
 - *Can you create a pocket guide, key word(s) or phrase(s), or other quick/short ways for staff to reference and remember what to do?*
 - *Can you convey a few simple actions for staff to take like: listen, respond, refer?*
- *Is there a mental health professional on-site at all times? Is it clearly communicated across staff levels who is responsible for responding to and handling MESSH needs and challenges? Who do they serve, what are their qualifications, and how is their role defined and explained to campers and staff?*
- *How are staff, campers, and parents/families able to access mental health professionals and community care staff before, during, and after the summer?*
- *How, when, and from whom do you collect information and evaluate camper and staff MESSH support needs? Are static forms the only way to collect information, or are there other opportunities to connect and build relationships with campers, families, mental health providers, educators, or others as relevant?*
- *How do you keep track/document information to better support campers and staff (overall, daily, and from year to year)?*