



FY2024-2028

Active Minds : Strategic Plan

The mental health crisis experienced by youth and young adults has become one of the most pressing public health issues of this time.



It's well understood that the mental health of youth and young adults has been declining for years. The COVID-19 pandemic both exacerbated these alarming trends and brought them to the national forefront as an urgent concern. Yet, despite the increasing mental health needs of youth and young adults, young people are still not accessing the help they need.

Over the past 20 years, Active Minds has centered its work around data that shows **youth are the most impactful catalysts for change among their peers and communities**. In setting Active Minds' goals for the next five years, the organization is placing heightened emphasis on that fact and on its unique strength in reaching young adults, as we focus on **mobilizing youth and young adult leaders** to create a movement that forever changes how mental health is valued and prioritized in society.

To reverse negative trends in youth mental health outcomes, societal norms around mental health must radically improve. This includes ensuring:

- Youth & young adults have access to mental health information—including prevention education;
- They know what supports would be appropriate for their needs at any level;
- They can physically and emotionally access those supports when they need them.

A key factor in enabling this change is that youth and young adults have access to peers who can promote positive norms and beliefs about mental health. Research shows that in times of need, youth prefer to talk to peers rather than a professional or adult.¹ Institutions and systems must enable and facilitate help-seeking behaviors. Particularly as future generations become more diverse in race, ethnicity, gender and sexual identities,² Active Minds will continue to serve all those in need, with a growing intentionality to uplift the unique experiences of marginalized youth—including but not limited to those within BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) and LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) communities.

Most importantly, it is critical to engage youth & young adults as a key part of the solution. Young people know best what they need; it is time to position them to voice their needs, inform the solutions, and give them tools and paths for change.

¹ Morning Consult MTVE Custom Mental Health Study, 2023

² Pew Research Center



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The state of youth & young adult mental health



The data paint a worrisome picture of youth and young adult mental health, with recent well-documented increases in anxiety, depression, suicidality, and feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and isolation. Based on recent reports from the CDC:

- From 2011 to 2021, nearly all indicators of poor mental health and suicidal thoughts and behaviors increased.³
- In 2021, 42% of high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (i.e. daily sadness and hopelessness for at least two weeks), with increases over the last decade for all collected races and ethnicities and both males and females.⁴
- Young adults aged 18-25 had the highest prevalence of mental illness (33.7%) compared to adults aged 26-49 (28.1%) and aged 50 and older (15.0%).⁵



³ "Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2011-2021", CDC

⁴ "Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2011-2021", CDC

⁵ National Institute of Mental Health



Mental health and wellbeing are an essential part of healthy adolescent development and have far-reaching and long-term ripple effects that significantly impact a person's quality of life. In addition, the behaviors established in these years are likely to persist into adulthood.⁶ Identifying and supporting people during their youth & young adult years is critical, especially considering that 50% of all mental illnesses develop by age 14⁷ and 75% by age 24.⁸ Reaching youth and young adults at this critical juncture can set the stage for mental wellbeing for many years to come.

We have identified key barriers to accessing mental health care today. **Social stigma** is one of the most universal and persistent challenges. Though each person has individual circumstances that dictate how they are affected by barriers, data shows that the barriers are most pronounced for BIPOC (Black, Latino/a/e/x, Indigenous, and Asian American and Pacific Islander) and LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and other) populations and thus proactively ensuring inclusivity and reflection of all such identities is critical.

⁶ World Health Organization

⁷ World Health Organization

⁸ National Alliance on Mental Illness

How Active Minds drives essential, enduring change



Active Minds is uniquely positioned to drive essential, enduring change. For 20 years, we have held a unique position in the mental health field, equipping young adults themselves to change the conversation around mental health. Our presence is far-reaching, with active participants on more than 1,000+ college campuses, and a growing reach in grades 6-12 throughout the country—with a goal of reaching 1,000 new middle and high schools in the next two years. We also operate nationally renowned programs utilizing a peer-to-peer approach that is influencing the narrative on youth and young adult mental health, leading to changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors towards mental health as demonstrated by a 2018 study⁹ of Active Minds' work by RAND Corporation.

In this next chapter, Active Minds will build on its strong foundation of educating youth and young adults in order to create even greater impact by inspiring action that ultimately changes norms and behaviors of individuals, communities, and systems around mental health.

Ultimately, we are working to create a movement that **forever changes how mental health is valued and prioritized in society.**

The organization's work will center on mobilizing and equipping youth and young adults. Active Minds' focus will be on **amplifying the collective, diverse voice of youth and young adults to build a movement of lasting champions who improve mental health.**

This exciting and important work reflects the natural next step in our journey to change the conversation around mental health. It also fills a critical gap in the space today, differentiating us from organizations in our field/space providing education on mental health and enabling supports. Active Minds maintains **we need a movement that inspires and demands change led by the generation who feels its impact the most** so that our country will have the watershed moment it needs to create sustained change around the state of mental health for youth and young adults.

Active Minds' new theory of change documents how we will approach this work.



⁹ Active Minds [RAND Study](#)

Active Minds' 2023-2028 Theory of Change



Our Theory of Change highlights three key elements of how we will pursue our intended impact:

- We will connect, unify, and support a network of mental health champions;
- We will equip them with the knowledge, tools, and resources to influence their spheres now and into the future;
- We will activate them to share their voices publicly and mobilize them to create change amongst their peers, institutions, and communities.

Underpinning all of these approaches, our work moving forward will also be responsive to emerging data on the disproportionate mental health disparities faced by historically marginalized and diverse communities. As future generations become more diverse in race, ethnicity, gender and sexual identities, by tailoring our resources and trainings to more intentionally represent the unique needs of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities, Active Minds will build on its 20 years of work supporting youth and young adults from all communities.





There are a few important elements of this strategic work to highlight: a focus on **mobilization**, especially with **youth and young adults ages 14-25**, and a focus on **equity**.



Mobilization

Active Minds defines mobilization as a group of people coming together to take individual and/or collective actions towards a shared purpose or goal. We will prepare and organize youth and young adults to mobilize—with the goal of **creating a movement of mental health champions** that improve mental health norms.

What is a mental health champion?

We define **mental health champions** as individuals who i) are informed about mental health needs and supports, ii) seek opportunities to educate peers and networks, and iii) participate in individual and/or collective action to change mental health norms in their own lives and in their communities and systems.

There are four key levels of change: **individual, interpersonal, community, and systems**. The focus going forward will be to continue the essential work on creating change at the individual and interpersonal levels and to also purposefully focus on creating change in communities and systems that serve youth and young adults.



Youth and young adults ages 14-25

Our experience and research tells us that 14-25 is the prime age to engage in mobilization. Currently, this age range is part of Gen Z—a generation known to be hungry for change.¹⁰ Gen Z has already gained a reputation for being passionate collective activists, driven by the desire for change on key issues including climate, reproductive rights, and gun violence prevention.^{11,12} Additionally, age 14 is typically the point at which youth and young adults have enough knowledge, maturity, and access to channels and media to participate in mobilizing. Finally, given the data of the increasing mental health needs of youth in these ages and the power of peers, young people are best able to speak to their needs and perspectives of their peers. People within this range of 14-25 are ideally positioned and have the drive to understand and vocalize their needs to influence peers, institutions, and communities.¹³

Equity

As we pursue our goals, we will take a purposeful equity lens by tailoring our work to include and reach BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth and young adults. While mental health outcomes are worsening for all youth and young adults, the data reveal that BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth and young adults are facing more barriers than others, making it less likely that they can access the care they need.^{14, 15, 16, 17, 18} We strongly believe it is critical that we not only recognize these disparities but that we ensure our approach leads to more equitable mental health outcomes. Without a stronger commitment to addressing the needs of these disproportionately impacted groups, they will be left behind even further. As we pursue our work, Active Minds will continue monitoring the state of youth mental health and regularly identify the populations with whom we can have the greatest impact as we continue supporting the mental health of all youth and young adults.

For two decades, Active Minds’ approach to changing the conversation around mental health has been powered by youth mitigating the stigma surrounding mental health challenges and encouraging help-seeking among their peers. Today’s youth are the practitioners, policymakers, and parents of tomorrow. Through teaching, educating, and mobilizing youth and young adults, we will be creating a movement of today’s champions who change the world of tomorrow.



¹⁰ “True Gen’: Generation Z and its implications for companies, McKinsey & Company

¹¹ Gen Z Has a Passion for Political Activism. Schools Can Nurture It.”, EducationWeek

¹² “Gen Z: How young people are changing activism”, BBC

¹³ “Why Activism is Natural for Young People”, Greater Good Magazine, Berkeley University of California

¹⁴ “Recognizing Barriers Black, Indigenous, People of Color Face Regarding Mental Health Treatment”, University of North Carolina, School of Medicine

¹⁵ “Mental Illness Doesn’t Discriminate, so Why do BIPOC Communities Have Difficulty Accessing Care”, Jefferson Center

¹⁶ Mental Health America

¹⁷ National Alliance on Mental Illness

¹⁸ The Trevor Project

Active Minds' goals and five-year strategic priorities



As we begin our next chapter, we have developed a five-year strategic plan to guide our work. In the next five years, we will focus on deepening our progress towards our intended impact by refining, focusing, and strengthening our approach in alignment with our new Theory of Change. **The next five years are essential to building the movement that will improve mental health norms.** To achieve this, we will focus on five strategic priorities.



Strategic Priority #1

Sharpen focus of programming towards mobilizing youth as key champions for mental health

Over the next several years, we will enhance and adjust the programs we offer in three ways:

- **Aim programs towards youth and young adult mobilization**, aligned towards the approaches laid out in our new Theory of Change (“our work”)
- **Position programs to measure impact and to sharpen our perspective** of what is necessary to successfully mobilize youth and young adults
- **Apply purposefully an equity lens in programmatic work**, taking steps to ensure programming both reflects and resonates with populations that have historically been most marginalized in mental health, beginning with BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth and young adults

Through this sharpening, Active Minds will establish a strong foundation towards our ultimate goal of building a movement that forever changes how mental health is valued and prioritized. To build this movement, **our programs will prepare youth and young adults to be champions and leaders in their peer groups, communities, and institutions/systems.**



We plan to achieve and exceed this goal by:

- **Doubling down on key programs**, including our school-based chapter programming and our direct-to-youth resources to ensure they foster deeper youth engagement and mobilization opportunities.
- **Designing and implementing youth leadership trainings** focused on equipping youth with knowledge and skills needed to be effective mental health champions and to drive the movement forward.
- **Making strategic pilot adjustments to some of our other existing programs** with the goal of deepening impact and driving sustainability, including Send Silence Packing, Active Minds Speakers, and Emerging Scholars; and sunsetting programming that doesn't align with our new Theory of Change.
- **Exploring emerging areas of focus**, such as our policy and advocacy efforts and workforce development—both of which target critical barriers to accessing mental health supports today and utilize the unprecedented dedication of young adults to continue to change the world tomorrow.

Over time, we will continue to evolve our perspective on best-in-class mobilization strategies and calls-to-action, as well as the dynamic needs of youth and young adults, to ensure that we are effectively amplifying their voices and centering our work on the most effective approaches.



Strategic Priority #2

Focus marketing efforts on delivering messages that best mobilize youth and young adults to create change around mental health

Marketing is a critical driver of impact when seeking to change norms and evolve a conversation. Our marketing efforts play two important roles: to market our programs and to enable us to influence the conversation around mental health through public platforms (e.g., traditional media, social media, and other channels).

The messaging we prioritize in our marketing defines our brand and identity and communicates to the external world Active Minds' 'reason for being.'

To focus our marketing efforts, our work will revolve around:

- **Specifying the audiences we are targeting and sharpening the key messages** we will deliver across each marketing channel to reach these audiences
- **Better tracking and measuring the impact of our marketing activities**, leading to a clearer understanding of what approaches are working and for which populations
- **Keeping a pulse on the external environment** to identify promising new channels and innovative strategies

We are excited to move into this sharpened approach to marketing, with a clear set of target audiences, messages to test and focus on shifting the conversation to mobilization; and we are eager to continue to learn and evolve our approach over time.





Strategic Priority #3

Measure to better
understand the impact
of our work and
pursue continuous
improvement

It is paramount that we measure, understand, and communicate the impact of our updated approach. We will anchor a measurement process around the outcomes identified in our new Theory of Change and build measurement into all of our programs and marketing efforts.

We are investing in our Research and Evaluation team, equipping us with the capabilities and capacity to pursue a more robust measurement strategy to enable informed decisions and close tracking of our impact. This is also a growing function, with a mandate to adapt and evolve a measurement approach that is right-fit for Active Minds. With the context of our new Theory of Change, we will:

- **Develop our near-term and long-term measurement strategy** with clear KPIs and metrics
- **Implement our measurement strategy**—gathering and analyzing data
- **Apply continuous learning and improvement** to inform our future work

As we pursue this next step in our organization's impact, we are eager and excited to learn and further sharpen our perspective on the most effective tactics for youth and young adults mobilization. The learnings that our Research and Evaluation team identify from gathering and analyzing our data, as well as tracking the research base of the field at large, will directly inform our decisions and steps in the future.

Photo credit (above): MTV Entertainment Studios





Strategic Priority #4

Purposefully consider equity in all elements of our work to support prioritized populations

There are a multitude of reasons it is critical for us to center equity in our work. Equity across all races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations, continues to be a core part of Active Minds culture and goals, impacting every part of the organization, from programming to marketing to measurement to other internal functions. Recognizing existing data that underscores disproportionate mental health impacts faced by historically underserved populations, and the increasing diversity of youth and young adult generations, supporting and uplifting these communities is an important area of opportunity for Active Minds to contribute to youth and young adult mental health.

We remain committed to antiracism and are prioritizing an action plan to operationalize this commitment. We seek to:

- **Incorporate an inclusive program design and content development process**, keeping in mind the evidence-based need to tailor content for different communities and populations experiencing unique mental health challenges and what key messages resonate with each. For example, we will incorporate relevant stories, voices, and practices at the start of the design and development process and throughout implementation of programs and marketing efforts.
- **Develop a meaningful measurement approach** that identifies what impact outcomes we will hold ourselves accountable to, to ensure progress on equity. To do this, we will identify equity-centered outcomes and metrics, disaggregate data—including by race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, and identify opportunities to further deepen our impact on specific populations based on the data and analysis.
- **Build continuous learning about equity into our culture** to gain knowledge from outside and enable us to better serve populations historically marginalized in mental health. While we've made progress on our commitments to equity, we recognize that this is a journey and there is always more to be done. It is critical that we seek out and leverage voices and experts that provide valuable guidance and strengthen our approach with each passing year.

Strategic Priority #5

Strengthen organizational ability to sustainably deliver on our Theory of Change

It is vital that we continue building a strong organization and culture and that we align our resources to execute our strategic priorities. Our priority will be to ensure that our team has the tools and capabilities to implement their work with excellence. This includes:

- **Provide training, coaching, and professional development:** We will regularly monitor the needs of our team and ensure we are offering the necessary training, coaching, and professional development to support their work and their overall growth.
- **Build our roles and capabilities, supplementing with new hires/positions when needed:** We will ensure that we have the needed capabilities to execute on our work and determine what capabilities to prioritize and sequence in our hiring efforts.
- **Strengthen our technology infrastructure:** As we focus on mobilization, we anticipate a need to invest in technology to organize the movement of mental health champions and enable individual and/or collective actions. As we pursue our strategy, we will explore emerging tools to determine what will be most effective.
- **Ensure that Active Minds has sufficient financial resources** to sustainably execute our ambitious strategy. To this end, we will continue to assess and evolve our funding model and build on existing efforts to strengthen our development capabilities. This includes maintaining strong relationships from valued supporters as well as exploring and establishing new sources of funding.

Finally, we will continue to assess and evaluate our role and influence in the youth and young adult mental health ecosystem. We seek to share our point of view, informed by our research and experience, and speak up as a unique voice, especially in amplifying youth perspectives. To do this, we will build individual leaders in a variety of ways, such as speaking engagements, writing or opinion sharing, representing at key sector events, connecting with other thought leaders and leaders in the field, and identifying partnerships that complement our approach or expertise.





What it will take to achieve our goals

Across our five strategic priorities, we have identified a set of five-year success indicators:

- A growing network of united and engaged mental health champions
- Active, deep engagement with youth and young adults from all communities, including populations historically most marginalized in mental health and for whom the largest disparities still exist
- Necessary processes and systems in place to ensure we are prioritizing measurement and equity and effectively coordinating across functions
- A reliable, sustainable set of revenue sources
- A team with the necessary skills and training to execute on our core work, supplemented by key hires to strengthen our capabilities
- An organizational culture that nurtures a strong, diverse team

We estimate that executing this strategy will cost ~\$47 million over the next 5 years, starting at \$8 million today and increasing to ~\$11 million by FY28.

These financial projections reflect continued growth but at a more sustainable rate than the significant jumps since our last strategic plan, including careful and methodical hiring combined with focused, sustainable revenues that can weather economic uncertainty and volatility in the philanthropic world. The bold vision laid out in this strategic plan will require bold commitments, increased support, and transformational investments to enable our ultimate goal to be reached.

As Active Minds celebrates 20 years of passionate pursuit of change in the mental health of youth and young adults, we look towards the future with renewed dedication and focus. Today, we are emerging from a phase of rapid growth and are launching this new strategic plan to guide our next efforts. There are risks that come with executing this new strategy. Creating an effective movement of youth and young adult mental health champions is an ambitious goal that will stretch us and take time, effort, and learning. We will carefully consider how to innovate and respond to the needs of the individuals and groups who Active Minds can reach, knowing that we will need to remain flexible and responsive to their specific needs. We will also need to develop new methods and measures of tracking our impact and progress.

We know that it will take more than just five years to achieve our intended impact, but we are excited about the direction we have identified to make our work even more impactful for the constituency we serve. We seek to build an organization that will drive results in mental health for decades to come. In the near-term, this requires methodical, sustainable growth over the next five years. This is a season of leaning into our new Theory of Change, learning how to mobilize with excellence, and building the functions and teams that will support this mission. We are equipped and eager to build upon our years of experience and our recent growth to build the foundation for Active Minds' future, focused on creating a movement that forever changes how mental health is valued and prioritized.

