

SECTION I

WHY ACT ON HEALTH?



CHANGING LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY

Young people under 30 years of age make up more than half of the world's population. Many young people live in very different social settings to those which our parents and other elders experienced at a similar age. Those settings have been significantly influenced by changes in:

- communication systems – for example radio, television and broader circulation of newspapers and magazines;
- travel possibilities – for example better roads, cars, trucks and air links;
- educational opportunities – for example better schools with trained teachers and a greater chance of spending longer in the educational system;
- better diets and disease control that increase life expectancy.

These changes affected our lives in a number of significant ways. We may:

- be more independent of traditional authority and cultural patterns than our parents and elders were;
- have a cash income from a waged job;
- live in cities away from our ancestral town or village;
- be more focused on ourselves or our nuclear family, rather than the extended traditional family or community;
- have a different view to our parents and elders on the role of young people.

Experimentation and change are a normal process in this stage of our lives as our situations and commitments change. Some changes are a matter of choice, while others are forced on us by society. Many of us are still affected by having to leave school or home early.

WHY FOCUS ON YOUTH HEALTH ISSUES?

As young people, we are an important resource in our countries. Our health and well being help determine the current and future vitality of our communities and countries. But all too often our potential is under-realised and under-used.

Adolescence and early adulthood are usually a time to experience rapid transitions in our physical, spiritual, mental, social and sexual development. Since many of the factors that can harm our health later in life are often developed during adolescence, it is also a time to develop attitudes and behaviours that will stop us developing bad habits, such as smoking and substance abuse. During adolescence we can put these into practice independently from older people. In doing this we can enhance our ability to have a productive life and to make a meaningful contribution to the communities in which we live.

We need to be given every opportunity to develop to our fullest potential, to become active members of our communities and to make choices about how we live our lives. We need to seek out opportunities which can provide a supportive environment for us to achieve this, through experiential learning, observation and so on.

THE KEY YOUTH HEALTH ISSUES

As young people we are often one of the healthiest groups in our communities because we are not as vulnerable to diseases as the very young or the very old. However, despite our better health, we are often not as well-informed on health issues, or as healthy, as we should and could be. We are generally less concerned with long term damage to our health and we are more willing and more likely to take risks.

This manual focuses on health and education related to three major categories of concern for young people:

Sexual behaviour and reproductive health

This includes issues related to pregnancy, reproductive processes, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

Alcohol and other drugs

Young people may be exposed to alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, cocaine, heroin and solvents. We may risk problems related to the use of these substances, such as alcohol-related violence, respiratory problems related to smoking, and HIV/AIDS from injecting drugs.

Lifestyle risks

Changes in the life situations of many young people mean a greater risk of injury in transport-related accidents, exposure to poor health and safety conditions at work, less nourishing diets, more stress-related illnesses, inadequate rest and sleep, and lack of exercise.

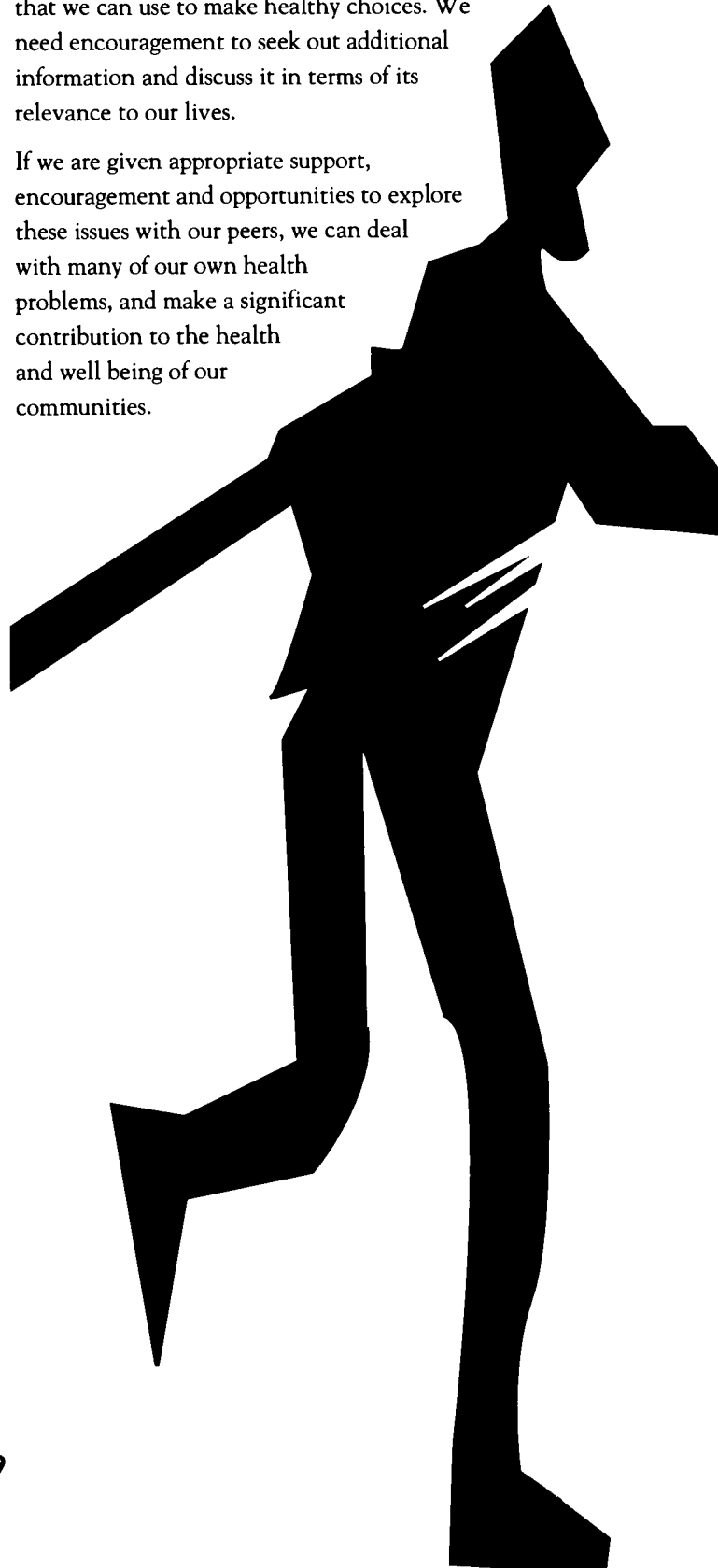
BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

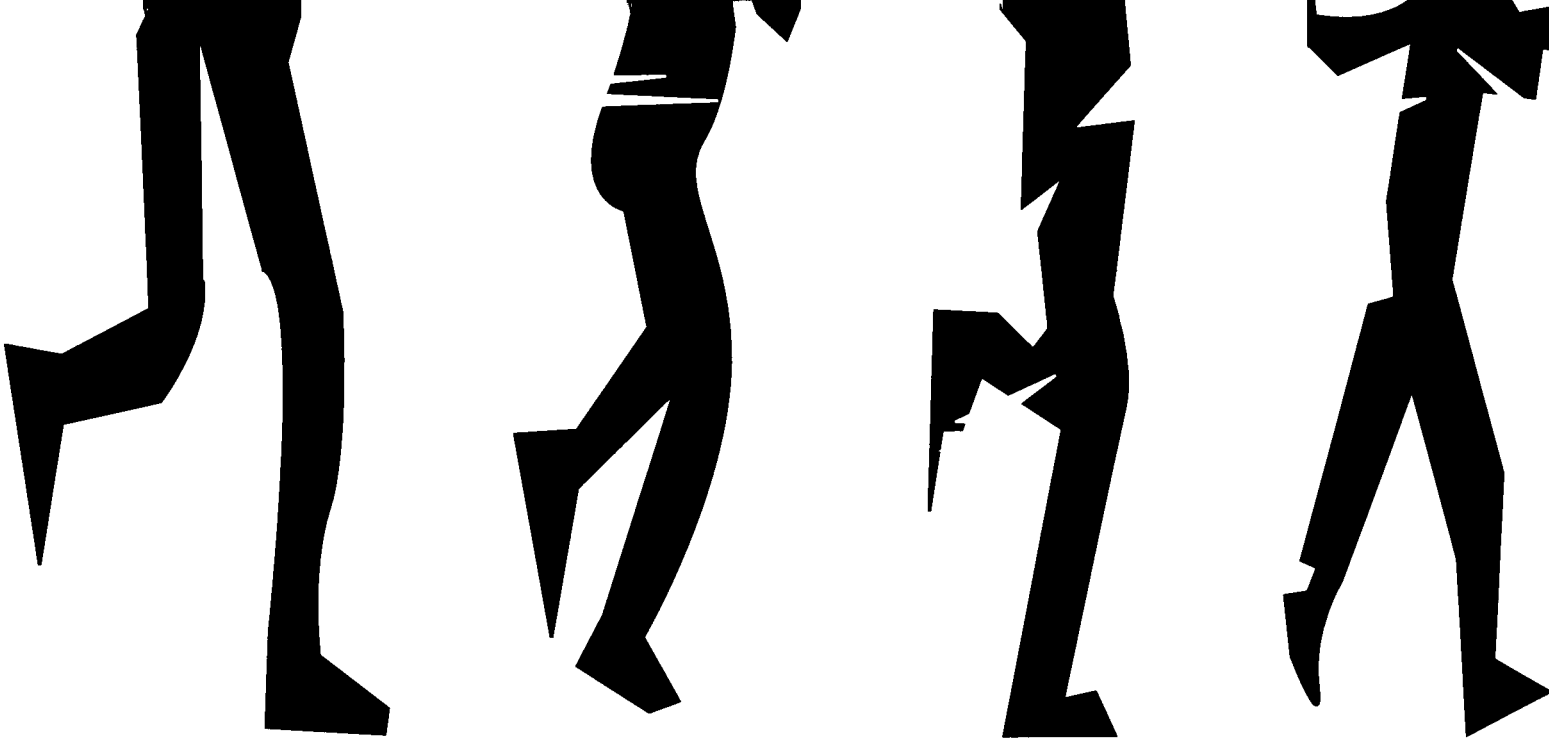
Many of the health problems we face as young people are related to our attitudes and behaviours, and are in principle preventable. Education and information are powerful weapons against the factors that restrict our healthy development.

It is important to remember that young people at this time in our lives are experimenting, taking risks and developing our own personality and identity, based on our own judgements rather than those of our parents, families and teachers, who have previously played important roles in shaping our lives. Risk-taking behaviour is a normal and healthy part of our development, and should not be seen as deviant.

As young people, we need to acquire knowledge that we can use to make healthy choices. We need encouragement to seek out additional information and discuss it in terms of its relevance to our lives.

If we are given appropriate support, encouragement and opportunities to explore these issues with our peers, we can deal with many of our own health problems, and make a significant contribution to the health and well being of our communities.





RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS AND ELDERS

Unfortunately many of the health issues that are of most concern to us are ones which we find difficult to share with parents and other elders – either because of the sensitive nature of the concern, or because of their lack of knowledge or awareness.

It may be uncomfortable for our parents and communities to recognise the existence of sex outside marriage, same-sex relationships and drug use. Their failure to do so, and to take appropriate steps, however, puts our culture and community at great risk and works against the continuing health of that community and its young people.

This resistance to open discussion has often meant that we get misleading or unhelpful advice. It is essential to promote an open and safe environment in which to discuss these issues fully, without fear of recrimination and with respect for young people's chosen patterns of behaviour.

To do this, we need to try to communicate with older people who are willing to understand and support us. This may be done by inviting older people, village elders and senior youth leaders to youth gatherings and giving them the facts about the health issues that concern us. By discussing these issues with them we may be able to create supportive partnerships to promote youth health issues.

ROLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE

To ensure that the health needs and priorities of young people are comprehensively and sensitively addressed, young people must play a central role in developing any initiatives that are aimed at us. Identifying our information needs ensures relevance and contributes to our personal knowledge, skills and development.

We have a unique understanding of the context into which any messages about our health needs and problems must be placed, we understand the views and opinions of other young people, and we understand the behaviours that put us at risk. We need to be linked with other young people to share our experiences and ideas and to ensure that programmes developed to target these issues have direct relevance to our needs and aspirations.