

Amplify Youth Voices

The Beneath the Surface Activity

PROVIDER PARTICIPATION GUIDE

From unspoken struggles to shared support.

An Invitation to Participate

The Beneath the Surface initiative exists to amplify youth voices, interrupt isolation, and help young people know they are not alone and that they matter to the adults in their lives. We believe recognition is the first step toward change because nothing changes until someone feels seen. This activity gives young people a way to express themselves and helps adults look beneath behavior, recognize what those behaviors may be communicating, validate the young person's feelings, and respond with empathy and compassion. By offering the activity in your school, practice, program, or community, you are helping build a bridge between what young people experience and what adults can see.

Where the Activity Began

Beneath the Surface began in middle and high school health classes, with 1,125 drawings created primarily by youth ages 12 to 14. In the original curriculum and presentation, the activity was called the Emotional X-Ray. Students were given a simple prompt and invited to draw what came to mind:

What would your anxiety, stress, or drama look like in your body or in your life?

Most of the original drawings were completed in about five minutes. Students responded quickly, which may have helped reduce overthinking and the pressure to create the “right” response. Together, the drawings revealed a deeper story and a glimpse into their unseen struggles. The original collection now serves as the foundation of the Beneath the Surface movement and its youth mental health awareness and prevention work.

Why We Use Art

Many young people struggle to put what is happening inside them into words. Art offers another form of language. Through images, symbols, shapes, colors, and words, young people can show us what an experience looks or feels like without needing to explain it. A storm, a cliff, a hole, a wave, or a crowded page can become a form of visual storytelling. The goal is to create an opening for young people to recognize and describe their own experience. Art gives a young person an opportunity to express what they experience beneath the surface and see it outside themselves. This can help them notice and make sense of what is happening. When another person responds with empathy, the young person feels seen, recognition becomes connection, and they no longer have to hold the experience alone. That connection reinforces safety and belonging.

Choose the Approach That Fits Your Setting

You can use this activity in different settings, but how you lead it should match the needs of the young people, the purpose of the activity, and your responsibilities as a provider or organization.

Clinical or Treatment Settings

Therapists, counselors, social workers, psychologists, and treatment providers may use the prompt as a brief reflective or therapeutic activity with an individual client or treatment group. The drawing can start a conversation, stay private, or be done without discussion. Before you start, explain if you will see the drawing, if it might become part of the clinical record, and how it will be handled afterward.

School or Community Group Settings

Schools, youth programs, and community organizations can offer this activity to groups as a short opportunity for expression. Facilitators may invite voluntary sharing, respond briefly to each drawing as it is shared, or have participants turn their drawings face down to create an anonymous local collection. Taking part never means a young person has to explain or show the drawing. Since a private or anonymous drawing cannot be used to ask for help, the organization should make sure there is a clear way for participants to get support before the activity starts.

Local Use

Beneath the Surface is not collecting youth artwork at this time. The activity is designed to live within your own school, practice, program, or community. A young person may keep the drawing, discard it, talk about it privately, or let the provider or organization keep it according to local policies.

How to Facilitate the Activity

1. **Prepare the setting.** Respect privacy, make support available, and decide how drawings will be handled.
2. **Invite participants.** Explain that participation and sharing are optional.
3. **Introduce the activity.** Participants may use pictures, symbols, words, colors, shapes, self-portraits, or stick figures.
4. **Share the prompt.** Ask: "What would your anxiety, stress, or drama look like in your body or in your life?"
5. **Choose the time frame.** Five to ten minutes often works for a classroom or community activity. A therapist or group leader may allow more time.
6. **Invite reflection.** Choose the sharing approach that fits your setting and keep explanation voluntary; this includes group discussion or private reflection.
7. **Close the activity.** Thank participants, remind them about available support, and follow your usual procedures if a concern comes up.

Suggested Facilitator Language

“What would your anxiety, stress, or drama look like in your body or in your life? Think about what this experience is like for you. What would it look like? Would it have a shape, a place, a sound, or a feeling? You can use thought bubbles to show what it sounds like, what someone says, or what you say to yourself. You can draw a scene if it looks like something happening around you. You can use pictures, symbols, words, colors, or stick figures. This is your way of showing what it is like for you. Get creative. There is no right or wrong answer.”

Optional Reflection Questions for discussions

- “Is there anything you would like to share with me/us about your drawing?”
“What would you want someone to understand?” “What else would you want someone to know? Would anyone like to share what their drawing means?”

When a Young Person Shares

A simple response can communicate that the young person has been seen and heard. Depending on what they share, you might say:

- “Thank you for sharing that with me/us.” “That makes sense.” “It makes sense how this affects you.” “I’m glad you shared this.”

Facilitation Tips

- Keep the activity simple and low-pressure.
- Avoid praising artistic skill or comparing drawings.
- Allow the drawing to remain private if that is what the young person chooses.
- Let the young person decide whether they want to talk about what they made.
- Music can help create a reflective atmosphere. You may play a song about mental health while participants draw.

A Separate Path to Support

Privacy can help young people express themselves honestly. In a group, though, a private or anonymous drawing cannot always link a concern to the person who made it. The organization should have a separate, clear way for young people to ask for support. If a young person shares abuse, suicidal thoughts, a suicide plan, or another urgent safety concern, or seems to be in distress, follow your usual professional, organizational, reporting, and emergency steps.

Scope of the Activity

The Beneath the Surface activity is not a mental health assessment, crisis-screening tool, research study, diagnostic tool, or replacement for professional judgment.

Sharing Your Participation

Your school, practice, program, or organization can share that you took part in the activity. Sharing your participation can help keep the conversation going, encourage other adults to listen, and show your community that youth voices matter. Drawings remain with the young person or are handled locally. Depending on your setting and permissions, you might share approved photos of the activity, the materials, the room, staff, or students who have media permission. You can also share a short reflection about why your organization joined in.

"We participated in the #BeneathTheSurface activity to amplify youth voices and help adults recognize what young people may be carrying beneath the surface."

Keep each young person and their artwork private unless you have the permissions your organization and the law require to photograph, post, display, or identify them.

If you would like to share your participation, explore a community display, or discuss another way to bring the activity into your setting, email Beneath@AmyKathleenLee.com or call 805-296-2600.

Your Partnership Matters

Every invitation to participate is an opportunity to interrupt isolation. When young people are given another way to express what they carry, they begin to recognize their own experience and discover that they are not the only ones carrying it. When adults respond with curiosity, empathy, and compassion, recognition becomes connection. The purpose is to say through our response: I see something I could not see before. This matters to me. And you matter.

Frequently Asked Questions

What ages is the activity designed for?

The original activity was mostly used with youth ages 12 to 14. This guide is meant for working with young people ages 12 to 19, with the provider or organization deciding what is developmentally appropriate.

Can I use the activity with an individual client?

Yes. In a one-on-one setting, it can be a short reflective activity or a way to start a conversation. Use it within your professional role and the context of your relationship with the young person.

Can I use it with a therapy group, classroom, or youth program?

Yes, as long as your plan fits the setting. For groups, make sure everyone knows what to expect about privacy, how drawings will be handled, where to get help, and what you will do if a concern comes up.

Does the young person have to show or explain the drawing?

No. Young people can keep their drawing private and choose not to discuss it. The activity can still be meaningful even if nothing is shared.

Should I interpret the symbols or images?

No. Ask open questions and let the young person explain what their drawing means to them.

What if the drawing suggests suicide, self-harm, abuse, or another safety concern?

A drawing by itself should not be used as a risk assessment; however, it can be a door to a meaningful conversation. Use your professional judgment, invite direct conversation when needed, and follow your usual assessment, reporting, safeguarding, and emergency steps.

Does the drawing become part of the clinical or educational record?

That depends on your setting, how you use the activity, and your organization's policies. Decide this before you start and explain it clearly to the young person. Do not promise privacy if your role or setting cannot provide it.

Do I need parent or guardian permission?

Permission requirements depend on your setting, the young person's age, the purpose, your organization's policy, and the law. The provider, school, or organization must figure out what notice, consent, or permission is needed.

Can I change the wording of the prompt?

It is best to use the original prompt when linking the activity to Beneath the Surface. Providers can change the wording if needed for clinical or developmental reasons, while keeping the prompt open and free from a suggested feeling, diagnosis, story, or outcome.

Can I photograph, post, display, or share a young person's drawing?

This guide does not give permission to publish or publicly display a young person's work. Follow your organization's privacy and consent rules and get the right permission before using drawings beyond the activity.

What materials are needed?

Plain paper and simple drawing tools are all you need. Special art supplies are not required. Make it easy for everyone to express themselves.

Is training required?

You do not need special art training. Facilitators should understand the purpose of the activity, stay within their professional role, make support available, and follow their organization's safety, privacy, and consent rules.

Can I send drawings to Beneath the Surface?

Beneath the Surface is not collecting new youth artwork at this time. Drawings stay with the young person or are handled locally based on the provider's or organization's policies.