



LEAGUE
of CHANGE
INSTITUTE

BUILT TO THRIVE

The Case and A Roadmap for
Investing in Youth Mental Fitness

2026-2027

BLEEPRIINT 2

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This blueprint is the second publication of

LEAGUE OF CHANGE INSTITUTE

WHY WE EXIST

To inspire, foster and accelerate the cultural transformations, scientific advancements, and financial investments required to build the best mental health for all in America.

We identify and build bold yet practical solutions to speed up the change we all want to see.

APPROACH & METHODOLOGY

The research underpinning this publication originated from the desire to radically disrupt the stigma surrounding mental illness and reverse the trajectory of the youth mental health crisis. The recommendations outlined in this blueprint represent one promising path forward.

To fully understand and appreciate the problem and to discern and define the opportunities for change outlined in the following pages, we took a multipronged approach which included the following key activities:

- ✔ An extensive literature review (books, white papers, reports).
- ✔ A literature review analyzing more than 50 articles, scientific papers, books, and reports on youth mental health and mental fitness.
- ✔ Securing stakeholder input: Seeking the perspective of several of Atlanta’s most knowledgeable

and influential business and civic leaders, philanthropists, and experts, practitioners and professionals in youth mental health treatment. These individuals guided the research, helped to identify key resources and additional experts, and provided feedback throughout the process and on development of the frameworks outlined in this report.

- ✔ An analysis of existing youth mental health models and programs in the greater Atlanta area that could be easily adapted to align to a framework to build youth mental fitness.

PIONEERING THE NEXT FRONTIER IN YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

We can't treat our way out of the youth mental health crisis.

A new strategic goal is required to help win this war: building youth mental fitness.

We live in a time where we are talking about mental health more than ever before. Yet the number of young people who are depressed, anxious, and dis-regulated is at an all-time high. We are seeing unprecedented levels of pessimism, loneliness, and fear. Youth suicide rates continue to climb. Despite mental health being seemingly everywhere, the stigma remains stubbornly in place, and levels of philanthropic and government funding remain low in comparison to other illnesses and social causes.

How could all this talking about mental health have yielded these disappointing results?

“There’s been an overinvestment in the far end of mental health, in the late-stage crises and catastrophes. And if we don’t get out in front of that, we’re going to keep spending our resources at the tail end.”

– John N. Constantino, MD

Liz and Frank Blake Chair for Children’s Behavioral and Mental Health, System Chief, Center for Behavioral and Mental Health, Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta (CHOA)

CHOA, one of the premier hospitals in the country for children and young adults, sees more than 6,000 youth a year who are experiencing a behavioral crisis.

Building Youth Mental Fitness

Much attention and money is being focused on responding to the youth mental health crisis. Schools are becoming essential places for promoting, monitoring, and providing our young people with professional-grade mental health services. Significant investments are being made to address the mental health workforce shortage as one way to increase access to care and shorten the wait time for help.

While these are necessary and noble priorities, culturally we are stuck somewhere between talking about mental health and waiting until crisis to act. But what if we swing the pendulum in the other direction? What if, instead of being reactive to symptoms of mental illness, we cultivate a culture of being in relentless pursuit of mental fitness?

Mental fitness is a goal.

Today we talk in terms of wellbeing and thriving. These are useful terms, but neither implies the need for action.

Equipping our youth and their support systems with the attitudes, knowledge and skills to **build mental fitness** – and the services necessary to **restore mental fitness** – will inspire kids and young adults to train their minds with the same determination and grit used to build physical fitness.

Focusing on mental fitness also has the potential to end the stigma that prevents people from seeking help. It’s possible that by shifting our conversations from the diagnostic labels of mental illness to all manner of how to achieve mental fitness, the stigma may well become obsolete.

Finally, reframing our narratives from mental illness to mental fitness may also help open the funding floodgates to fuel much needed research for essentials like biologically-based diagnostics and cures.

This blueprint is a call to action to dedicate at least as much time, attention and funding to youth mental fitness as we do to youth mental illness crisis response, treatment, and care.

Investing in youth mental fitness might be the change we’ve all been waiting for.

IT'S TIME TO REWRITE THE RULES AND RAISE THE BAR FOR YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

REWRITING THE RULES

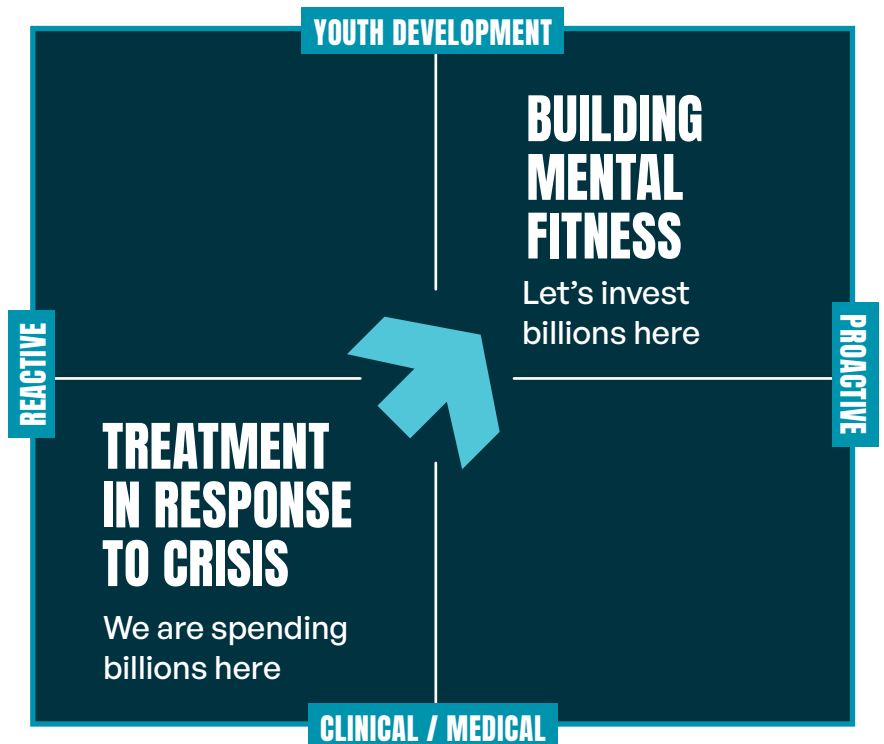
Pivoting Our Narrative From Illness to Fitness

We're doing a much better job of talking about mental health. Celebrities and athletes are telling their stories. Young people are more aware than ever of symptoms of mental illness, and some are seeking treatment sooner than in the past.

Yet, despite our best intentions, we've inadvertently created a culture focused on crisis with narratives that unknowingly perpetuate and reinforce the stigma. How? By talking about mental health, for the most part, strictly in terms of illness.

Go to a mental health website and you'll likely find statistics and resources outlined by illness and disorders. Glance into school and community mental health programs and you'll often see teachings organized around diagnostic symptoms and warning signs of mental illness.

We're unknowingly playing defense, but we can easily take control and switch to offense by focusing our attention and resources on building youth mental fitness.



RAISING THE BAR

Let's Invest As Much In Building Youth Mental Fitness As We Are On Responding to Crisis

How much are we spending on treatment and care in response to mental health crisis? No one knows for sure, but as one point of reference, consider this story:

Clayton County Board of Commissioners and the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) are partnering to build a **\$19 million Behavioral Health Crisis Center with 24 beds**

The third-party 2023 bed capacity study, conducted by Alvarez & Marsal, recommended the **creation of eight new crisis centers by 2032**, with immediate need in metro Atlanta, Central Georgia, and the Coastal region (8 x \$19m = **\$152 million investment**)

Source: Georgia's Newest Behavioral Health Crisis Center Coming Soon to Clayton County - Clayton County, Georgia

MUCH OF OUR TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH USES WORDS THAT ARE DISEMPOWERING AND INDUCE FEAR. THOUGH WE MEAN WELL, OUR NARRATIVE IS REINFORCING AND PERPETUATING THE STIGMA.

Behavioral disorders

Emotional problems

Substance abuse

Mental illness

Depression

Loneliness

Recovery

Sadness

Triggers

Suicide

Anxiety

Trauma

Bipolar

Broken

Coping

Stress

Crisis

ACEs

WE CAN CHANGE THIS.

MENTAL FITNESS IS THE NEW SUPERPOWER.

Grit

Reflection

Failing Well

Restoration

Adaptability

Compassion

Belief in Self

Self Reliance

Finding Calm

Mental Agility

Growth Mindset

Shifting Mind Gears

Changing Your Brain

Human Connections

Emotional Steadiness

Reframing Challenges

Overcoming Intrusive Thoughts

Comebacks Are Stronger Than Setbacks

Talking in terms that are related to mental fitness – building mental fitness, gauging mental fitness, restoring mental fitness when necessary – has the potential to make the stigma surrounding mental health obsolete. Imagine never again having to say, “Let’s end the stigma.”

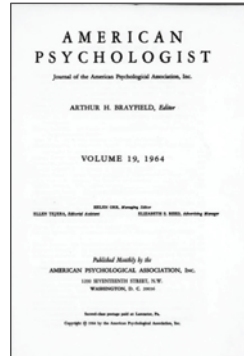
WHAT IS MENTAL FITNESS?

Mental health describes our overall state of being, and many people refer to its most balanced form as wellbeing.

Mental fitness, on the other hand, is the active process of developing and maintaining that wellbeing. It involves using tools and techniques to build the knowledge and skills needed to navigate our thoughts and emotions in a variety of situations.

Mental fitness is dynamic and empowering, and with consistent investment, it strengthens the mind's resilience, stamina, and capacity to flourish.

Most of us know the purpose of building physical fitness is to achieve optimal physical health. Let's make sure our kids know that building mental fitness is the way to achieve optimal mental health, and something we should all be constantly working on.



The term “mental fitness,” while rarely used, is not new. It was first used by Dorothea McCarthy in American Psychologist literature in 1964 when she explored Andie Knutson’s plea for a more appropriate term to describe the positive aspects of mental health and suggested the term mental fitness.



“Our mind is half our health. From the moment we wake up, our mind dictates everything we do – the way we think, the way we feel, the way we perform – so if we don’t train it or know how to take care of it, how are we meant to stay mentally fit?”

– Maya Raichoor, Leading expert in mental fitness and visualization and Nike’s first mental fitness trainer

A CHILD’S BRAIN IS ALWAYS CHANGING – THE QUESTION IS, IN WHICH DIRECTION?

Today, too many of our young people

- Feel limited by their insecurities like fear of failure, self-doubt and the need for external validation
- Are easily overwhelmed by challenges and quick to give up under pressure
- Are defined by feelings of inadequacy or self-criticism
- Have a constant need to prove their value to others
- Are chronically stressed and consumed by emotions, with little ability to regain control or perspective
- Believe they are fragile, in constant danger and could be permanently harmed by words
- Are quick to sacrifice their own needs and say yes to everything
- Are drawn to unhealthy relationships that drain them emotionally
- Overcommit, leaving little to no time for rest or personal growth
- Are afraid to step into their full potential

Building mental fitness will help develop young people who

- Know their value and strengths and don’t feel burdened by limitations
- Trust their ability to overcome hardship and disappointment
- Are kind to others
- Are equipped with resilience, clarity and emotional balance to handle challenges with composure
- Are attuned to their inner signals
- Prioritize resting their minds (including sleep)
- Practice mindful decision making
- Choose how they engage with their thoughts, frustrations, and concerns
- Have a healthy perspective on failure, seeing it not as a reflection of worth but as a natural part of growth and learning
- Break down unproductive neurological patterns and strengthen helpful ones

Somehow, we’ve ended up teaching kids things like rumination and worry. Let’s teach them things like reflection and self-reliance instead.

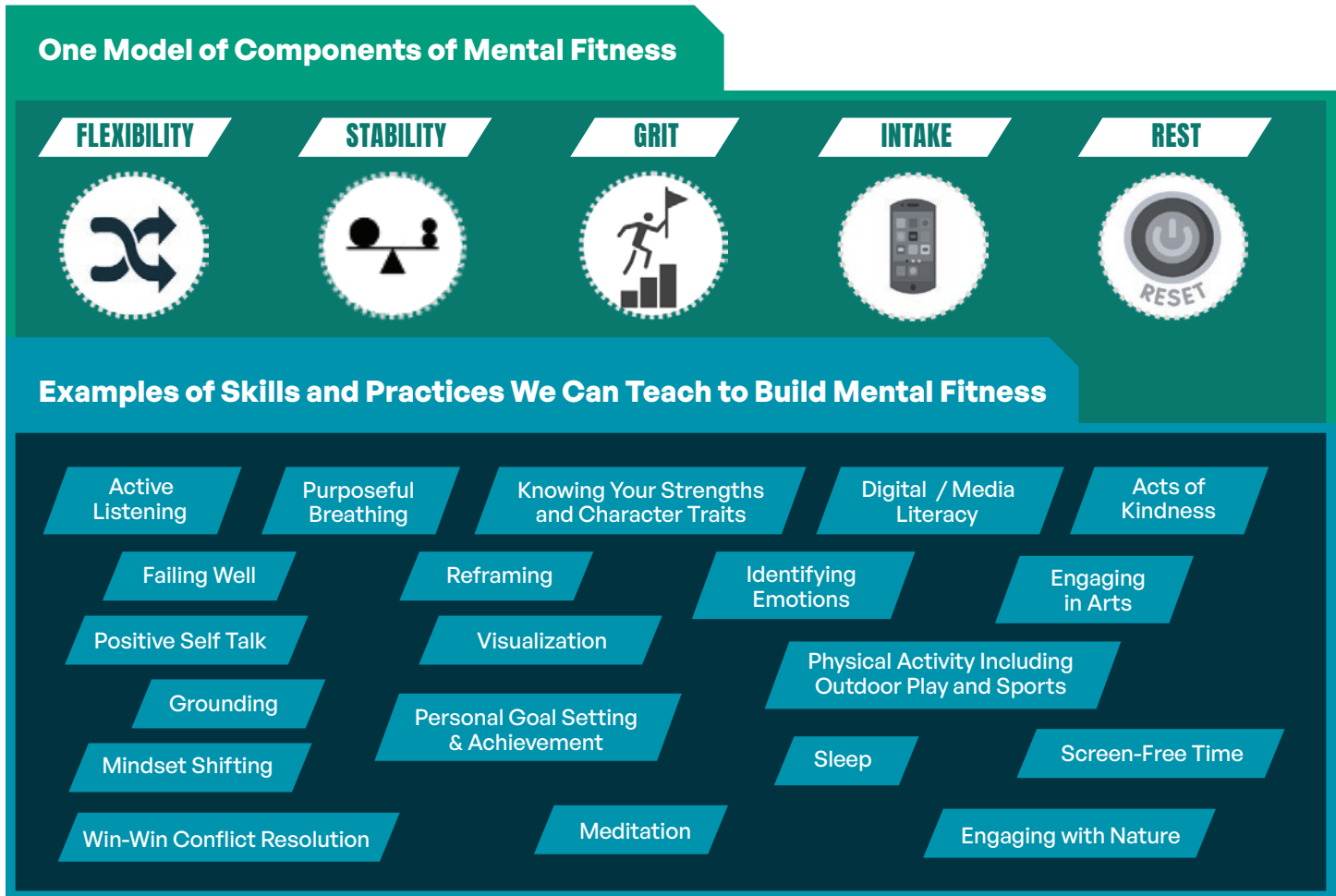
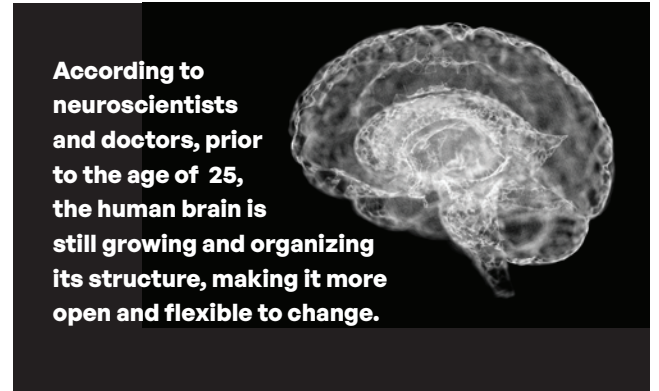
HOW TO BUILD MENTAL FITNESS

Neuroscience research has proven the brain is capable of change through neuroplasticity, meaning we can train our minds to become more adaptable, focused, and emotionally intelligent over time.

The human brain holds about 86 billion neurons, interconnected through nearly 100 trillion neural pathways. Every thought, feeling, or action sparks activity across these networks, sending rapid electrical signals from one neuron to another.

While we can't create additional neurons, neuroscientists have shown that the brain can form new connections — new pathways — that reshape how we respond, form habits, and interpret the world.

With time and repetition, this rewiring leads to lasting changes in behavior, emotional patterns, and cognitive functioning.



Just as with building physical fitness, there is no one best way, no one-size-fits-all for building mental fitness. We can use any number of tools and techniques to become mentally fit, calling on this reservoir of personal resources when needed.

A FORMULA FOR BUILDING YOUTH MENTAL FITNESS INTO A POWERHOUSE CAUSE

A BACKSTORY

Taking a Page Out of The Breast Cancer Playbook

Did you know?

35 years ago, breast cancer was as stigmatized and underfunded as mental health is today. How did this little-talked about condition become the most popular social cause in America? Through a convergence of three forces:

First, the term “breast cancer survivor” was introduced by Susan G. Komen. This simple phrase caused an emotional 180, shifting our focus from illness to an achievable goal.

Next, the Estee Lauder Companies would thrust the pink ribbon onto the national scene when they distributed 1.5 million of these visual symbols of survivorship at their cosmetic counters all across America.

Third, some of our nation’s biggest brands sold pink ribbon products and used their massive reach to run public service campaigns to raise awareness and funding, mostly during the month of October.

Today, millions of lives have been saved because prevention and early detection for breast cancer are social norms, and it is estimated more than \$6 billion in charitable funding pours in each year to fuel breast cancer education for prevention, screening for early detection, and research for better diagnostics and treatments.

Now imagine this . . . we use the same formula to build mental health into

the most admired,
the most well-funded,
and the most impactful
social cause of our time.



Let's Give Mental Health a New Ethos, a New Image, and New Positioning

1 Introduce “youth mental fitness” to shift our focus from illness to an achievable goal.



Embody an Inspirational Ideology / Ethos to Inspire, Motivate, Empower

Brand Archetype:
Hero

2 Use the orange 10 as a visual symbol of support for youth mental fitness.



Launch the Orange 10 as a New Marker / Visual Identity for Mental Health

3 Partner with some of America's biggest and most popular brands (businesses, sports and people) to mass market to raise awareness and funding on the 10th of every month.



Disrupt the Expected Cause Cadence

Instead of “A Day” or “A Month”
Create a New Custom to Act on the 10th Day of Every Month

The new term “mental fitness,” its signature logo the orange 10, and mega brands using their massive reach to raise awareness and funding on the 10th day of every month will swing human emotions from confusion, helplessness and fear to connection, determination and hope, and inspiring action sure to save millions of lives.

For more information and detail on this formula, please read BLUEPRINT 1.

INVESTING IN YOUTH MENTAL FITNESS CAN CHANGE THESE STATS

~20.3% AGES 12-17

HAVE A DIAGNOSED MENTAL OR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CONDITION, WITH ANXIETY BEING THE MOST COMMON DISORDER

ADOLESCENTS WITH A CURRENT DIAGNOSIS WERE

10X

AS LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE A LOT OF DIFFICULTY WITH MAKING OR KEEPING FRIENDS COMPARED WITH NO DIAGNOSIS

100%

IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS COMPARED TO THOSE WITH NO CURRENT DIAGNOSIS MORE LIKELY TO BE A VICTIM OF BULLYING

BETWEEN 2016 AND 2023

+35%

THE PREVALENCE OF DIAGNOSED OR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CONDITIONS AMONG ADOLESCENTS

+61%

THE PREVALENCE OF DIAGNOSED ANXIETY

+45%

THE PREVALENCE OF DIAGNOSED DEPRESSION

Source: National Survey of Children's Health Adolescent Mental and Behavioral Health, 2023

1 in 5 high school students seriously considered attempting suicide in 2023

Suicide deaths among 10- to 24-year olds increased by 62% from 2007 to 2021.

Source: CDC

FOR ALL AGE GROUPS
1 DEATH BY SUICIDE

EVERY 11 MINUTES

Source: CDC

THE AVERAGE DELAY IS

11 YEARS

BETWEEN SYMPTOM ONSET AND TREATMENT

Source: NAMI

AS OF 2022, ONLY
1.7%
OF U.S. PHILANTHROPY GOES TO MENTAL HEALTH

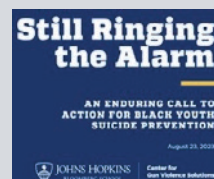
Source: Mindful Philanthropy

THE SUICIDE RATE AMONG BLACK YOUTH AGES 10-17 INCREASED BY

144%

BETWEEN 2007 AND 2020, THE FASTEST-GROWING RATE AMONG RACIAL GROUPS.

Source:



Nearly 60% of youth ages 16-25 express significant worries about the future.

Source: NCH Stats

THEORY OF CHANGE

We believe building youth mental fitness by investing in targeted education, screening for early detection, and messaging with PSAs will help **end the stigma and change the trajectory of the youth mental health crisis.**

Level of Impact



Individuals and Families



Community



Systemic

ACTIVITIES

Deliver mental fitness education programs in youth-serving community environments to build knowledge and skills (target youth ages 5-18 and their parents, caregivers, teachers, coaches and mentors)

Provide mental fitness screening services for early detection to youth ages 5-18 and their parents (includes referral to professionals as needed)

Promote and market youth mental fitness on the 10th day of every month to drive funding for programs, services and research. Use orange 10 symbol as visual logo / marker for mental fitness

Build processes and infrastructure for rapid development and deployment of youth mental fitness programs, services, research

Provide leadership to cultivate emergence of a mental fitness marketplace (non-profit and for-profit)

OUTPUTS

Organized network of providers of mental fitness education and monitoring services

Organized collective of youth-serving community participants where youth and their parents receive mental fitness education and screening; teachers, coaches, mentors also participate

YouthMentalFitness.org framework and list of resources

Mega-marketing by brand partners on 10th of month: Promos include public displays, PSAs (digital / print / outdoor), large scale live events (sports, concerts), engagement of customers, fans, followers and employees

Consumer brands produce and sell **orange 10 branded merchandise** to raise awareness and funding to expand mental fitness programs, services, research

Conferences convening mental fitness experts (scientific, academic, clinical, medical), philanthropists, business/civic leaders, lawmakers to expedite scaling of mental fitness programs, services, research

Research to chart future course for greatest impact

“PROJECT SUPERPOWER”



If our youth are equipped with the knowledge, skills and beliefs that they can achieve excellent mental health by proactively building their mental fitness, they will navigate challenges more effectively, enjoy stronger relationships, and have the greatest likelihood of reaching their full potential as happy, productive members of society.

OUTCOMES

- ✔ Stigma surrounding mental health ends / becomes obsolete
- ✔ Public attitudes are changed for the better
- ✔ Culture of reacting to crisis shifts to culture of proactive prevention and early detection
- ✔ New conversations, new narrative and common language emerge
- ✔ Lunch and dinner table conversations pivot from fear or silence to action
- ✔ People in need find care and treatment sooner
- ✔ Mentally fit future workforce is more productive
- ✔ People of all ages are inspired to take charge of their mental health
- ✔ Perceptions of illness, confusion and fear are transformed to determination, connection and hope
- ✔ Mental fitness becomes part of the cultural fabric of America / a lifestyle
- ✔ Help is no longer hard to find because screening services include referral to professional help
- ✔ Reduced risk of developing some mental illnesses / need for treatment
- ✔ Prevention and screening for early detection becomes the social norm
- ✔ Workplaces offer mental fitness programming and early detection services
- ✔ Pressure on crisis, clinical, medical workforce is eased due to fewer people needing professional intervention; time between outreach and first visit shortened
- ✔ Funding floodgates open to advance and expand programs, services and research
- ✔ Societal and government beliefs and practices are influenced

METRICS | KPIS

- ⊙ Suicide rate drops
- ⊙ Crisis visits to ERs drop
- ⊙ Number of youth in mental health treatment centers drops
- ⊙ Time between symptom onset and seeking professional help shortens
- ⊙ Number of youth in need of professional / clinical / medical care drops
- ⊙ Duration of time in treatment drops / speed of restoration to fitness accelerates
- ⊙ Amount of funding dedicated to mental health increases (private and public)
- ⊙ Corporate and government healthcare spend on mental illness declines (medication, treatment)

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE: THE ROAD TO YOUTH MENTAL FITNESS BEGINS IN ATLANTA

Atlanta business, civic and philanthropic leaders provide guidance on how best to launch a bold idea in Atlanta

2025
MAY - NOVEMBER

Blueprint 2 published: A call to action to dedicate at least as much time, attention and funding to youth mental fitness as we do to youth mental illness crisis response, treatment, and care.

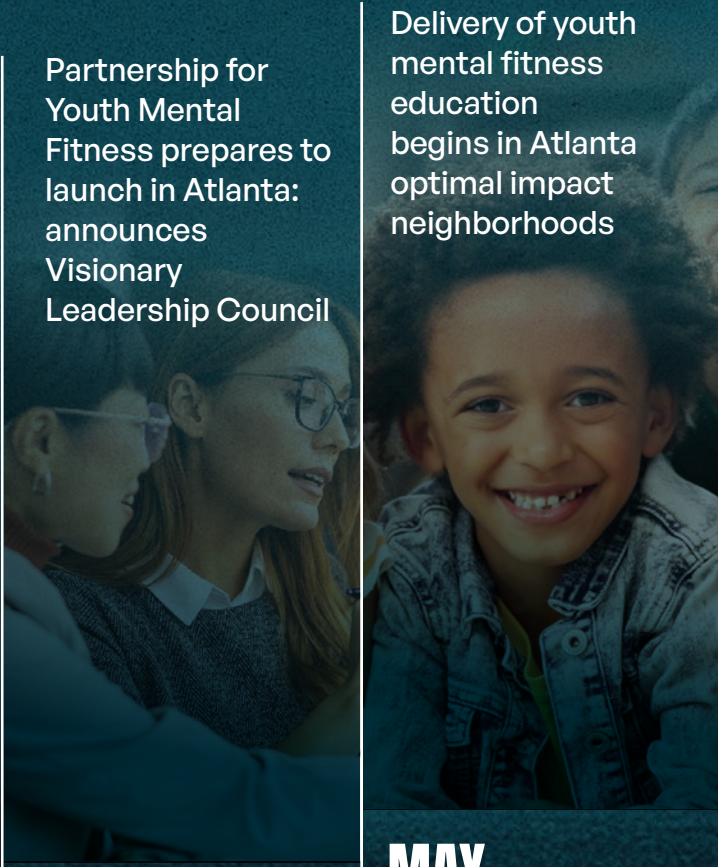
2026
JANUARY

Partnership for Youth Mental Fitness prepares to launch in Atlanta: announces Visionary Leadership Council

APRIL

Delivery of youth mental fitness education begins in Atlanta optimal impact neighborhoods

MAY



THIS IS BIGGER THAN CHARITY.

It's a purpose with a plan to end the stigma and change the trajectory of the youth mental health crisis.

YouthMentalFitness.org launches

PSAs begin to promote Youth Mental Fitness (ad space donated by Atlanta brand partners)

Atlanta brand partners begin 10th of month promotions to raise awareness

Atlanta brand partners begin selling orange 10 merchandise to raise awareness and funding

League of Change hosts conference / publishes Blueprint 3 to mobilize for scale beyond Atlanta

AUGUST

SEPTEMBER

OCTOBER

2027 & BEYOND

THE PARTNERSHIP FOR
YOUTH MENTAL FITNESS
10
ATLANTA
A League of Change Institute Program

THERE'S A NEW SUPERPOWER IN TOWN.



THE PARTNERSHIP FOR
YOUTH MENTAL FITNESS
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