



# Trauma-Informed Nutrition Messaging Toolkit

Funded by:



## Introduction

This toolkit was created for organizations seeking to use social media to distribute nutrition and health-related messaging that is grounded in a trauma-informed framework.

While outreach on healthy eating and good nutrition is nothing new, sound messaging that reflects the principles of trauma and resilience is in relatively short supply.

By creating this toolkit, Leah's Pantry hoped to make this outreach easier by sharing the steps it took to develop a trauma-informed social media campaign. Additionally we wanted to provide resources that organizations could easily integrate into their work.

We hope one of the main takeaways of this resource is that the process of content development is just as, if not more, important than the content that is produced.

We also hope organizations will understand that successful outreach is dependent on the strength of the relationship they have with their community and the degree to which they partner with them.

While we do not presume to have all of the answers of what works in your community, we can share a model we hope you'll consider in your own efforts.

## Trauma-informed Nutrition Security

Trauma-informed nutrition security reframes the way we look at healthy diets and food security.

The concept is rooted in the idea that trauma and adversity can affect dietary behaviors, chronic disease, and health. This reframing requires us to shift focus away from thinking of food as merely calories or sources of nutrients, to viewing it in relationship to other aspects of health and wellbeing.

Trauma-informed nutrition promotes a positive and healing relationship to food that adds to the vibrancy and vitality of ourselves and our community. In this frame, nourishment is more than nutrition.

Though obtaining nourishment for oneself seems relatively simple, it can be challenging for numerous reasons. While there are varying factors that

help form an individual's relationship to food, we know through trauma-informed work that adverse experiences, including ACEs, can leave a lasting impact. An adverse event, such as divorce, bullying, or homelessness, can result in trauma that harms both the mind and body.

ACEs typically occur in three realms: home, community, and environment (Figure 1). Regardless of the circumstance, an adverse event can influence our food choices, eating habits, and physical health in dramatic ways.

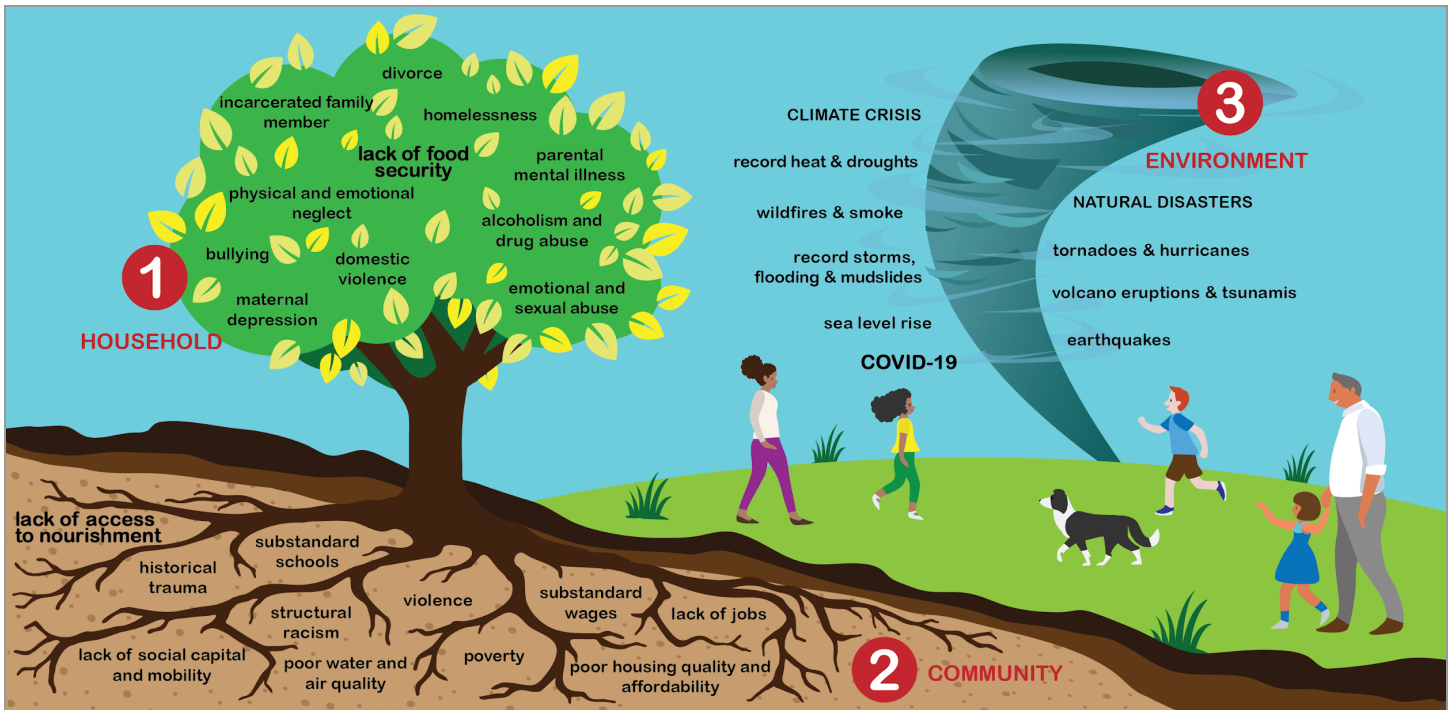


FIGURE 1: 3 Realms of ACEs from AcesConnection.com, updated by Leah's Pantry

In addition to adverse events, trauma can exist around food itself. This trauma is often overlooked however as it is embedded in the context of other adversity such as deprivation, oppression, abuse, and exploitation.

For example, an adult may still carry the negative emotional impact of participating in a free school lunch program as a child. Receiving a free lunch at school can signal inequity or a lack of financial resources to a child's peers. This type of adversity can trigger shame, and is an example of how food-specific experiences can be deeply painful and traumatic.

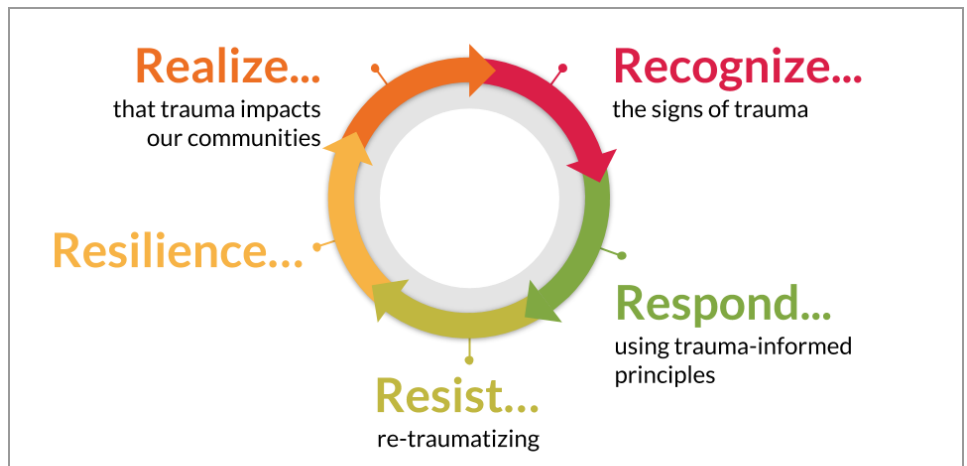
When trauma or adversity triggers shame, it can lead one to feel damaged and beyond repair, and create a long-lasting and complicated relationship with food. Creating trauma-informed interventions require us to better understand shame.

## A Path Forward

As we create programs that lead people toward wellness and health through nutrition, we must do so carefully and thoughtfully. For if we fail to acknowledge the larger context of peoples' experience, we run the risk of perpetuating more shame and embedding more trauma despite our best intentions.

Figures 2 and 3 represents a model organizations can observe when designing trauma-informed programs and services.

**FIGURE 2:**  
*Starting Point for Change:  
The Five 'R's*



**FIGURE 3:**  
*Principles for Responding, Resisting,  
and Resilience*



In approaching this work and how to lead a community toward resiliency, we must first realize and recognize an individual's trauma and symptoms. The more challenging and equally important task however is ensuring trauma-informed interventions do not inflict more damage by re-traumatizing an individual.

This is accomplished by designing a program or service that, at all stages, is client-centered and strengths-based. The principles of the

trauma-informed approach allow for that by valuing, respecting, supporting, empowering, and acknowledging the entire cultural and historical context of an individual.

In following this process and adhering to the fundamental underpinnings of trauma-informed care, we can promote positive and healing relationships to food and build resiliency among individuals and our community at large.

## Six Key Principles (Adapted from SAMSHA)



### Safety

Throughout the organization, staff and clients feel physically and psychologically safe; the physical setting is safe and interpersonal interactions promote a sense of safety. Understanding safety as defined by those served is a high priority. A culture of wellbeing including stress reduction, conflict de-escalation, and self care, is practiced.

### Trustworthiness and Transparency

Organizational operations and decisions are conducted with transparency with the goal of building and maintaining trust with clients, family members, among staff, and others involved in the organization. Staff are well-trained to deliver clear, reliable and high quality health services and information.

### Peer Support

Peer support and mutual self-help are key vehicles for establishing safety and hope, building trust, enhancing collaboration, and centering clients' stories and lived experience to promote their health and wellbeing. Clients are supported to forge connections and share strategies, skills and resources with each other. "Peers" are to those with similar lived experiences, or in the case of children may include family members and key caregivers.

### Collaboration and Mutuality

Importance is placed on the leveling of power differences between staff members and staff and clients. All organizational staff play a role in providing trauma-informed services. They partner with each other and with

clients to provide services that recognize that people are the experts of their own lives and that quality relationships and the meaningful sharing of power and decision-making are required for health and wellbeing.

## Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

Organizations recognize people as wise, creative, and resourceful. They understand the ways in which clients' voice and choice have been historically diminished and seek to mitigate that impact. Programs support clients' dignity and ability to shape their own lives by emphasizing strengths and self-advocacy. The organization also supports and empowers staff in their efforts.

## Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

The organization intentionally moves past cultural stereotypes and biases (e.g., based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion, gender-identity, geography, etc.); offers community responsive services; leverages the healing value of cultural traditions and communities of belonging; incorporates policies, protocols, and processes that are responsive to the gendered, ethnic and cultural needs of individuals served; and recognizes and addresses historical trauma.

## Methodology

The process in which Leah's Pantry developed this social media messaging prioritized its target audience from development to implementation, and yielded important lessons in the end.

Leah's Pantry understood that if it were to alter youth behavior around nutrition, it needed messaging that resonated with this population. Each message needed to be relevant, authentic, and value each individual's experience.

If the organization was to succeed, then it needed to invite youth and adults into its development process.

Over the course of two weeks, staff surveyed approximately 100 youth and adult residents of California.

Leah's Pantry viewed the focus groups as a leadership opportunity to train youth and adults to be session facilitators.

Facilitators were also responsible for recruiting group participants for each Zoom session. In appreciation of their participation, each person received

an honorarium.

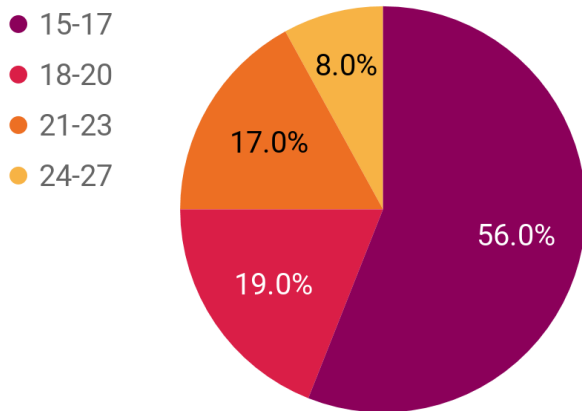
**TABLE 3:**  
*Focus Group Demographics*

FOCUS GROUPS		
Participants	Youth	Adult
Age	15-26 yrs	25+
Number of focus groups	11	5
Participants per group	5-8	5-8
Length of session	60 min.	90 min.
Honorarium	\$25	\$30

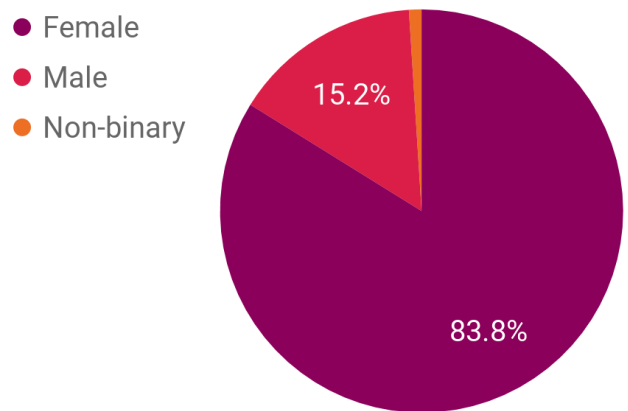
The ethnically diverse youth focus groups were mostly female participants, aged 15-17 years. (See charts for participant-reported details.)

- Age: 15-17 years old (56%); 18-20 years old (19%) and 21-23 years old (17%).
- Gender: 83% female, compared to 15% male.
- Ethnicity: African (26%), African American/Black (19%) and Latinx (16%). The group overall included participants who identified as Asian, Caucasian, Eastern European, and Middle Eastern.

**Age Range of Registered Youth Participants (n=84)**

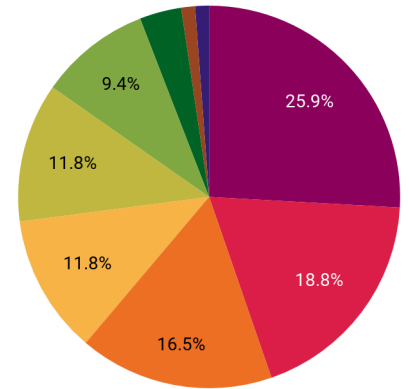


**Gender of Registered Youth Participants (n=84)**



Ethnicities of Registered Youth Participants (n=84)

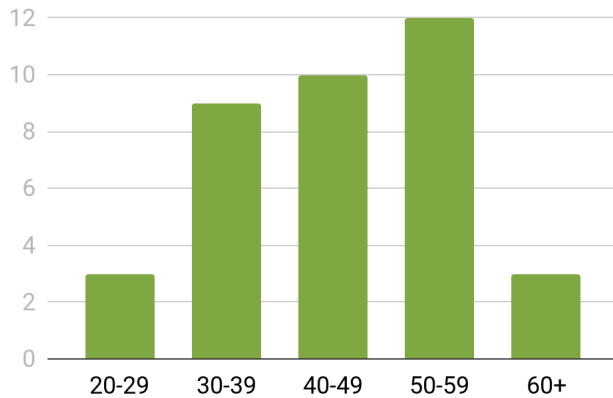
- African
- African-American/
- Hispanic/ Latinx
- Caucasian/ White
- 2+ Ethnicities
- Asian
- Mexican/ Mexican-
- Middle Eastern
- Eastern European



The ethnically diverse adult focus groups were comprised of (see graphs for details):

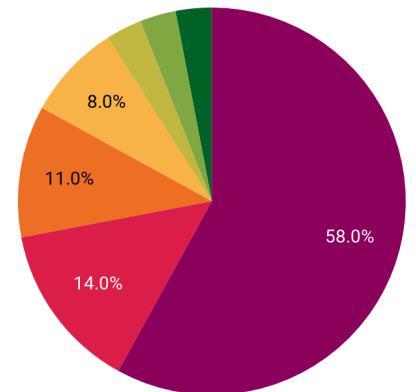
- Age: 59% were between 40-59 years old.
- Ethnicity: 58% identified themselves as African-American or Black.

Age Range of Registered Adult Participants (n=36)



Ethnicities of Registered Adult Participants (n=36)

- African-American/Black
- Caucasian/ White
- Hispanic/ Latinx
- 2+ Ethnicities
- Filipino
- Indian
- Nicaraguan



During these sessions, participants were asked about their social media usage (most relied on Instagram, Snapchat, and Tik Tok), outlets they frequented for health information, as well as their understanding of physical and emotional health, nutrition, and stress.

A section of the focus group also allowed Leah's Pantry to do a test run on potential social media posts. These sessions provided a forum in which participants could openly share their reactions, attitudes, and perceptions of each post.



## Recommendations

The focus groups offered insight not only into youth social media behavior and their nutrition-related beliefs, but it also resulted in concrete recommendations to consider when developing youth-focused content.

Of the key findings, young adults offered the following advice:

1. **RELEVANT**—Check what is trending, but avoid forcing the trending topic into the posts if it does not make sense to do so.
2. **QUICK READ**—Use more images that are attractive and **use fewer words**.
3. **RESEARCHED**—Use links to **cite sources**.
4. **MATURE**—Be mindful of the tone of the post; teens want to be spoken to like adults.
5. **TRAUMA-INFORMED**—Be aware of potential triggers, such as calorie counts or restrictive dieting practices.

Adult participants offered the following recommendations:

1. **FOCUSED**—Be clear on your intended audience (e.g., age, gender, or ethnicity). The more clarity you have, the more likely audiences will engage with your content;
2. **REPRESENTATIVE**—Make sure the individuals in your post **resemble the audience** you're attempting to reach. For instance, If your intended audience is people of color, include individuals of color in your posts;
3. **TRUST-WORTHY**—Health information will be trusted if it comes from a source the audience is familiar with. Consider identifying networks of individuals who can share posts with their friends and family.

## Creating Messages That Resonate

The effectiveness of a message is dependent on the relationship you have with your clients. If your connection to your community is grounded in openness, trust and respect, then you are also likely to understand the nuances of your client-base and are attuned to its needs.

Effective communication of any kind relies on a strong relationship with your audience. Successful verbal and written communication meets people where they are and understands that each individual brings their own life experience to the table.

With that said, developing an effective message requires thoughtfully considering your audience's values, beliefs, preferences, and culture. Messages that resonate with an audience are often relatable and understanding of each individual's circumstances. An effective message that resonates is a message that is heard.

Oftentimes, despite our best intentions and trusted relationship with our community, our communications can fall short and have an ill-intended effect. Leah's Pantry asked focus group participants for feedback on a series of social media posts. On occasion youth and adult participants had dramatically different responses to the content they were reviewing.

For instance, a post promoting sleep (Figure 4) and its impact on one's immune system was extremely well-received by the adult focus group. Adults participants found the image to be humorous and relatable.

Youth, on the other hand, had a strong but differing opinion. For youth participants, the post evoked feelings of shame. Youth were quick to express the challenges they've often faced in falling asleep.

A second post (Figure 5) highlighting the connection between diet and mood also resulted in different responses between the two groups.

Unlike the sleep-related post, this message resonated well with youth. Youth found it to be authentic and appreciated the graphic representation of the overall message.

Adults did not agree with that opinion. Some found the image to be "too sad," not appealing, and even condescending. One participant stated that the image was not attractive and that she would not take the time to read the corresponding message.

**FIGURE 4:**  
*Tested social media  
post promoting sleep*

Don't underestimate a good night's rest—  
quality sleep can boost your immune system.

**Try these quick tips for a better snooze.**



- ✓ Turn off electronic devices.
- ✓ Avoid large meals, high-sugar foods, and caffeine close to bedtime.



**FIGURE 5:**  
*Tested social media  
post highlighting the connection  
between diet and mood*

**Feeling off?**  
**Maybe your meals are affecting  
your mood—**  
poor diets have even been  
linked to depression.



*Your body and brain need  
a balance of food groups:  
fruits, vegetables, whole  
grains, proteins, and  
healthy fats.*



## Lessons Learned

### **1** Successful messaging is dependent on the relationship you have with your clients.

Organizations that have a relationship with a community grounded in trust and respect are well-positioned to develop effective outreach messages. (See Principles 1-2, Trauma-Informed Principles.)

Effective messages are sensitive to an individual's circumstances, values, and life experience. Messages that resonate with audiences are thoughtfully crafted—at its best they anticipate an audience's potential reactions; at its worst they fall flat or are offensive. (See Principle 5, Trauma-Informed Principles.)

### **2** Tailor your message to your target audience.

Developing messages that take the lived experience of your intended audience into consideration is critical. As seen in the examples highlighted in the previous section, individual responses may vary greatly depending on an individual's age, gender, race, culture, socio-economic status, and education.

Though the sleep-related post was meant to be light-hearted and humorous in tone, it was not received that way by youth audiences. (See Principles 3-5, Trauma-Informed Principles.)

### **3** Test your messages with your audience.

Organizations need to do a trial-run of their content with identified target audiences. After tailoring your messages, it is important to ensure they have the intended effect by testing them with the target audience. Testing each message will allow you to make revisions as necessary and ensure your message is heard. (See Principles 2, 4-6, Trauma-Informed Principles.)

### **4** Audiences bring their own perspective and experiences to the table.

These posts demonstrate how the trauma experienced by individuals can be triggered easily through seemingly harmless messages. The triggering of emotions, such as shame, can also happen quickly and unexpectedly.

Each individual's response is a result of that person's experience. Again, it is virtually impossible to anticipate the full range of responses to any given message. However, we can mitigate potential negative responses by testing the message with the target audience in advance. (See Principles 3-6, Trauma-Informed Principles.)

## 5 Co-create content with your audience.

Invite audience members to create content and outreach messages with you. Including your audience in this development phase will help you better tailor your messaging so it is sensitive and appropriate to individuals you are hoping to reach.

In doing so, you may head off potential problems early on and make necessary revisions before your message is finalized. (See Principles 4-6, Trauma-Informed Principles.)

## 6 Be prepared to repair your relationship.

Prior to asking for community review, be as prepared as possible for a range of negative feedback. In the best case scenario, your content will be well-received and understood by your community. There may be times however where your content causes unintended harm. In these instances, you'll need to quickly make amends with your audience.

Explain that no harm was intended, take responsibility, apologize for the hurt it caused, and work with individuals toward a message that is more acceptable. [Restorative Practices](#) offer helpful tools for this process.

# Posts and Templates

The following social media posts and templates may be used in your organization's social media campaigns.

These focus group-tested posts highlight healthy eating habits, the link between stress and health, common misperceptions about nutrition, and tips to maintaining a healthy diet and lifestyle. Each post was developed using a trauma-informed framework.

[Adult-focus Social Media Post Templates](#)

[Older Youth-focus Social Media Post Templates](#)

*All posts may be used in their current form, however we encourage your organization to tailor these posts with text and images that resonate with your communities.*

## Messaging Beyond Social Media

While this toolkit focuses primarily on social media posts (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), it does not address the varying tools we use to conduct community outreach.

There is a clear need for trauma-sensitive messaging and language specific to the outreach tools many of us have in rotation. To fill this gap, we included examples of tools, phrases, terms, and [layouts](#) you can use in your organization's efforts.

## Nutrition Class Description (Older Youth)

Through these nutrition classes, youth will be provided a safe and fun environment to learn about cooking, discuss individual relationships to food, and learn about mindfulness and nutrition.

Youth will also:

- learn how stress contributes to poor nutrition and health;
- learn how nutrition impacts physical and mental health;
- explore how to cook healthy meals;
- practice techniques for a mindful and stress-reducing approach to eating, meal preparation, and navigating the food environment.

This class will support the development of youth prepared to take control of their diet and health choices.

## Nutrition Class Recruitment Materials (General)

Join our nutrition class!

In this fun session we invite you to share your wisdom as we learn from each other's experiences.

This class will cover:

- cooking,
- the link between nutrition and physical and mental health,
- the connection between stress and food,
- the importance of self-care,
- how we each have very individual relationships to food.

Our class offers a safe environment where we can share, reflect, and learn new tools to help nourish our bodies and minds.

## Nutrition Class Description (Adults)

Through these nutrition classes, participants will enjoy conversation, reflection, cooking, sharing a meal together, and learn holistic skills to care for themselves and their loved ones.

Each session will create an environment of community connection, safety and trust, self-care, and will destigmatize common challenges to healthy eating.

Participants will:

- learn how toxic stress contributes to poor nutrition and health;
- explore their personal relationship to food, mood and stress;
- learn about nutrition for good physical and mental health;
- explore ways to provide healthy meals and good nutrition;
- practice techniques for a mindful and stress-reducing approach to eating, meal preparation, and navigating the food environment.

## Nutrition Class Description (Older Adults)

Nourishment and healthy living is important, no matter what your age. As we grow older however, our needs begin to change.

In this nutrition class we'll create a safe learning environment where participants can enjoy conversation, reflection, cooking tips, and continue to learn about self-care and self-management strategies.

Participants will:

- learn about our nutritional needs for good physical and mental health;
- learn how stress contributes to poor nutrition and health;
- explore their personal relationship to food, mood, and stress;
- explore ways to cook healthy meals;
- practice techniques for a mindful and stress-reducing approach to eating, meal preparation, and navigating the food environment.

## Nutrition Class Description (Adults, Virtual Delivery)

Through our nutrition classes, participants will have a virtual forum for candid conversation, reflection, cooking, and learn holistic skills to care for themselves and their loved ones.

These unique sessions will foster community connection, destigmatize common challenges to healthy eating and offer a safe environment for all participants.

Participants will:

- learn how toxic stress contributes to poor nutrition and health;
- explore their personal relationship to food, mood and stress;
- learn about nutrition for good physical and mental health;
- explore ways to provide healthy meals and good nutrition;
- practice techniques for a mindful and stress-reducing approach to eating, meal preparation, and navigating the food environment.

## Gardening Class Description (Kids)

We are hosting youth gardening classes that cultivate healthy and happy children by connecting them to food and nature.

These sessions will provide a fun learning environment where kids will learn:

- How to grow some of the food we eat
- How to prepare food
- How to appreciate the food we've harvested, and the environment that helped us grow it.

We will also review:

- how stress can contribute to poor nutrition and health;
- explore our individual relationship to food, mood and stress;
- nutrition for good physical and mental health;
- tips that enable us to eat mindfully.

At the end of this class, participants will learn how healthy lifestyles help nourish our bodies, minds and the environment.

## Gardening Class (Adults)

We are hosting gardening classes that cultivate healthy living and overall wellness.

This class will provide a fun learning environment where individuals will learn:

- Gardening tips;
- How to prepare food
- How to cultivate gardens where food can thrive.

We will also review:



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- how stress can contribute to poor nutrition and health;
- explore our individual relationship to food, mood and stress;
- nutrition for good physical and mental health;
- tips that enable us to eat mindfully.

At the end of this class, participants will learn how healthy lifestyles help nourish our bodies, minds and the environment.