

# **We are leaving youth's potential up to chance.**

*How a new framework can help youth thrive*

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# Intro

**1 in 3 youth** report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.<sup>1</sup>

**Depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders** are among the leading causes of disability among adolescents.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly half of mental health problems are established by adolescence.<sup>3</sup>

With the rise of modern advancements in science and technology, we've become more capable of thriving as a species than ever before. Yet, mentally and emotionally, our youth are suffering more.<sup>4-6</sup>

Something doesn't add up.

The truth is, that without accessible, practical skills to manage and grow from life's stressors, youth live in survival mode, primarily existing in a state of psychological self-protection and squandering their potential. The World Health Organization's latest research (2021) asserts that failing to address adolescent mental health means that issues can extend into adulthood, limiting these children's opportunities to lead the lives they are capable of.<sup>2</sup>

***“If we do want a better future in the year 2030, we have to urgently invest in those who will create it.”***

**United Nations**

Individual and global stressors for youth continue to rise. Knowing what youth need to affect positive change in their own lives amidst these challenges will not only improve their ability to thrive, but in doing so, equip tomorrow's leaders and citizens to create a better future.

# Background

*Youth today are surviving,  
not thriving.*

On the spectrum of the human experience, our youth today are “surviving” instead of “thriving.”

## To “survive” means...

to continue to exist, especially in spite of hardship.

*While this is the minimum expectation for a human to be alive, our youth deserve to aspire for and are capable of thriving when given the opportunity.*

## To “thrive” means...

to develop well or flourish.

*Human beings are capable of positive individual growth, which in turn helps to grow thriving communities. Youth can be these community catalysts when given the opportunity.*

When it comes to life concerns they face on an individual and global level, youth are inundated with and breaking down under modern day stressors.

# Background

A survey of 10,000 children from 10 countries indicated that 90% of young people felt notable worry about climate change and half reported that it had negatively affected their daily lives and functioning.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, academic pressures and expectations make 61% of youth feel intense pressure to perform well in school.<sup>8</sup>

These shared global pressures are on top of already fragile mental and emotional foundations.

## Fast facts:

- 7 in 10 teens report that anxiety and depression are major problems among their peers.<sup>8</sup>
- 1 in 6 youth have had a major depressive episode.<sup>1</sup>
- 1 in 5 have seriously considered attempting suicide by the age of 17.<sup>1</sup>
- Reports of “overwhelm” for adolescents between 1985 and 2016 jumped from 18% to 41%.<sup>9</sup>
- Anxiety is the leading mental health issue among American youth and clinicians suggest that the numbers are only rising.<sup>8</sup>

# Background

**To bring these statistics to life even further, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), and the Children's Hospital Association (CHA) joined together in 2021 to declare a National Emergency in Children's Mental Health.<sup>10</sup>**

Needless to say, these statistics are alarming. Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs explains why this is particularly troublesome for youth well-being. According to Maslow's theory, "safety" and "security" are core needs that must be satisfied for an individual to access the capacities that indicate thriving such as love and belonging, esteem, and self-fulfillment.<sup>11</sup> If an individual is in an ongoing state of anxiety or depression, their body perceives a lack of psychological or physical safety. Their physiology changes to focus on survival, and they're cut off from thriving.



# Background

While every generation has a unique set of stressors to face, today's youth are experiencing more significant psychological distress.

In 2007, **five times as many youth** surpassed thresholds in more than one mental health category than they did in 1938, according to an ongoing study of more than 77,500 high school and college students.<sup>6</sup> This information is no surprise given the continually mounting daily stressors faced by this age group, such as bullying,<sup>12,13</sup> excessive worry about appearance,<sup>14</sup> and general loneliness in the digital era.<sup>15</sup>

It's fair to say that the majority of youth are merely surviving, or "continuing to exist," through the mounting hardships they face.

# Background

*Youth need to be  
(and aren't) equipped to  
leverage adversity.*

Assistant Secretary-General at UN DESA and UN Chief Economist Elliott Harris asserts that young people have the potential to save the world, but youth's current limited access to quality education is “squander[ing] the potential of millions of people whose capabilities and enthusiasm could greatly accelerate progress.”<sup>16</sup>

Contrary to popular notions that all adversity is harmful, **common adversities** (see footnote 1) **may actually be a necessary medium for forging strong youth if they understand how to turn adversities into advantages.**

A concept that captures this idea is *antifragility*, which posits that thriving can occur as a result of disruption and disorder. He suggests that nature always favors organisms that can bounce back stronger from stress, chaos, or disorder, which are inherent parts of living on earth.<sup>17</sup>

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Footnote 1: There are many types of adversities, and what is presented here mostly refers to common adversities, such as an argument with a friend, taking an exam, or experiencing rejection. However, other types of adversities, such as exposure to violence, death of a loved one, and experiences of strong, frequent and/or prolonged challenges can be psychologically or physiologically traumatic. Those experiencing such overwhelming or persistent adversities are not those who we have in mind in this white paper. Individuals experiencing these types of adversities should seek help from a medical professional.



# Background

Youths who undergo adversity have even been shown to develop “hidden talents,” acquiring an adaptive intelligence to function even more effectively in the face of challenges or hardships.<sup>18</sup>

*Post-traumatic growth (PTG) theory* also affirms that positive growth is possible after undergoing significant challenges in life. Following varying degrees of trauma, individuals are shown to enhance their personal strength, develop closer relationships, foster greater appreciation for life, undergo positive spiritual change, and discover new possibilities.<sup>19</sup>

While youth in previous generations faced significant stressors, we currently know more than any other generation about what it takes to thrive, not only in spite of those stressors but because of them. And while the technological era has our world more globally interconnected than ever before, access to this information in the critical stages of youth development is scarce and highly dependent on an individual’s environment.

**This leaves a child’s potential – and therefore, the potential of the community and the future – up to chance.**

# Background

*Youth need to thrive  
for individual and  
collective well-being.*

Adversity is an inherent part of the human experience, and thriving in spite of adversities is a necessity for youth to grow into flourishing individuals who foster prosperous communities. According to *ecological systems theory*, a child has the ability to influence and be influenced by the beliefs and actions of the people around them.<sup>20</sup>

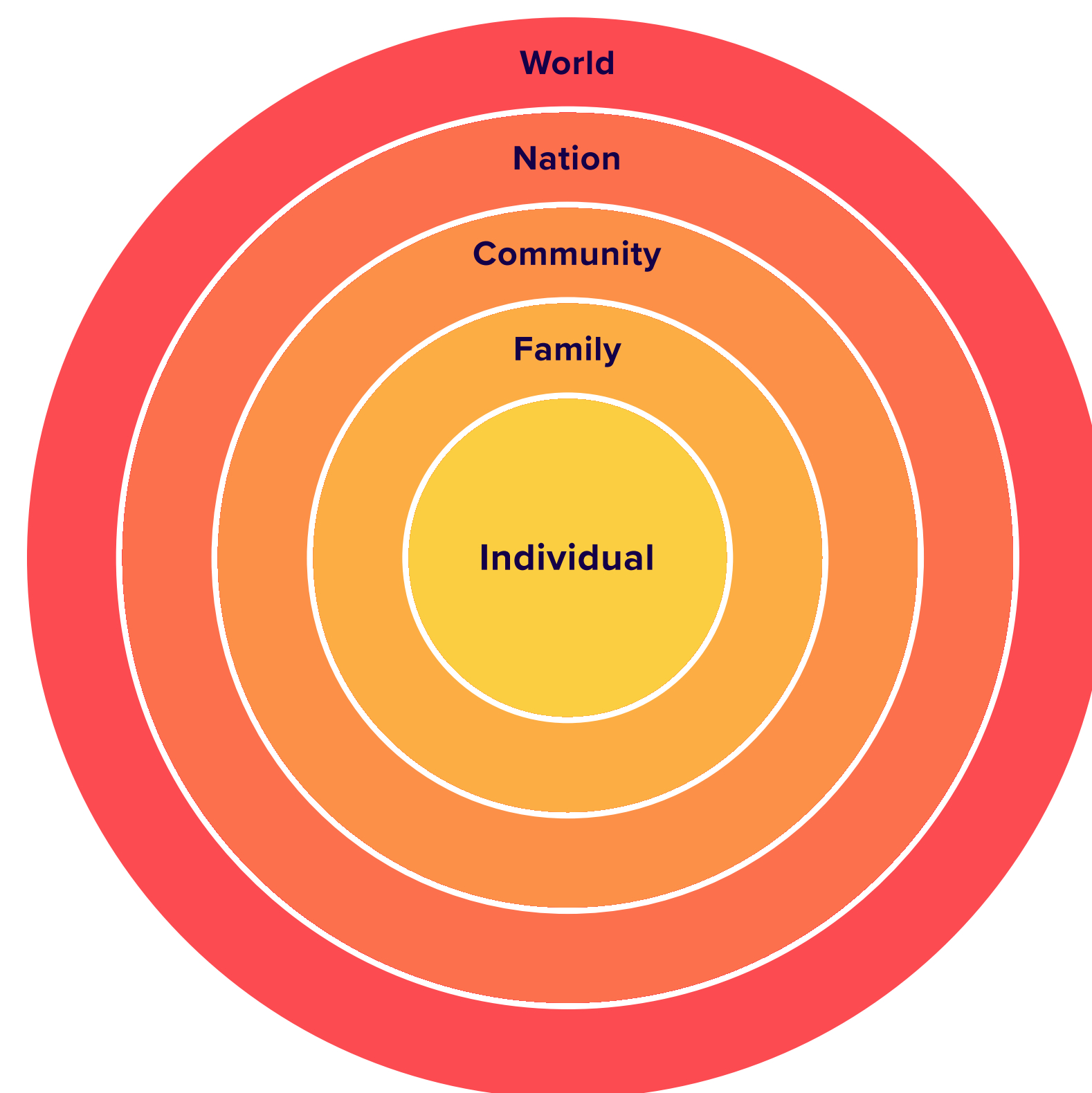


Figure 1: Ecological systems theory

# Background

In other words, if youth are primed with skills to leverage their adversities to grow, they will not only improve their own lives but also influence others in their immediate environment, which will cast a positive ripple effect from local to global communities. Clinicians, researchers, and policy makers have all called for building resiliency, grit, and a toolkit of stress management skills to strengthen youth development for both individual and collective flourishing.<sup>21–23</sup>

***“A sustainable future depends on having resilient populations, which cannot be achieved without investments into young people.”***

**Dr. Osotimehin**

Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund

So if the goal is to equip youth with the knowledge and skills they need to turn adversities into advantages, what specific knowledge and skills would improve their likelihood to thrive? The science-backed *tapouts thriving framework* proposes an answer to that question.

# Solution

*tapouts thriving framework offers new perspective to maximize youth thriving.*

While there are many significant external barriers with our world's systems and structures – including poverty, inequality, unemployment, and inequity, to name a few – this paper focuses on the development of intrapersonal resources within youth as a part of the solution. Progress on these widespread issues needs to be made, and youth deserve access to the self-development education and experiences needed to maximize thriving in any external circumstances outside of their control.

The *tapouts thriving framework* outlines what personal factors determine and indicate an individual's trajectory to thriving in life.

## Survive mode—thrive mode spectrum

This framework defines the terms “survive mode” vs. “thrive mode” as two states at polar ends of a spectrum for how an individual exists in their lives (see footnote 2).

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Footnote 2: When referring to "survive mode" and "thrive mode," we are speaking directly about youth's psychological conditions as opposed to their physical or environmental conditions. We acknowledge the tremendous impact of these elements on their survival; however, we are focused on what's most in their scope of influence to change.

# Solution

If youth don't have the skills to navigate the inevitable adversities of life, their nervous systems register common stressors as threats to their psychological safety and well-being, and as a result, they live in survive mode and cut off access to capacities that support thriving.<sup>24,25</sup>

Let's examine how this works:

- Humans respond to any perceived threats in their environment with a stress response that includes a component known as the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which then regulates physiological processes like the autonomic nervous system (ANS) to adjust for the stressors.<sup>26</sup>
- Once this stress response is set in motion, the body's resources are geared toward survival needs and, in simple terms, "shut off" nonessential brain functions like reasoning, working memory, cognitive inhibition, abstract thinking, emotional regulation, and cognitive flexibility that contribute toward states of thriving, like love, belonging, creativity, self-sufficiency, competence, and exploration.<sup>24,25,27</sup>
- Without stress management and resilience skills to mitigate the overactivation of this stress response, youth can get caught in a cycle of unknowingly reinforcing a state of survive mode when they face daily stressors that their mind-body connection isn't equipped to handle.<sup>28-30</sup>



**Survive Mode** is founded upon a fear-based, narrow-minded approach to life, which requires an individual's focus to be on psychological safety and self-protection. If this state is sustained, an individual likely has severely lacking or ineffective self-regulation skills, a lifestyle that is missing the consistency needed for sustained well-being, a self-image rooted in limitations rather than strengths, and/or a mindset creating self-limiting habits by viewing oneself as a victim of circumstances.

**Survive  
Mode**



**Thrive  
Mode**

**Thrive Mode** is founded upon a trust-based, expansive-minded approach to life, which requires an individual's psychological safety needs to be met so they can focus on higher needs like self-mastery and creativity. If this state is sustained, an individual likely has effective self-regulation skills, an intentional and stable lifestyle, a self-image rooted in strengths and visions of what's possible, and/or a mindset creating self-enhancing habits by believing one has agency over their circumstances.



# 4 key factors of youth potential

For youth to thrive to their highest capacity within any given circumstances, we believe that identity,<sup>31,32</sup> mindset,<sup>23,33</sup> social-emotional skills,<sup>34,35</sup> and lifestyle<sup>36,37</sup> are the four key factors of self-development that are most influential for well-being and within their scope of control.

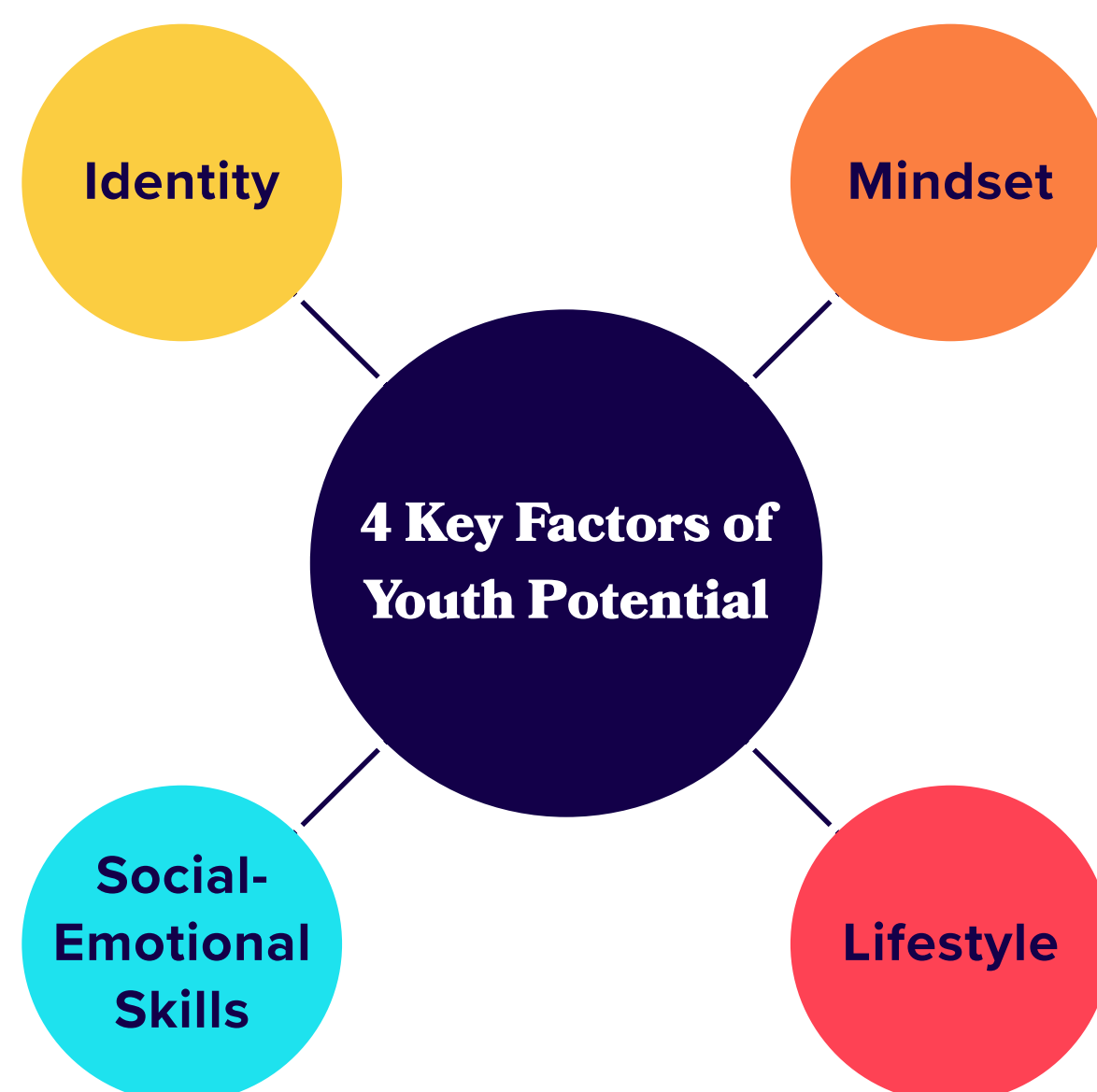




Figure 2: 4 Key Factors of Youth Potential



## Identity

An identity is the unique set of beliefs, values, purpose, character, and qualities we hold that determine our self-image.



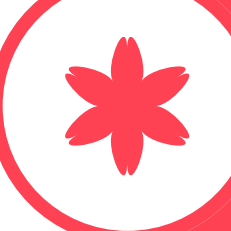
## Mindset

A mindset is an established set of attitudes and perspectives we hold that shape our worldview or philosophy of life.



## Social-Emotional Skills

Social-emotional skills are the learned abilities to regulate one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to optimize performance and relationships.



## Lifestyle

A lifestyle is the way in which a person lives, including habits, resources, and allocation of time and energy.

# Solution

## 4 processes of change for youth potential

Each self-development area changes through an automatic process that all individuals engage in, whether consciously or unconsciously, throughout life:

- 1 **Identity** *Shaping*
- 2 **Mindset** *Formation*
- 3 **Social-Emotional** *Skill-Building*
- 4 **Lifestyle** *Design*

Each of these processes can shape the factors of one's potential to be surviving-oriented or thriving-oriented and begin during early stages of youth and adolescence.<sup>21,38,39</sup> The default approach to these processes within individuals typically defaults toward survive mode to address daily stressors with limited or no self-development skills. However, if individuals receive support to intentionally engage in these four processes, they are more equipped to thrive.<sup>23,34,40</sup>

# 4 Processes of Change for Youth Potential: Survive--Thrive Spectrum

Survive Mode	Process	Thrive Mode
<i>Externally-sourced</i>	<b>Identity Shaping</b>	<i>Self-sourced</i>
When an individual defines themselves as others perceive them or as the world validates them, they experience self-sabotage, isolation, and limited opportunities in life.	Identity Shaping is the process of defining one’s self-image that influences how they think, feel, act, and achieve outcomes in life.	When an individual shapes their own view of self separately from the biased viewpoint of others, they experience self-mastery, belonging, and abundant opportunities in life.
<i>Victim-based</i>	<b>Mindset Formation</b>	<i>Agency-based</i>
When an individual perceives themselves as victimized by life’s circumstances, they relinquish a sense of control, which leads to self-sabotage, limited opportunities, and being undermined by adversity.	Mindset Formation is the process of defining what an individual trusts to be true – about themselves, the world, and how to approach any and all aspects of life itself.	When an individual views life’s inherent challenges as essential for growth, they claim agency over the control they do have in life, which leads to self-mastery, abundant opportunities, and being empowered by adversity.
<i>Inconsistent</i>	<b>Social-Emotional Skill-Building</b>	<i>Consistent</i>
When an individual builds social-emotional skills inconsistently, they aren’t engaging in the repetition needed to rely on these skills in the face of challenges, which leads to isolation, being undermined by adversity, and compromised health.	Social-Emotional Skill-building is the process of acquiring skills that help an individual self-regulate their emotional state to better relate to others and adapt to uncertain conditions.	When an individual builds social-emotional skills consistently, they engage in the repetition needed to reliably cope with challenges and grow from stress, which leads to belonging, empowerment from adversity, and optimized health.
<i>Passive</i>	<b>Lifestyle Design</b>	<i>Intentional</i>
When an individual’s lifestyle choices are accepted passively based on external circumstances or environment, their actions become misaligned from their desired outcomes, leading to self-sabotage, limited opportunities in life, and compromised health.	Lifestyle Design is the process of making choices for how an individual spends their time, energy, and resources in life, including nutrition, physical activity, sleep, hobbies, spirituality, financial management, and career path.	When an individual makes lifestyle choices that are aligned with their strengths, values, and desired outcomes, they reinforce habits that lead to self-mastery, abundant opportunities in life, and optimized health.

# Outcomes

*tapouts thriving framework leads to likely outcomes that indicate youth thriving.*

How a new framework can help youth thrive.

## 5 Domains of Youth Potential

There are five prominent domains to examine for evidence of well-being and positive growth, which are key indicators of thriving: self-fulfillment, resilience, connection, experience, and health.

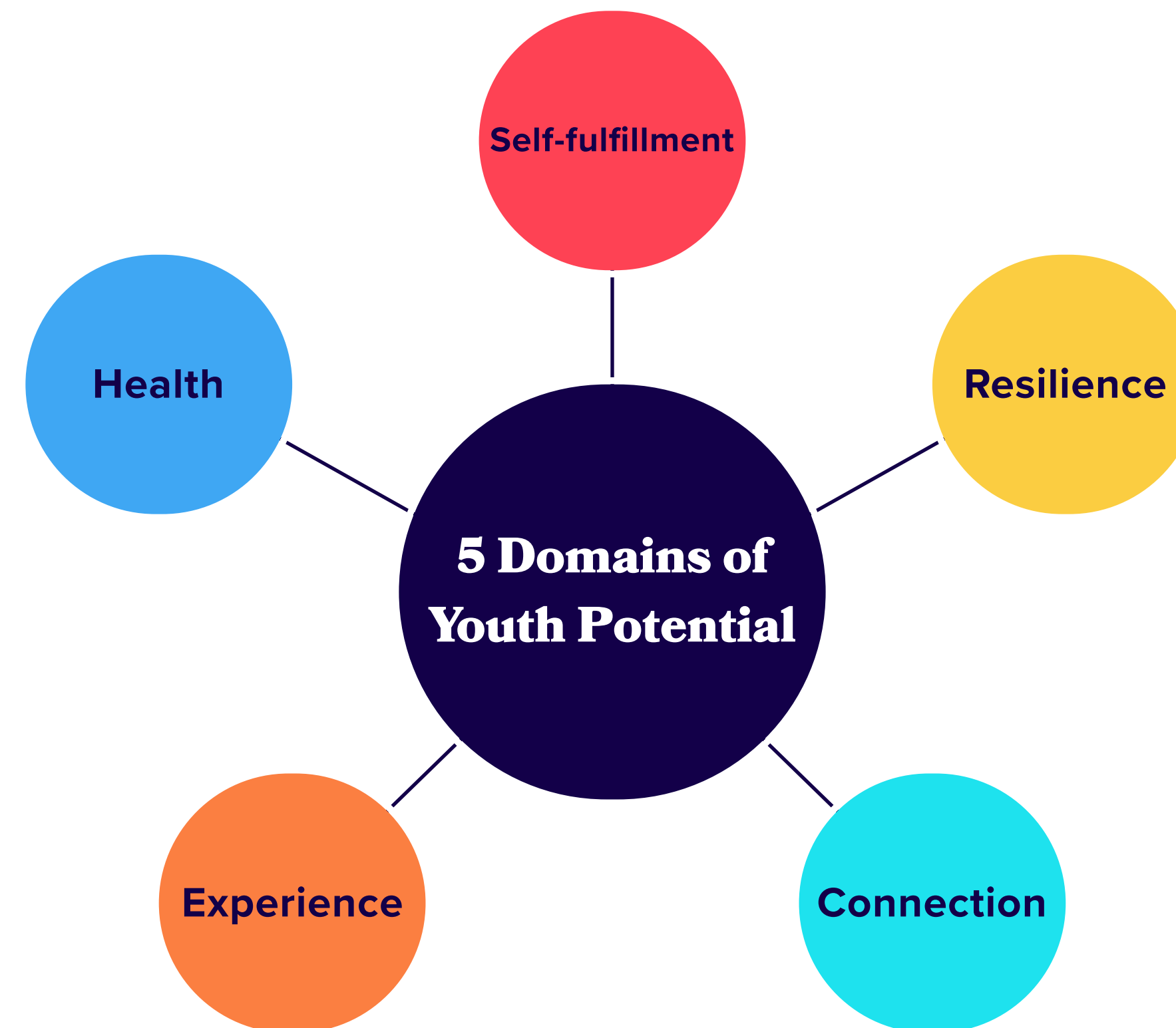


Figure 3: 5 Domains of Youth Potential

# Outcomes

We suggest the aforementioned four processes of change influence these five domains. The identity shaping,<sup>3,4,28</sup> mindset formation,<sup>13,20,26</sup> social-emotional skill-building,<sup>9,11,21</sup> and lifestyle design<sup>19,46,48</sup> processes are interconnected with the development of self-fulfillment, resilience, connection, experience, and health within an individual, as shown in Figure 4.

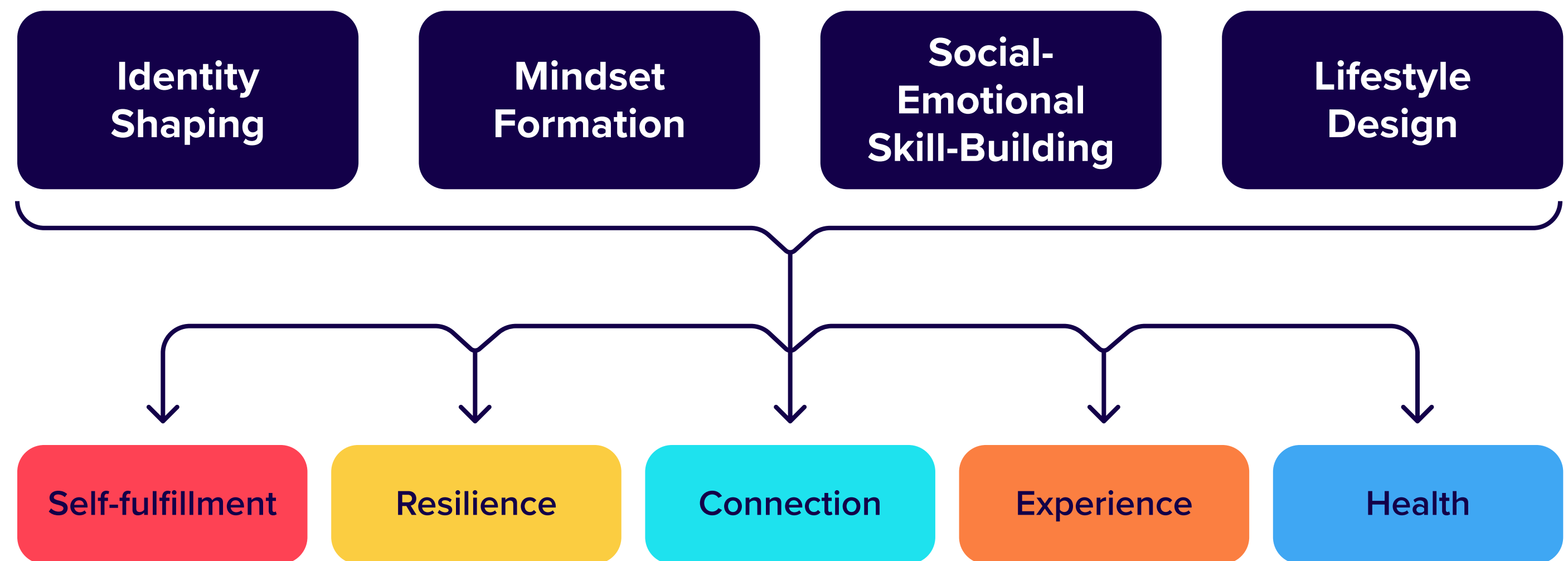


Figure 4: Connection Between 4 Processes of Change and 5 Domains of Youth Potential



# Outcomes

The connections between these elements indicates that individuals can in fact impact how they perform in each of these key areas of their lives. If they are engaging in the survive mode processes of change, they will likely experience more, if not all, of the survive mode outcomes shown in Figure 5.

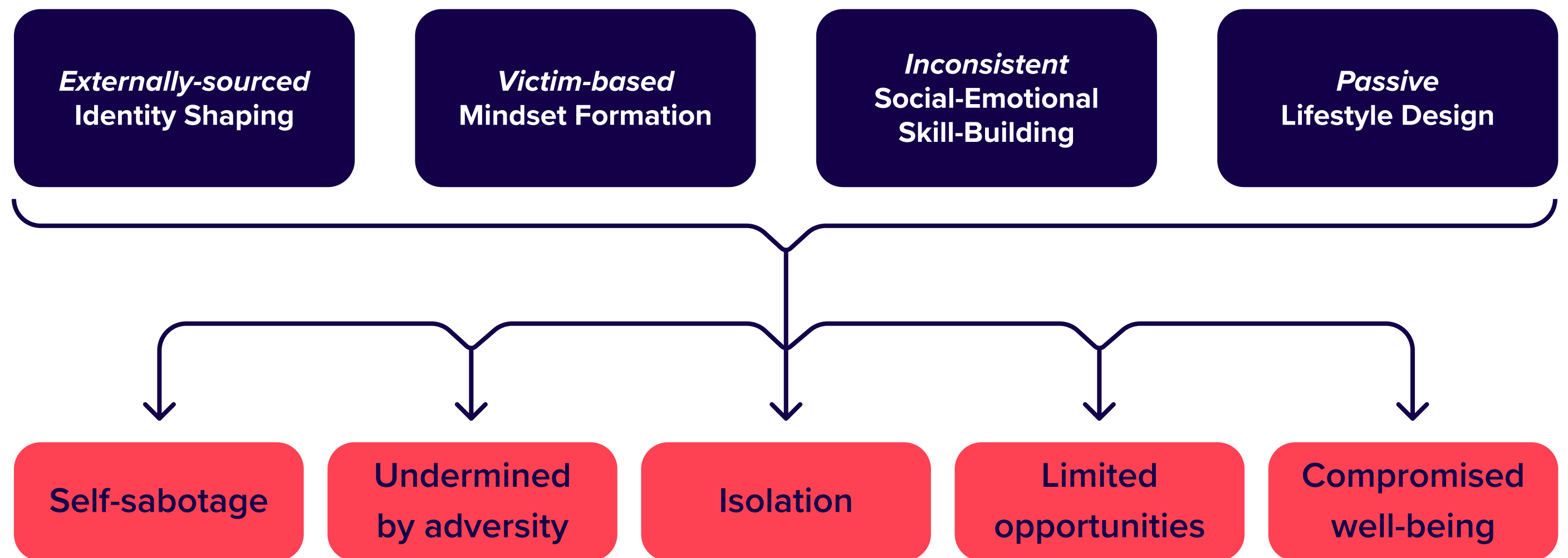


Figure 5: Survive Mode Version of 4 Processes of Change and 5 Domains of Youth Potential



# Outcomes

If, however, an individual is engaging in the thrive mode processes of change, they will likely experience more, if not all, of the thrive mode outcomes, as shown in Figure 6. The differentiating factor that shifts youth from a survive mode to thrive mode trajectory is access to resources that teach them the ideas and skills they need to build a wellness-promoting identity, mindset, social-emotional skills, and lifestyle.<sup>10,19</sup>

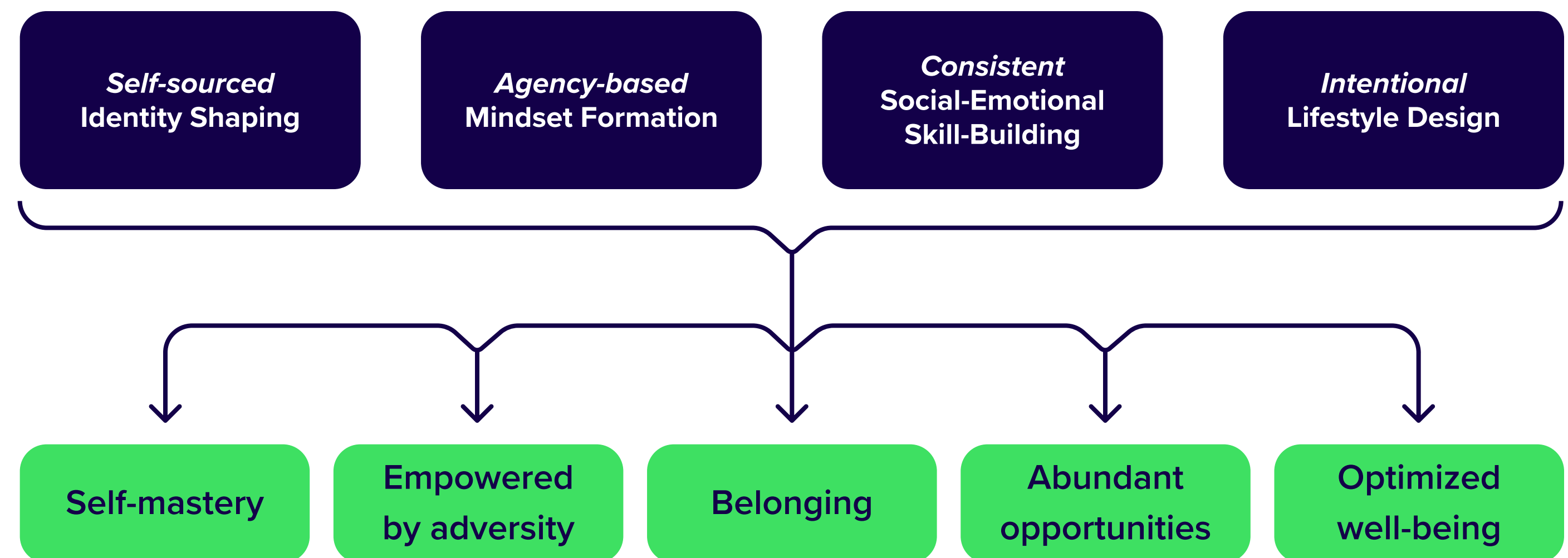


Figure 6: Thrive Mode Version of 4 Processes of Change and 5 Domains of Youth Potential

# 5 Domains of Youth Potential: Survive--Thrive Spectrum

Survive Mode	Domain	Thrive Mode
<i>Self-sabotage</i>	<b>Self-fulfillment</b>	<i>Self-mastery</i>
A person is unable to fully develop one’s talents and achieves compromised results across all areas of life due to self-doubt and a lack of purpose in life.	Self-fulfillment is the realizing of one’s deepest desires and capacities.	A person realizes the fullness of their talents and achieves desired results through embodying self-confidence and a clear sense of purpose in life.
<i>Undermined by adversity</i>	<b>Resilience</b>	<i>Empowered by adversity</i>
A person breaks down under the stress of challenges, chaos, and uncertainty as they don’t employ the mindset or skills needed to endure setbacks.	Resilience is the capacity to recover from challenges.	A person grows stronger under the stress of challenges, chaos, and uncertainty as they employ the mindset or skills needed to turn their adversities into advantages.
<i>Isolation</i>	<b>Connection</b>	<i>Belonging</i>
A person experiences disconnection with the people and things around them as their limited social-emotional intelligence interferes with their ability to form deep, meaningful relationships.	Connection is the relationship between self and other people or things.	A person experiences belonging with the people and things around them as their heightened social-emotional intelligence supports their ability to form deep, meaningful relationships.
<i>Limited Opportunities</i>	<b>Experience</b>	<i>Abundant Opportunities</i>
A person lives by a narrow worldview rooted in fear that limits the range of experiences they have through delaying or failing to reach goals and/or settling for what’s familiar instead of pursuing rewarding challenges.	Experience is the set of opportunities fulfilled across areas of one’s life.	A person lives by an expansive worldview rooted in abundance that increases the range of life experiences they have through actively achieving goals and/or leveraging opportunities that promote personal and collective progress.
<i>Compromised well-being</i>	<b>Health</b>	<i>Optimized well-being</i>
A person experiences unsustained mental, emotional, and/or physical well-being and engages in habits that reinforce unhealthy patterns of behavior and unwanted health challenges.	Health is the condition of one’s mental, emotional, and physical state.	A person experiences sustained mental, emotional, and/or physical well-being and engages in habits that reinforce healthy patterns of behavior and desired health status.

# Outcomes

The unique part of this framework is that these constructs can be measured, whether or not a youth is surviving or thriving, based on the assessment of the key factors within these five domains. The use of validated outcome measures can capture the status of:

- 1 **Self-fulfillment** by assessing self-worth and self-efficacy
- 2 **Resilience** by assessing resilience and stress mindset
- 3 **Connection** by assessing belonging
- 4 **Experience** by assessing life satisfaction and growth mindset
- 5 **Health** by assessing quality of life

An overarching measure can be developed, validated, and utilized for these key factors to assess a child's overall thriving status, as well as to extract which domains are leaning closer toward or further away from thriving.

# Conclusion

In the declaration of a National State of Emergency in Children's Mental Health, the associations involved a call for us all to advocate for action, such as providing community-based systems of care that support youth with accessible evidence-based interventions.<sup>1</sup>

***“We cannot always build the future for our youth,  
but we can build our youth for the future.”***

**Franklin D. Roosevelt**

As this paper has shown, youth are more likely to survive than thrive through life and a key catalyst for change is helping them gain the skills to positively change what's within their control.<sup>10</sup>

There's a massive push to develop and increase access to therapeutic services to meet the demands of the global mental health crisis we're facing, which is necessary and critical. It's important to note, however, that preventative services are just as necessary to curb youth psychological distress, maximize resiliency, and improve sustained well-being.<sup>10,21</sup>



In 2010, poor mental health was estimated to cost the global economy approximately \$2.5 trillion per year, a cost that's projected to rise to \$6 trillion by 2030.<sup>41</sup> The adults reflected in these numbers who experience poor health and low productivity establish their foundational identities, mindsets, social-emotional skills, and lifestyles in their youth.<sup>25,30,35</sup> Therefore, if we hope to decrease the financial, psychological, and physical toll of impaired mental health on our world, **preventative services to build self-development skills for youth are needed, and they're needed now.**

By using the tapouts thriving framework, companies, leaders, and institutions can improve their services to ensure that youth are being redirected and supported to sustainably thrive throughout their lives regardless of their circumstances. Empowering youth with the knowledge and tools they need to thrive is essential to maximize the well-being of our most impactful generation, and therefore, our world as a whole.

This white paper proposes a lens through which to positively impact the present and future of today's youth, but also to begin a deeper discussion around designing transformational education and experiences for them. To join us in this important and timely discussion, we welcome you to get in touch with us by visiting tapouts or contacting us directly:



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