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## **EMPOWERment model**

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## EMPOWERment model: conceptual framework

Mental health is a dynamic state of internal balance that enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with universal social values. It is a fundamental component of WHO's definition of health (WHO, 2013). *"Good mental health enables people to realise their potential, coping with normal stress of life, work and life productivity and contribute to their communities"* (WHO, 2013:5). The essential components of mental health that contribute in varying degrees to a state of internal balance are basic cognitive and social skills, the ability to recognise, express and modulate one's own emotions, as well as compassion for others; cultural and social norms make it more difficult to express one's own emotions, flexibility and the ability to cope with adverse events in life and to function in social roles, as well as the harmonious relationship between body and mind. Among many WHO recommendations that are at stake for Member Countries the empowerment *of persons with mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities: Persons with mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities should be empowered and involved in mental health advocacy, policy, planning, legislation, service provision, monitoring, research and evaluation* (WHO, 2013). This is not only a crucial component of the recovery process but also prevention – through equipment in skills that will enable individuals to recognize the challenges and tools to overcome them within their strength.

The Empowerment Group is based on working in Open Dialogue and the idea of peer-to-peer support. During the meetings, through topics suggested by the facilitator, we focus on bringing out and strengthening the individual resources of the participants. We also learn how to act peer-to-peer support to receive support from participants but also the need to support others, i.e. how to use our own experiences to support and empower others. Learning to work on resources. In developing the model, we draw on the OD approach, the Emotional CPR method (eCPR), academic and policy research experience, university practice in running support groups for students, professional practice at Józef Babiński Clinical Hospital in Krakow and Beskid Centre for Mental Health as well as our personal experience. ECPR is based on the equality and respectful emotional bond between the participants. Such a setting enables individuals to openly share feelings, and experiences and form a group that is not based on judgemental pre-defined terms (that are socially constructed and has particular meanings

attached), but allows to explore the unknown together, unleash power to create and raise a new Voice, a new purpose and hope. The eCPR method, through the simplicity of being together, allows us to reach very deep emotions and reactions, allowing individuals to be felt, expressed and released in the presence of another person.

In this report, we present an EMPOWERMENT model – designed and implemented by a team from the Human Foundation in Poland. We began by first, outlining the main conceptual assumptions that guide the model. We then move on to *Empowerment in practice*. The subsequent sections guide the reader through the groups that have been conducted within this framework. Each session in each group is carefully explained along with the tools used – to provide a toolkit for other practitioners and experts to employ in their practices. We then move on to the evaluation of these groups – done by the participants themselves. The report ends with a summary of lessons learned from our programme and should be also a space for others to reflect before employing the empowerment model.

## Empowerment

According to WHO (1998:6) Health Promotion Glossary *empowerment* is:

*“Empowerment is a process through which people gain greater control over decisions and actions affecting their health.[...] Empowerment may be a social, cultural, psychological or political process through which individuals and social groups can express their needs, present their concerns, devise strategies for involvement in decision-making, and achieve political, social and cultural action to meet those needs. Through such a process people see a closer correspondence between their goals in life and a sense of how to achieve them, and a relationship between their efforts and life outcomes [...] a distinction is made between individual and community empowerment. [The former] refers primarily to the individuals’ ability to make decisions and have control over their personal lives.”*

### Open Dialogue Approach

The Open Dialogue Approach (ODA) has been used successfully since the 1990s in West Lapland, Finland (Buss, et.al., 2020). The Open Dialogue is based on the support meetings, which involve: the person in crisis, his/her relatives and people important to him/her, and professionals who moderate the meeting as well as close social network members (Ibid.). The work is based on the activities of mobile crisis intervention teams, and the therapeutic process emphasises above all the importance of

using the patient's psychological resources and those of his or her social network. An important feature of the meetings is the initiation of polyphony, i.e. a situation in which each participant, in an atmosphere of acceptance - can freely express himself (if s/he wishes to do so). Importantly, every voice is heard and treated as equivalent. Polyphony is contextual – depending on the topic and context of the conversation, each form the opinions and experiences that are contrapuntal with each other.

The core for the success of ODA is the quick response to a crisis by meeting with the individual and their immediate network, preferably at home or in other natural and comfortable settings. An Open Dialogue session with the whole network should take place within 24 hours of contact. In the literature, this approach is often explained by seven guiding principles: (1) immediate support, (2) social network perspective, (3) flexibility and mobility, (4) accountability, (5) psychological continuity, (6) tolerance of uncertainty and (7) dialogism (Seikkula et al., 2001; Buss, et.al., 2020).

The empowerment model in mental health treatment emphasizes collaboration, self-determination, and the enhancement of an individual's sense of control and autonomy in their mental health journey. In the framework adopted in our programme, we emphasise the following features as the key for inclusion in the group scenario.

### Key model's assumptions

EMPOWERment model in mental health treatment is a holistic and person-centred approach that respects the autonomy and dignity of individuals, recognizing their capacity for growth and positive change. It aims to shift the focus from a traditional expert-driven model to one that values and amplifies the individual's voice and agency in their mental health, well-being and the journey for recovery and co-production of knowledge by learning directly from the participants<sup>1</sup> (Lewis, et.al., 2017).

The presented model is built upon a *Strengths-Based Perspective* (Ping Kwong Kam. 2021). Identifying and building on the individual's strengths and capabilities is central to the empowerment model. This approach emphasizes what individuals can do, rather than focusing solely on deficits or pathology and medicalised treatment options. It also challenges the stigmatisation attached to the notion of mental health, through the use of neutral language and challenging the general approach to how mental

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the empowerment college has already introduced their model in practice through courses and café meeting: [The College Explained in Detail – Empowerment College](#)

health is understood in society. It equips individuals with skills and inner strength to assist on the way to recovery. Ultimately, those who participate in the groups, become not only stronger and more capable individuals, but also key elements in one's support system through peer support, or what we call: train the trainer approach. In other words, those who participate in the support groups become *self-help* specialists who build their own capacity, agency and decision-making abilities not only for themselves but also to share and support others. Key elements are:

*Holistic approach:* Each individual operates in their circumstances that shape one's wellbeing differently. In our framework, it is key to understand that mental health and wellbeing, rather than being a medicalised concept, should account for all the psychosocial factors that shape an individual's experience. These can include factors such as family situation, economic circumstances, identity or migration trajectory. However, throughout the empowerment journey, those individual circumstances can become an individual's strengths. In other words – the power lies not in the biomedical definition of what mental health is, but in the human. Therefore, we do not need to *treat the illness* but rather understand why the difficult moments in each individuals' life occur and how they can be supported through those difficult times. For instance, depression can be caused by social exclusion and conflicts based on nationality grounds which leads to a lack of self-acceptance. Rather than *treating* those issues, we argue that empowerment is much more likely to successfully support individuals in tackling those challenges. Therefore crisis, rather than being treated in isolation – is addressed and worked with in individuals' natural environment to empower them to train the crucial skills on the way to recovery.

*Community-based support:* Individuals function and experience their well-being in the groups and community. The model aligns with community-based support that creates a safe space for individuals to recover. The *safe space* may move beyond the family networks and focus more on the local community. In a world where we gradually physically move away from each other due to technology, with an emphasis on individual task management and productivity, the empowerment model aims to create spaces where people support each other and construct a community that one can be part of and rely on. Moreover, unlike with traditional approaches, the support is driven by equality between members, safety, reflexivity and mutual support.

*Transformation of language:* the use of adequate and non-stigmatising language is key in organising support and recovery for any individual.

*Informed Decision-Making:* Providing individuals with comprehensive and understandable information about their condition, treatment and recovery options, and potential outcomes allows them to make informed decisions about their care. Informed decision-making is a cornerstone of empowerment.

*Skills Building:* Empowerment in mental health involves equipping individuals with the skills and tools they need to manage their mental health and well-being effectively. This may include coping strategies, communication skills, problem-solving techniques, and resilience-building exercises.

*Cultural Competence:* Recognizing and respecting the cultural context of individuals is vital. A culturally competent approach ensures that mental health treatment aligns with the individual's cultural background, values, and beliefs.

*Advocacy:* Empowering individuals in mental health treatment may involve supporting them in advocating for their needs within the healthcare system, community, or other relevant contexts. This can include assistance with navigating services, understanding rights, and promoting self-advocacy.

*Reducing Stigma:* Efforts to reduce stigma associated with mental health are part of the empowerment model. This includes promoting a more inclusive and understanding societal attitude towards mental health.

*Goal Setting:* Collaboratively setting realistic and meaningful goals is an integral part of the empowerment model. These goals should reflect the individual's aspirations and contribute to their overall well-being.

*Fostering Independence:* Encouraging and supporting individuals to take an active role in their mental health care fosters a sense of independence. This may involve gradually transitioning from a more intensive treatment setting to more independent self-management.

*Peer support:* Involves people using their own experiences to help each other. Peer support differs from other forms of psychosocial support in that the support person is someone who has been in a similar situation or position and can personally relate to the steps another person wants to take towards recovery. In peer support, everyone's views and experiences are equally valued and not considered better or more important than another person's knowledge.

## External conditions crucial for the EMPOWERment to be successful

Although in our work, we focus on the skills that participants should develop, the external environment within which the *EMPOWERment* model functions, should not be left without attention. To accommodate the effectiveness of the work based on the model, the dominant institutional approach has to be challenged through:

*Establishing a collaborative and respectful relationship* between mental health professionals and individuals seeking treatment is crucial. This involves recognising the individual as an active participant in their care and decision-making. EMPOWERment model is predominantly based on the recovery organised within the support groups that, rather than being located in institutional isolation, are grounded in the community and peer support groups.

*Individual-Centred Approach:* The empowerment model is individual-centred, focusing on the unique needs, preferences, and strengths of the individual. Recovery is tailored to the individual's specific goals and aspirations.

## Groups

By the end of June 2024, we have conducted 3 empowerment groups:

- (I) with Adult Women (a mixed group of 6 Polish and 3 Ukrainian females)
- (II) with University Students (nationality: 11 Polish, 3 Ukrainian and 1 Kazak females)
- (III) with a group of primary school children (Polish and Ukrainian teenagers: boys & girls).

Between July and December 2024, further 2 empowerment groups were conducted:

- (IV) with a group of high-school students (15 teenagers age between 16-18 years old; 3 Ukrainian girls, 1 Ukrainian boy; 8 Polish girls & 3 Polish boys)
- (V) group of mental health hospital patients - day ward (17 participants; 1 Ukrainian female, 1 Ukrainian male; 8 Polish women & 7 Polish men; age between 29-57)



## Participation in the Programme

The participants unanimously reflected positively on the sessions, noting the initial challenge of engaging with a larger group. The facilitator was perceived as successful in managing the group dynamics and fostering a productive and welcoming environment. The participant appreciated the structured yet inclusive nature of the sessions, which transitioned from feeling like informal gatherings to meaningful discussions. Women observed that despite coming from different backgrounds, they managed to find common ground. The discussions highlighted shared experiences and aspirations, reinforcing a sense of unity among the group members and mutual support. Over time, women became more open and less concerned with controlling the interaction, finding it a valuable exercise in self-expression and openness.

Although Oksana, for instance did not express specific fears about the meetings, she mentioned feeling emotionally unsettled due to the war in Ukraine. However, she hoped the programme would bring her harmony, peace, and a sense of love from the Polish community.

## Reflection on the Experience

The participants felt a sense of relief and satisfaction after the sessions. There was a notable increase in self-confidence and a reinforced belief in their ability to connect with people from different cultural backgrounds (i.e. Polish with Ukrainians, Ukrainians with Polish). The empowerment was described as subtle yet impactful, contributing to a more positive self-perception and self-worth. The participants highlighted the effective facilitation, the unity fostered among participants, and the overall positive and supportive atmosphere.

Magda identified that the most significant benefit was the realization that others shared similar challenges and experiences. This collective understanding fostered a sense of community and mutual support, which was comforting and empowering. Participants together expressed their will to participate in more sessions (if available in the future).

On the other hand, Kasia valued the importance of small, daily gestures in improving others' well-being. This new awareness led her to incorporate such practices into her routine, enhancing her social interactions and confidence.

Overall, participants expressed a desire for a longer duration of the programme to allow for more in-depth exploration and sustained engagement.

### **Lessons for the Future**

The participant shared her positive experience with her daughter and friends, emphasizing the value of such empowerment groups. Participants, such as Raisa recommended the group to others, suggesting that the programme offers valuable personal and communal growth opportunities.

Kasia, reflecting on her journey, would tell her past self that participating in the programme was worthwhile and beneficial. She recognized the value of engaging in such experiences and encouraged herself to take advantage of similar opportunities in the future.

Inna would advise her past self to prepare more thoroughly for the sessions. She would suggest writing down questions and being ready to engage deeply with the topics discussed. This preparation could enhance the benefits of the programme for herself and others.

### **University Students**

#### **Before the programme**

Before participating in the empowerment programme, the majority of respondents had no direct experience with empowerment, especially in the context of everyday life and mental health. This was their first exposure to such themes and activities. There was a sense of uncertainty about how to behave in group settings, reflecting a lack of familiarity with interactive, empowerment-focused environments. Olena noted initial difficulties in establishing common ground with peers at their university, which the workshop later helped mitigate. Weronika mentioned a general discomfort with large groups and speaking openly in such settings, which she identified as a significant barrier that prevented her from participating in such groups beforehand. This fear of public speaking was something she struggled with since high school, often resorting to extreme measures to avoid direct engagement, such as turning her back to the audience during presentations. Additionally, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine had a notable impact on her mental health. Living with a Ukrainian woman and witnessing her distress compounded her anxiety and stress. Although she recognized that the war affected many others more severely, she acknowledged that the situation had a pervasive influence

on her life and psychological well-being and encouraged her to participate in the EMPOWERment group.

Olena's participation in the programme was even more difficult and affected by her past experience. During her teenage years, she experienced a philosophical crisis, questioning the meaning of life and facing creative and personal difficulties. An encounter with a person suffering from depression and suicidal thoughts significantly affected her, leading to a major emotional and creative crisis. Moving to Poland with her boyfriend added to her struggles, as she faced cultural and language barriers, isolation from peers, and an unfamiliar educational system. Despite these challenges, she found some solace in returning to Uzbekistan, though she continued seeking answers to her existential questions.

### **The start of the programme**

The group participants learned about the EMPOWERment program mostly through their informal networks of close friends and other students, but the information has been also distributed through the official channels. The main motivation for the participants was the relevance of the topics to their personal experiences. Tania found it particularly interesting, because of the programme's focus on helping immigrants and providing support in Poland, which along with her background and interest in psychology, motivated her to participate. She had previously been involved in the Erasmus+ mentor programme, which helped her connect with other international students and boosted her confidence. This experience made her eager to find similar connections within the local context in Poland.

Others, such as Zuzanna were quite unsure about the participation. She even compared her idea about the group to the AA meetings but with no alcohol. Even though, there were no particular expectations or apprehensions though, as the participant approached the programme with an open mind and without preconceived notions, her curiosity and the positive feedback from friends motivated her to join the group. She found the group environment welcoming and supportive, encouraging her to continue attending despite her initial nervousness. The structure of the meetings, which included discussing personal problems and thematic topics, was particularly appealing to the participants. This dual approach of individual sharing and thematic discussions provided a stimulating and enriching experience, enhancing participants' understanding of the issues related to EMPOWERment.

## Participation in the project

During the participation, respondents highlighted several positive aspects of the programme. The sense of closeness and openness within the group, where everyone shared their experiences honestly was by far the most valued experience throughout the group. This created a supportive atmosphere that differed significantly from the typical one-on-one therapy sessions that Zuzanna had. She found the group setting particularly beneficial for gaining new perspectives and practical advice, such as information about academic resources like financial aid. The programme also facilitated her personal growth by helping her confront and overcome her fears related to public speaking and group interactions. Engaging in collaborative discussions made her feel more confident and less isolated. The sense of community and mutual support was a recurring theme in her feedback.

Tania's main motivation for participation in the group was her desire to find lasting relationships and support systems in Poland. She had no prior experience with group empowerment programmes but had always sought emotional support from friends and family.

## Reflection on the experience

Reflecting on participants' experiences noted several key takeaways. First, women felt more supported and understood within the group, which contrasted with the limited understanding her therapist had of the specific challenges faced by students. The program helped them to realize that their struggles were not unique, which alleviated some of the anxiety, self-criticism and concerns raised before the beginning of the empowerment group.

In her reflection, Zuzanna for instance, expressed a desire for more frequent meetings and a larger space to accommodate the group comfortably. The respondents appreciated the facilitator's role in maintaining a balanced and neutral atmosphere during discussions, which was found crucial for the group's dynamic.

Reflecting on her experience, Tania found the programme extremely valuable and necessary. It not only provided her with a supportive environment where she could openly share and process her emotions but also created a sense of belonging and community that provided mutual support. The programme has helped her not only in understanding and managing her own emotions but also in

connecting with others - facing similar challenges. It reinforced her belief in the importance of psychological support and the value of community in overcoming personal and emotional barriers. Her experience during the workshop was marked by gradual adaptation and increasing comfort. Initial sessions included discussions that helped her to unwind and connect on a personal level, which was appreciated. The tasks assigned, including interactive exercises, were positively received and facilitated communication among participants. Working with the group evolved from an initial sense of separation to a more cohesive and united experience as the sessions progressed. Sharing personal experiences and realizing commonalities with peers provided a sense of solidarity and reduced feelings of isolation.

Olena acknowledged a greater understanding of shared challenges and issues, contributing to a sense of not being alone in her struggles. This realization fostered a more relaxed attitude towards personal problems. The most beneficial aspect of the programme was the enhanced social interaction and connection with others. There were no significant suggestions for improvement, as the experience was generally positive. Comparing life before and after the workshop, Tatiana did not identify significant changes but noted an internal shift towards better problem analysis and a more positive mindset.

#### If you could go back in time...

Zuzanna: " I would advise myself to join the group earlier and attend all the meetings, as the experience was profoundly positive and supportive."

Olena: "If given the chance, I would advise my pre-workshop self to approach this adventure with more positivity and openness to new experiences."

#### School group

The majority of participants found the program enjoyable and interesting, even though they were not very keen on sharing their experiences and evaluating the sessions. Despite very broad comments, teenagers indicated that the sessions were fun and nice. Multiple participants noted that the program was *"an interesting and pleasant experience"* and was a welcomed *break from the usual lessons*. The feedback "było git" (it was good) and "Fajnie" (cool) further reinforce that the program was well-received and appreciated by the attendees.

A reflection: *"I didn't say much but I liked it. I think this should be continued"* suggests that despite the lack of active participation, the groups were well received and appreciated.

## Day ward group

### Before the programme

Participants' reflections highlight the diverse challenges they faced and their motivations for joining the empowerment group. These accounts provide insight into the program's impact and participants' barriers. All participants learned about the empowerment group through communication from the staff ward. Thus in this particular case, the program relied on institutional channels to reach potential participants. The staff's role (namely the facilitator) was critical in connecting individuals with the support they needed, which underscores the importance of effective communication and outreach in similar initiatives. Victoria's experience of being diagnosed with psychosis and her subsequent treatment in a psychiatric ward highlight the challenges of mental health recovery. She faced significant fears about reintegrating into society, including concerns about employment and social acceptance. Additionally, her grief over her husband's death who died in the war and the stress of adapting to a new country further compounded her mental health struggles. However, many participants shared their positive hopes for the programme. Grażyna expressed optimism about the programme, seeing it as an opportunity to address her challenges. Her belief in the potential for change suggests that the program provided hope and a sense of agency for participants. Ivan's reflection sheds light on societal expectations regarding masculinity. Despite being a sensitive person, he was taught to suppress his emotions to appear "tough," which created a barrier to forming meaningful connections with others. His account emphasises the importance of addressing cultural norms and promoting emotional openness in such programmes. Victoria has further noted that similar programs were unavailable in Ukraine, or at least she had not encountered them. This highlights how access to mental health and empowerment resources can vary significantly between countries, and it underscores the importance of making such programs accessible to newcomers from diverse backgrounds. Artur identified grief over his daughter's death as his primary barrier. His difficulty coping led to hospitalization, illustrating how unresolved grief can severely impact mental health and functioning. Danuta expressed a desire to use the program to improve her ability to connect with others and to learn how to ask for help. This highlights a common challenge of vulnerability and reliance on social support, which the program could address through group interaction and

communication skills. The participants' reflections illustrate the complex interplay of mental health challenges, cultural factors, and personal experiences in shaping their barriers. The empowerment group hoped to provide a pathway for addressing these issues.

### **The start of the programme**

Below we present the accounts of two participants: Victoria and Grażyna, however, to a large extent - these attitudes were shared among all the participants. The reflections from Victoria and Grażyna provide insight into participants' initial expectations, emotions, and concerns as they began the program. These accounts reveal both hopes for transformation and underlying fears about the group experience. Victoria's statement, "Apart from openness, I didn't have anything in me", suggests she entered the program with a sense of openness but without a strong sense of confidence or other resources to rely on. Her openness indicates a readiness to engage but also hints at vulnerability and uncertainty about the process. Grażyna's expectations were tied to personal transformation. She hoped the program would provide an opportunity for her to externalize her thoughts and feelings, to "let what is in my head come into the light." This reflects a deep desire for self-expression and emotional release, which she may not have experienced previously in a supportive environment. Both participants expressed apprehension about how they would be received by the group. Victoria - although not stated explicitly, her focus on openness may imply a need for reassurance and acceptance within the group setting. Grażyna - voiced concerns about whether the group would accept her and whether she would feel comfortable enough to speak up. Her fear of remaining silent and leaving the program without benefit highlights the challenge of overcoming internal barriers, such as anxiety or self-doubt.

### **Participation in the project**

I was so afraid to speak in the group. I was very afraid of how I would be received. It was very so difficult for me. It caused a lot of anxiety in me. I was very afraid. Sometimes I just had something in my head and wanted to share it, but however, this barrier was stronger and I wasn't able to. (Grażyna)

Pleasant. I didn't expect to get even more in tune with the group. (Victoria)

It was when I went in there that at first there were these fears this anxiety, but

I saw that everyone was very friendly smiling, that they didn't look down on me at all

and everyone is actually struggling with some kind of problem and I stopped feeling so alone in

my anxiety and I felt such a very friendly family atmosphere, which for example

helped a lot at that moment.(Grażyna)

I hoped that these meetings would help me open up even more to the other person

and learn to ask for help.(Beata)

I hoped that these meetings would help me open up even more to the other person

and learn to ask for help. (Ewelina)

### **Reflection on the experience**

The participants' reflections provide insight into their experiences, emotions, and personal growth during the project. Their accounts highlight initial challenges, the transformative impact of the group environment, and the outcomes they hoped to achieve. Grażyna expressed significant fear about speaking in front of the group, worried about how she would be perceived. This fear often prevented her from sharing thoughts, even when she wanted to. Her experience highlights the power of self-doubt and social anxiety as barriers to participation. Victoria and Grażyna both described initial feelings of anxiety when joining the group. Grażyna noted how this fear stemmed from worries about judgment and isolation. Victoria echoed similar apprehensions but expressed surprise at how the group dynamic exceeded her expectations. Over time, Grażyna found the group to be welcoming, kind, and nonjudgmental. Realizing that others also struggled with personal challenges helped her feel less isolated and fostered a sense of belonging. She described the group as having a "friendly, family-like atmosphere" that supported her emotionally during a difficult time. Victoria was pleasantly surprised by how cohesive the group became. This indicates that the group's dynamic created a safe space for participants to connect deeply with one another, enhancing their sense of solidarity and mutual support. Beata and Ewelina both expressed a desire to use the program to improve their openness to



others and learn to ask for help. Their reflections point to a common goal of developing interpersonal skills and overcoming barriers to vulnerability. Overall, the participants hoped that the program would enable them to move beyond fears and limitations, particularly regarding social interactions and expressing their needs. For instance, Artur who had lost his daughter said that the most useful part was to make a *step forward* in rebuilding himself after the loss. He further explained that he could see the difference. Through having trust in his own emotions he now believes that those emotions will not *kill or flood* him, but quite opposite – they are there to support him in difficult moments.

### **If I could go back in time...**

“I would say to myself: be good to yourself, so everything else will be good” (Victoria)

“I think I would say: don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid to get out of your comfort zone” (Grażyna)

“You have the value. Always” (Ela)

“Your sensitivity is your power” (Ivan)

“Don’t be afraid and try. It’ll do you good” (Danuta)

“Be brave!” (Beata)

„Trust yourself and try. It is always better to try, even if it doesn’t work work than if you never try”  
(Artur)

### **High-school group**

#### **The start of the programme**

Olga describes the program's start as a positive experience, emphasising feeling appreciated and valued ("poczułam się dowartościowana"). She highlights specific interactions, such as receiving a kind compliment or a hug, which contribute to a sense of connection and emotional warmth. These elements indicate that the program successfully fostered a supportive and affirming environment, helping participants feel included and respected. Olga recalls a moment from the first sessions where she was asked to define herself ("sama się musiałam jakoś określić"). She perceived this as a positive aspect, suggesting that the program encouraged self-awareness and introspection. This activity likely

provided her with a sense of agency and self-discovery, which contributed to her overall positive experience. Despite the positive aspects, Olga also mentions a difficulty: reluctance to openly share her thoughts in response to certain questions ("wolałam to zatrzymać dla siebie"). This indicates a tension between the program's interactive nature and her personal comfort level with vulnerability. While the program may have aimed to encourage open dialogue, some participants, like Olga, may feel more comfortable keeping certain reflections private.

### **Participation in the project**

The participants' reflections reveal a range of experiences and emotions regarding their involvement in the project. Among positive experiences, has been a reflection on the group work and communication. Zofia highlights the value of "working in a group with another person" and "conversation" as the most significant aspects of the project. This suggests that collaboration and interpersonal communication were central to the program's success. Engaging with others likely fostered a sense of community and offered opportunities for participants to learn from one another. Beata emphasizes that she gained new knowledge during the sessions, describing them as "valuable". This indicates that the program provided meaningful educational experiences that expanded her understanding and skills. However, the reflection addressed also some challenges. Both Helena and Beata mention feelings of discomfort. Helena describes moments of awkwardness in group settings, without attributing this to specific causes, while Beata refers to feeling "not quite comfortable" and struggling to articulate responses during some discussions. These accounts suggest that the group-based format may have been intimidating or overwhelming for some participants, potentially due to social anxiety or pressure to contribute. Moreover, Beata mentions feeling as though she lacked the "right words" to answer questions at times, comparing the experience to being metaphorically "pinned against a wall." This highlights the challenge some participants faced in expressing themselves effectively, which could stem from a lack of confidence or the pressure of being put on the spot.

### **Reflection on the experience...**

"I would take part because it develops self-esteem and like relationships." (Marysia)

“It would be valuable, only that such activities would be in a series of meetings, for example, in the form of a class or during some kind of health education, so that they could be included in the curriculum. Not as extracurricular activities (Gabrysia)

## Reflections & lessons learned

The first lesson learned relates to the schedule in which the school groups were organized. Unlike others, here we were more bound by the limitations imposed from school. In this case, we were only given 3 slots for 1 hour and 40 minutes, during the break between regular lessons. Despite the positive reception of such an initiative, we felt that the time spent in the empowerment groups was insufficient and participants only began to really open up towards the end of the last session. Hence our recommendation would be to maintain the *one topic per week* schedule. It is apparent that there is a need for more than three meetings, the group – in particular with teenagers. The group became more active towards the end of the last meetings, thus with 6 meetings there would be a chance for them to become even more active. It was stated that the lack of integration within the group made it more challenging to open (there was a high turnover of people in this class and they were not well integrated), thus getting to know the group in the first session would be beneficial. For other adult groups, introductory sessions build safety, confidence and trust in other group members. This could be due to the fact that adult groups consisted of women, who are more open to sharing.

The second point, that is worth mentioning is that in such a group we found it is crucial that there is someone familiar present (in the case of the school-age group it was a teacher, but it could potentially be anyone from the community, with who the teenagers were familiar). It eased their fear about the sessions and increased their confidence.

The third lesson implies that for such a diverse and not well-integrated group, when sensitive topics are addressed a separate introductory session should be added, in order to allow the group to get to know each other a little bit more as well as to create a safe space for participants to share their thoughts.

Conducting empowerment groups with minors and school students is difficult. Not only because of the age and institutional restrictions but predominantly because those young people do not have the skills to talk about emotions, their emotional needs, and their mental health. Hence a series of

empowerment groups for parents to encourage openness towards the topic should be recommended. We would also recommend flexibility with approach – as young people at this age find it difficult to express themselves verbally, perhaps more artistic activities would allow them to express themselves better.

The high-school students' group was also challenging. Some participants in this group reported feelings of discomfort while sharing with the group, so it is crucial to ensure that the facilitator respects individual boundaries regarding personal sharing. Offering a clear assurance that sharing is voluntary and providing diverse ways to engage (adapted to the specificity of the group) could help address the needs of participants who may prefer more privacy.

The evaluation interviews proved to be significant not only in informing us about the experience and opinion of the programme, but we have also asked about the potential ideas for improvement. While a great majority of the participants did not have any doubts or suggestions for improvement, one of the participants recognised the structured approach but noted a desire for more openness in the discussion topics, suggesting that a less rigid framework might allow for more individual expression and unexpected insights.

The empowerment model offers a flexible approach that can be adapted to the conditions within which the group operate but also to the number of participants and topics that can be discussed. However, in terms of the size of the groups the differences in interaction, dependent on size were visible. While the hospital group was already familiar with the facilitator (which allowed for the smooth inclusion of a greater number of participants), the groups that were not familiar with each other should be between 8 – 12 people.

Nonetheless, participants across all the groups highlighted the program's emphasis on creating a warm, affirming atmosphere was effective, and feelings of appreciation and connection were present throughout. Besides, activities that promote self-reflection were, in general, viewed positively and had a significant impact on participants.

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