



ReConnection – Reconnecting Through Experience

*Handbook of Experiential and Outdoor Education
for Youth Workers and Trainers*

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Introduction

The ReConnection methodological handbook is the imprint of several years of experiential work, shared thinking and experiences gained in the field. It grew out of trainings, group processes and community situations with young people in which we met the same question again and again: how can we create genuine connection, safety and opportunities for growth for young people who, over the course of their lives, have often experienced precisely the absence of these things?

The methodological handbook is intended primarily for professionals, trainers, teachers and helpers who work with young people from vulnerable groups – in settings where lack of motivation, low self-confidence, relational wounds, mistrust or emotional overload are not exceptional phenomena but part of everyday work. We are convinced that in these situations the foundation of development is not merely the transfer of information, but the quality of connection.

At the heart of the ReConnection approach, therefore, is experiential learning built on safe connection. We believe that young people can go through real change when they find themselves in situations where they can experience:

- that they are safe,
- that their presence matters,
- that it is okay to make mistakes,
- that it is possible to connect,
- and that they are able to have an impact on their own lives and communities.

The methods presented in this handbook are therefore not simple collections of "games" or programme ideas. The outdoor and experiential education exercises, the reflection tools, the group dynamics models and the chapters on the neurobiology of connection all serve the same goal: supporting learning processes in which participants not only gain new knowledge, but also live through new experiences of themselves, their relationships and their own possibilities.

In the course of our work it became especially important for us to understand that development is not an exclusively cognitive process. Young people's nervous system state, sense of safety, previous relational experiences and current group experiences fundamentally determine whether they are able to be present, cooperate, learn or even accept help. For this reason, several chapters of the handbook deal with trauma-sensitive

approaches, the neurobiology of connection, and the group leadership competences that can help create a safe and holding environment.

Another important factor in the creation of this handbook was that in recent years we have seen ever more clearly that young people need not only skills, but also holding community experiences – experiences in which they can live through cooperation, mutual attention and shared success. This is why community situations, cooperative challenges, outdoor learning spaces and reflection processes play a prominent role in ReConnection programmes.

The structure of the handbook follows this conceptual arc. The first chapters present the foundations of training and group leadership, as well as the methodological and psychological background. They are followed by chapters exploring the specific features of working with young people from vulnerable groups, the considerations involved in creating a safe learning environment, and the processes of experiential learning. The second part of the handbook offers concrete exercises, outdoor and experiential education tools, and debriefing options for everyday training and teaching work.

We consider it important to emphasise that this handbook is not a collection of ready-made recipes. We do not believe that the same method works in the same way in every



group. Rather, we wish to pass on a professional approach that supports mindful presence, reflective practice and sensitive attunement to participants.

We hope that this handbook will not only provide practical ideas, but also offer inspiration to professionals who believe that connection, community experience and a safe, holding

presence can set real change in motion in young people's lives.

Kriszta Molnár – Professional Lead, Senior Trainer

Introducing the Partner Organisations

TANDEM Non-profit Organisation

TANDEM n. o. is a non-profit organisation based in Komárno, Slovakia. Since 2009 we have been working with young people, teachers and helping professionals using the tools of non-formal learning and experiential education. Human connection, community development and support for personal growth have always been at the centre of our work.

Our organisation's professional programmes are built primarily around topics such as:

- self-awareness and identity,
- community functioning,
- communication and conflict management,
- career guidance and planning for the future,
- active citizenship,
- and supporting young people's mental and social well-being.

Over the years we have taken part in numerous methodological development projects, teacher trainings and youth projects. Our work places particular emphasis on experiential education and experiential learning, which rely not primarily on frontal knowledge transfer but support development through personal experiences, community situations and reflection processes.

An important feature of how we work is that we always understand professional development as a community process. Our programmes aim not only to develop skills, but also to create safe spaces where participants can experience acceptance, cooperation and connection. This approach has also been present in our previous methodological publications and educational projects.

We have long been providing methodological support to teachers and helping professionals as well. The aim of our trainings, workshops and conferences is not only for participants to learn new tools, but also to become more reflective about their own professional practice, their role as group leaders, and their patterns of connection.

One of our key professional developments in recent years was the Messzelátó training series, which offered young people from vulnerable groups a complex, multi-weekend,

experience-based development process. The programme explored the themes of self-awareness, career guidance, communication, active citizenship and conscious life management through playful, outdoor methods built on experiential learning.

The Messzelátó programme became a particularly important milestone in the life of TANDEM, because it gave us the opportunity, in practice, to further develop the approach that later became one of the foundations of our ReConnection project: the conscious design of development processes built on connection, safety and community experiences. During the programme, the participating young people not only acquired new skills, but could also experience that they are able to connect with themselves, their peers and their own vision of the future.

Élményakadémia Public Benefit Association

Élményakadémia Public Benefit Association is one of Hungary's leading professional communities in experiential education with an outdoor focus. The organisation was founded in 2005 with the aim of supporting the personal and community development of young people and professionals through the tools of non-formal and experiential learning.

At the centre of Élményakadémia's work is experiential education. Their programmes are built on the idea that people learn most deeply about themselves and their relationships through real experiences, challenges, community situations and reflection processes.

The organisation works a great deal with young people from vulnerable or socially disadvantaged backgrounds, including:

- Roma youth,
- participants living in deep poverty,
- young people from the child protection system,
- and communities where lack of self-confidence, isolation or social exclusion are more strongly present.

In their programmes, the outdoors is not merely a venue but a deliberate educational tool. Challenges in nature, cooperative situations and adventure education processes support:

- the development of resilience,
- the strengthening of self-confidence,

- taking responsibility,
- and the experience of community functioning.

Another important pillar of Élményakadémia's work is supporting helping professionals. Their trainings and professional programmes place special emphasis on:

- methodological development,
- reflective practice,
- burnout prevention,
- and building professional communities.

The organisation has a strong international network and has for many years been an active participant in European youth and education cooperation. They have delivered numerous international trainings, outdoor courses and professional learning processes in which professionals from different countries shared their experiences of experiential learning, community development and social inclusion.

In the ReConnection project, Élményakadémia played a particularly important role in strengthening the professional foundations of the outdoor and adventure education approach, the trauma-sensitive approach, and development processes built on experiential learning. Over the course of the project, the joint work of the two partner organisations meant not only methodological cooperation, but also the emergence of a shared professional way of thinking that places at its centre helping work built on connection, safety and respect for human dignity.

The Project Process and Activities

The ReConnection project was not a single training or methodological experiment, but a deliberately designed, cumulative learning and development process. Throughout the project we strove to keep professional thinking, methodological development and field experience in continuous dialogue with one another.

The project was founded on the shared recognition that supporting young people from vulnerable groups requires more than a few well-functioning exercises or motivational programmes. What is needed is a complex approach that simultaneously addresses:

- self-awareness,
- connection,
- community integration,

- developing a vision of the future,
- and supporting social and labour-market integration.

During the project, the partners therefore developed a shared development model, which we called the ReConnection model. At its centre was the process through which young people can gradually reconnect:

- with themselves,
- with their identity,
- with their roots,
- with their communities,
- and with their own vision of the future and with society.



International Professional Cooperation

In the first phase of the project, the two partner organisations – TANDEM, n.o. and Élményakadémia Public Benefit Association – built shared professional foundations. The aim was not simply to exchange methods, but to develop a common language and a shared professional approach.

Several international professional workshops took place during the project, at which the participating trainers and helpers:

- learned outdoor and experiential education methods from one another,
- worked together on future-planning and career guidance tools,
- examined trauma-sensitive approaches,
- and analysed the role of body-awareness and reflective methods in work with young people.

One of the most important outcomes of the professional meetings was that they created a strong and holding experience of professional community among the participating professionals. The two methodological retreats offered a strong foundation for professional self-awareness and a space for reflection that people in the helping professions greatly need and are rarely given. In order to hold strong and safe frameworks as professionals for the young people who come to us, it is essential that we ourselves are well: that we can regularly work on our own professional identity, look at

our vision of the future, withdraw, evaluate, and give one another a deeper level of attention and feedback than everyday brief encounters allow. Regular self-reflection and conscious learning, including supervision, must be part of the lives of helpers working with vulnerable young people, and are also an essential tool in preventing burnout.

Methodological Development and Shared Learning

In the next phase of the project, the emphasis shifted to methodological development. Together, the partners developed the outdoor exercises built on experiential learning that later formed the basis of the pilot trainings.

Particularly important roles in this process were played by:

- the methodology of reflection,
- group dynamics awareness,
- the challenge by choice approach,
- and a neurobiological and trauma-sensitive approach to connection.

During the development process we were not looking for ready-made recipes, but for tools that can be applied flexibly in different groups and life situations. Indeed, one of the key lessons of the project was that methods on their own are not enough: the real impact is always created by the way the trainer is present, connects and holds a safe space for participants.

Pilot Trainings for Young People from Vulnerable Groups

One of the most important phases of the project was the two international pilot trainings, each lasting 12 days, held in Slovakia and Hungary. They were attended by young people from vulnerable social situations who:

- lived in a minority environment,
- grew up in children's homes,
- came from difficult financial circumstances,
- or were trying to find their way into adulthood with an uncertain vision of the future, low self-confidence and little support.

During the trainings, participants did not learn in traditional educational settings. The process was based on:

- outdoor challenges,
- community experiences,
- body-awareness and reflective exercises,
- cooperation-based tasks,
- and future-planning processes.



The arc of the trainings was deliberately cumulative. The initial phase of connection and trust-building was gradually followed by exercises that supported:

- self-reflection,
- taking responsibility,
- communication,
- conflict management,
- and recognising one's own abilities.

One of the most important experiences of the project was that learning situations in nature helped young people particularly strongly to connect with themselves and with one another. During the shared challenges, many participants experienced for the first time that they can have an effect on their environment, that their presence matters, and that they can be an important part of a community.

Reflection, Processing and Professional Learning

Shared reflection and professional processing played an ongoing role throughout the project. After each training, the trainers analysed:

- the group processes,
- the participants' reactions,
- how the individual methods worked,

- and the situations in which safety, connection or, indeed, resistance appeared particularly strongly.

This reflective practice fundamentally shaped the final professional approach of the project. The ReConnection model was not born as a prefabricated theory, but was built up from real group situations, experiences and shared learning processes.

Dissemination and Professional Dialogue

In the closing phase of the project, the partners held several professional dissemination events in Slovakia and Hungary. At these meetings we:

- presented the ReConnection model,
- shared the experiences of the project,
- demonstrated outdoor and experiential education tools in a form participants could try out,
- and initiated professional dialogue with organisations and professionals who also work with young people from vulnerable groups.

An important aim of the project was that the knowledge created should not remain closed within the partner organisations, but should live on in other communities, trainings and professional processes.



ReConnection diagram²

² Google. (2026). NotebookLM [Large language model]. <https://notebooklm.google/>

The Role of the Methodological Handbook

This methodological handbook is a summary and a further development of the whole project process. It is not merely documentation of the programmes delivered, but the result of the shared learning process that took shape during the project.

The aim of the handbook is to make the experiences, methodological insights and conceptual foundations that emerged in the project transferable to professionals who:

- work with young people,
- accompany communities,
- or wish to create safer, more connected and more reflective learning spaces in their own work.

The Logic Behind the Structure of the Handbook

The structure of the ReConnection methodological handbook follows a deliberate professional arc. The order of the chapters is not random: the aim is for the trainer or helping professional to progress gradually from understanding the theoretical foundations to methods that can be applied in practice, and then to their conscious, reflective use. The structure of the handbook is based on the logic of experiential learning, in which theoretical knowledge, self-reflection and practical experimentation reinforce one another.

The first major section of the publication deals with the theoretical background. Here we describe fundamental approaches that define the ReConnection approach: experiential learning (the Kolb model), comfort zone theory, the role of reflection, group dynamics processes, the various forms of resistance, and the neurobiological background of connection. These chapters provide professionals with a common language and conceptual framework. Their role is not merely to inform; they also help the trainer to interpret more consciously the processes taking place in the group, the young people's reactions and their own professional presence.

The next section focuses on the specific features of working with young people from vulnerable groups. Here the handbook starts from the premise that with these groups one cannot think exclusively in terms of "techniques". Creating a sense of safety, the opportunity for connection, freedom of choice and an accepting presence are preconditions for every further development process. The chapters therefore place strong

emphasis on the trauma-sensitive approach, the importance of contracting, recognising the individual boundaries of the comfort zone, and the subtle trainer attitudes that build trust over the long term.

The third major section of the handbook is built on practical methodology. In its first half we devote a chapter to the methodology of labyrinth walking. The labyrinth as a walking meditation tool provided the central motif of our first trainers' workshop. Labyrinth walking is more than an outdoor life-path exercise: the labyrinth is a spiritual space in which participants can come closer to their innermost selves and, if they wish, to the guiding thread of their lives. We originally included this tool in the programme to support trainers' self-reflection, but in a later phase of the project it took on much greater significance, as the participants of the methodological workshop carried it into many of Élményakadémia's programmes: they worked with it with parents, trainers and the students taking part in the pilot trainings.

This section also includes outdoor and experiential education exercises, games and reflective debriefing techniques. The logic behind the selection of the exercises is likewise deliberate: we move from simpler connection and trust-building tasks towards deeper themes of self-awareness, cooperation or future planning. The handbook aims to ensure that the trainer does not merely "run tasks", but is able to think in terms of whole processes: to recognise the current state of the group, interpret reactions, and adapt their methods accordingly.

Another important element of the handbook is the central role of reflection. According to the ReConnection approach, real learning does not happen during the exercise itself, but when it is processed. For this reason the book offers many questions, debriefing angles and facilitation tools that help participants become aware of and integrate their experiences. The goal is not merely to create a good experience, but to support young people in formulating insights that relate to their own lives.

One of the most important principles behind the structure of the handbook is flexibility. Although the chapters follow a logical developmental arc, the publication is not meant to function as a rigid script. Rather, it is a professional toolkit from which trainers can choose according to their own group, goals and situation. In the ReConnection approach, methods on their own do not bring about change – real impact is created by the combination of safe connection, mindful presence and reflective process facilitation.

Theoretical Background

Trainer Fundamentals

Alongside methodological preparedness, the greatest asset is **mindful presence**. This is especially true in work with socially disadvantaged young people, where fine-tuning to the group's dynamics and individual needs is far more important than pre-written scripts. For the development process to be not just a way of passing time but an experience that generates real inner change, we need to build on three fundamental pillars: the **comfort zone model**, **Kolb's experiential learning cycle** and the in-depth process of **reflection**.

The Space of Learning: The Comfort Zone Model

The basis of every development process is understanding where participants are located in a psychological sense. The **comfort zone** is the safe harbour where young people feel at home, where tasks are familiar and nothing threatens their self-image. For disadvantaged young people this zone is often narrower and more fragile; because of mistrust or past trauma, even a simple round of introductions can cause them tension. As trainers, our primary task is to stabilise the comfort zone: through rituals, predictability and equal partnership we create a safe space in which young people dare to relax.

Real growth, however, takes place in the **learning zone** (or challenge zone). Here the tasks already test participants' abilities and require some excitement and concentration, but do not yet trigger paralysing anxiety. The art of the trainer lies in keeping young people on this edge. If the challenge is too great, we cross into the **panic zone**, where stress blocks thinking and development is replaced by defence (crying, anger or withdrawal). Since these boundaries differ from person to person, the trainer must continuously monitor the group and be ready to adjust the intensity of exercises or to guarantee freedom of participation.



The Process of Learning: Applying the Kolb Model

Once we have created a safe space, we also need to define the way learning will take place. According to the **Kolb model**, effective development is a cyclical process that begins with **concrete experience**. With disadvantaged young people this stage is critical: for them, it is action, movement and play – rather than theoretical reasoning – that open the doors. In experiential learning we do not talk about cooperation; instead, we build a bridge together or hold up a stick on our fingertips. The experience-based approach helps release tension and focus attention.

The next step of the cycle is **active experimentation**, where young people can try out new strategies. This is where competence development becomes visible: when a young person who previously refused tasks becomes able to complete a small sub-task, their self-confidence begins to grow. We can support this process with visual feedback systems such as a "growth tree", where concrete achievements (stickers, marks) receive ritual affirmation. This helps ensure that the positive experience does not remain just a momentary good feeling, but becomes part of the young person's self-image.

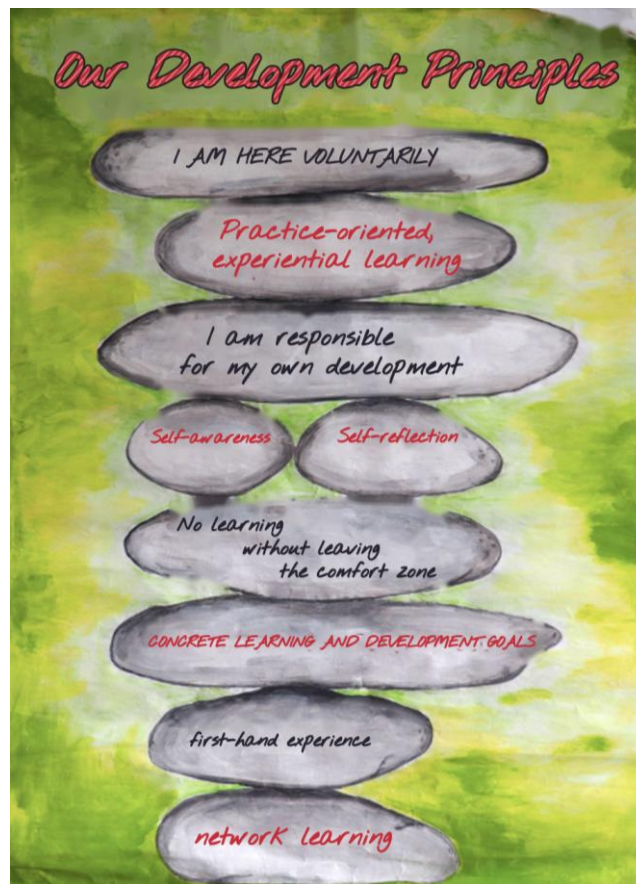
Deepening Learning: The Power of Reflection

Experience in itself is not yet knowledge – it is **reflection** that makes it so. Reflection is the stage of the Kolb cycle where we stop and look at what actually happened to us. For those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds this process is often unfamiliar and difficult, since in their everyday lives they rarely have the opportunity to articulate their inner states. As trainers, we take on the role of facilitator here: we help find words for feelings and provide a safe form for sharing.

Gradualness in reflection is key. We can start with non-verbal signals or simple "yes/no" questions, then move on to sharing in small groups and finally in plenary. During reflection the trainer also acts as a kind of "emotional mirror": amplifying positive moments that the young person may not even have noticed in themselves. Since they often live within negative narratives ("I can't do this", "I'm bad"), genuine, performance-based positive feedback received during reflection has healing power. This is the point at which an external experience becomes an inner resource.

Trainer fundamentals such as planning based on Kolb's learning cycle, respecting the importance of reflection, or applying comfort zone theory are not just theoretical frameworks, but elements of a toolkit with which we can build bridges between young

people's present and their possibilities. The success of the work does not depend on one or two brilliant exercises, but on the consistency with which the trainer manages the learning process. If we are able to maintain safety, provide the experience and help reframing through reflection, we give young people a chance to step beyond their own limits more boldly – not only in the training, but in life as well.



Our Development Principles

The Arc of Training Design

Non-formal education, especially in work with disadvantaged young people, is not just a succession of games and exercises. Training design is a deliberate pedagogical process built on participants' inner experience and on experiential learning. The aim is to create an arc that leads young people from mere participation towards self-reflection and the conscious creation of a vision of the future.

The Threefold Unity of Conscious Goal-Setting

Step zero of planning is clarifying where we want to take the group. Goals are never isolated; they reinforce one another:

- **Knowledge level:** Here we define the concepts and connections that young people need to acquire, for example in the field of career guidance or labour-market opportunities.
- **Skills development:** The emphasis is on practical applicability. The aim is to develop competences such as cooperation, effective communication and problem-solving, which are essential for social integration.
- **Shaping attitudes:** This is the deepest level, targeting young people's outlook and their relationship with themselves and their future. The aim is for participants to develop the inner motivation and self-confidence that enable them to take charge of their own destiny.

Target-Group-Specific Planning

In work with disadvantaged young people (e.g. young people in state care, those living as a minority), planning is based on a deep knowledge of the group. We need to take into account that these young people often arrive with low self-esteem, difficulties in self-expression and a lack of trust. When planning, the trainer must weigh up the group's maturity: with a community that has been together for a long time, deeper self-awareness or conflict management tasks can be used, whereas with an ad hoc group creating a safe atmosphere is the priority. Language and physical barriers, as well as difficulties arising from participants' life situations, are not supplementary considerations but determining factors in the choice of methods.

The Dynamic Arc of the Learning Process

A well-structured 12-day pilot training, or even a shorter workshop, is divided into three main phases that ensure continuity:

- **Tuning in and safety:** In the opening phase the aim is to dispel the myth of the "blank slate". Participants bring their everyday stress and prejudices with them; warm-up exercises and icebreakers help them arrive and open up to working together.
- **Action – the core of experience:** This is where real engagement happens. Outdoor and adventure education tools confront young people with challenges through which they gain real experiences of cooperation and of their own limits. Nature as a pedagogical space helps foster clear thinking free from social stigma.

- **Reflection and integration:** The most critical part of non-formal learning. In our experience, real learning happens not during the exercise but during the debrief. Here we turn experiences into lessons and jointly look for answers to how the knowledge gained can be transferred into everyday life and future planning.

Time Management and Methodological Awareness

The key to a successful training is a balance between flexibility and structure. When planning, it is critical to build in buffer time: space must be left for unexpected group dynamics. Breaks (15–30 minutes) should provide real rest, and in debriefing circles it must be ensured that everyone gets a chance to speak. The trainer's toolkit (icebreakers, cooperative techniques, tension-releasers) is effective when it always serves the current goal and the group's emotional state at that moment.

Continuous Development: Evaluation

The training does not end with the farewell. For trainers, evaluating their own work (self-reflection and professional supervision) ensures quality. In process analysis, trainer competence develops by examining the triad of perception (*what did I see?*), interpretation (*what does it mean?*) and intervention (*how did I respond?*).

Fundamentals of Group Dynamics

Based on Bruce Tuckman

This chapter combines the theoretical arc of training design and group dynamics processes into a single professional guide. The aim is for trainers to understand the internal logic of the training and to be able to lead disadvantaged young people from self-awareness to creating a vision of the future.

An effective training is not just a series of well-chosen exercises, but a deliberately designed learning journey that takes into account participants' developmental phases and educational goals. In planning, clarifying goals is the first step: we need to think in the threefold unity of knowledge, skills and attitudes. This is especially true for disadvantaged young people, where breaking through inner barriers and strengthening self-confidence are often more important than technical knowledge.

Planning is based on a deep knowledge of the group: the trainer must weigh up participants' prior knowledge, motivation and social background (e.g. state care,

minority status). These factors determine the group dynamics processes, which can be divided into the following stages:

1. Forming

In the arc of the training, this phase corresponds to the period of **Tuning in**. At this point participants are still uncertain; they are testing boundaries and looking to the trainer for



guidance, while often bringing mistrust or previous negative experiences with them. The trainer's task is to create a safe atmosphere and to lay down the framework (time, space, rules) clearly. At this stage, icebreaker exercises serve to release tension and build the first connections.

2. Storming

As the sense of safety grows, individual interests and the struggle for roles emerge. This phase is a time of tension and resistance, which in disadvantaged groups may also show up as defiance or passivity. It is important to recognise that this is not a failure of the training, but a natural part of development. The trainer should use tension-releasing techniques and empathic facilitation to help the group, so that conflicts strengthen the community rather than tearing it apart.



3. Norming

The group gets past the first frictions and begins to develop its own operating principles. A common language, a sense of belonging and mutual acceptance emerge. At this stage the trainer is more of a facilitator, allowing the group to formulate its own internal norms, which strengthens young people's autonomy and sense of responsibility. This stage prepares the ground for deeper professional work.



4. Performing

This is the most intensive, **Action** phase of the training arc. The group becomes capable of effective cooperation and of solving complex challenges. This is where outdoor and



adventure education exercises come in, through which participants gain real experience of their own abilities and of shared success. Processes taking place in nature help foster thinking free from social stigma and the development of a vision of the future.

5. Adjourning

At the end of the process the group says goodbye, which can be emotionally demanding for participants. This is the time for **Reflection and closure**: we turn experiences into lessons and help transfer what has been learned into everyday life. The trainer's task is

to make learning outcomes conscious and to create farewell rituals, ensuring that young people leave with a stable inner image and concrete plans.

The quality of the training is rounded off by ongoing **evaluation**, based on participant feedback and the trainer's self-reflection. Analysing the triad of perception, interpretation and intervention enables professionals to respond even more consciously to the needs of groups in the future.



Resistance in the Group

On Resistance in General

Throughout our nearly twenty years of group leadership work, we have tried from the very beginning to regularly create opportunities for ourselves to stop, look back on our work and, in an atmosphere supported by our fellow trainers, analyse the challenges we encounter in the field. Once or twice a year we hold case discussions and supervision sessions, and our clear experience is that the phenomenon of resistance – in groups or in individuals – has given us the most food for thought. Likewise, in our development work with teachers we very often hear that they struggle with resistance or do not know how to deal with it.

But what exactly do we mean by resistance in the language of group dynamics or in teachers' everyday speech? When we hear the word, we most often think of group members who, through quiet withdrawal or forceful, loud behaviour, go against the group's goals or are present in a destructive way, "ruining" the session. Put simply, we tend to regard as resistant anyone who "doesn't want" to learn, play or take part in the process.

The most common mistake in the classic attitude arises when, based on the behaviour of resistant participants, we conclude that they are always deliberately obstructing the process – and often we even assume ill will. Yet this simplifying interpretation is usually wrong: resistant participants most often behave this way for reasons that do originate within them, but unconsciously. To put it more simply: they are not "doing" it; the phenomenon is "happening to them".

If we want to use a more refined, more neutral formulation, we can say that **resistance is individual or group-level behaviour that hinders the group process, the progress of learning or the deepening of joint work.** Resistance may appear, for example, as passivity, lateness, excessive talking, diversion, silence, task avoidance or open protest. It is important not to interpret resistance simply as "bad behaviour": it often has a protective function, meaning that the participant is trying in this way to preserve their own sense of safety in a learning situation that is difficult, uncertain or too intense for them.

In terms of perceiving and handling resistance, the richest and most perspective-broadening approach we have encountered in our studies so far has been that of Gestalt psychology. This approach assumes that the process of individual and group learning can be described along an experiential cycle, and that blockages in the various phases of the cycle produce different kinds of resistance. In handling these types of resistance, we can likewise choose the appropriate behaviour or response depending on the point or phase at which the blockage occurred.

Gestalt Psychology and the Group Process



The Gestalt Cycle of Experience³

³ Google. (2026). NotebookLM [Large language model]. <https://notebooklm.google/>

The process of experience consists of seven successive phases that follow a logical order. If the cycle is uninterrupted, the individual is able to learn and grow.

- **Sensation:** The beginning of the process, where bodily stimuli (e.g. tension, change in heart rate, external noise) appear at the threshold of consciousness.
- **Awareness:** The stage of *figure–ground formation*. The individual gives meaning to the stimuli and recognises their need (e.g. "I'm tired of the group work").
- **Mobilisation of energy:** The emergence of inner drive and tension, which provides the fuel needed for action.
- **Action:** The energy takes a concrete direction; active manipulation of, or movement within, the environment begins.
- **Contact:** The high point of the process, the state of full presence, where the essential encounter or experience takes place at the boundary between the individual and the environment (or another person).
- **Evaluation, closing down:** Processing the experience, integrating the results and beginning to "withdraw into the background".
- **Withdrawal:** The cessation of activity, rest and the creation of empty space, which is a precondition for starting a new cycle.

Resistance Mechanisms at the Boundary

Resistance mechanisms are learned responses that interrupt the natural course of the cycle. Although they originally serve a protective function, in a training situation they often block contact and meaningful change.

The overview below summarises the forms of resistance associated with each phase of the cycle of experience. In other words, if what should happen in a given phase does not take place, this is shown by the following symptoms:

		Description of the mechanism	Typical inner sentence or symptom
Sensation	Desensitisation	Dulling of the senses; conscious or unconscious exclusion of incoming data and feelings.	I didn't hear the task I didn't notice I don't feel anything / I can't put my feelings into words The exercise didn't touch me
Awareness	Introjection	Uncritical acceptance of external expectations and "shoulds"; overestimating the other's credibility at one's own expense.	This includes the typical "good students": those who accept everything, agree with everything and assume the group leader always knows best.
Mobilisation of energy	Projection	Attributing one's own unaccepted feelings or traits to others; shifting responsibility.	"He's angry with me." / "The group doesn't trust me." / "They won't let me speak." "They don't listen to me" "I'm left out"
Action	Retroflection	Turning energy directed towards the environment (e.g. anger or a need) against oneself; suppression.	Self-harming statements, "I messed it up"; instead of confronting, blames themselves for errors, omissions and failures
Contact	Deflection	Weakening the force of contact through humour, changing the subject or avoiding intimacy.	Doesn't take the task "seriously" "Let's talk about something else." / Avoiding eye contact / "The whole thing's a joke." "This task is boring"
Closing down	Confluence	Dissolution of individual boundaries in the group; lack of the ability to stand apart and say no.	"I can't say no." / "I feel what the others feel." / Unable to reach closure. When the group member is unable to transition back into their real life and wants to stay only in the "as-if space".

An important conceptual point is that the Gestalt approach regards the appearance of resistance as"creative adjustment", serving "survival" at times when a disturbance has arisen in the cycle of experience. If such a phenomenon is temporary and dissolves as the group process changes, and the group member is able to move on, no intervention is needed at all. They can become a problem when they become fixed and turn into part of a participant's character. At this point it is worth considering, for example, how introjection as a resistant reaction can, in its entrenched form, turn someone into the group's "nodding" member – the group member who accepts every piece of information, teaching and advice from the leader "without chewing it over" misses out on developing critical thinking and does not practise standing up against something on a given topic, voicing an opposing opinion, or even working out and putting together their own view. Or how resistance through joking can give rise to the role of the "group clown" – whose bearer often keeps themselves away from reflective learning and deep experience right to the end. It is not beneficial either for individual learning or for the group if we allow these roles, or any other resistant behaviour, to become ossified.

To avoid falling into countertransference as group leaders (i.e. to avoid "being angry" with the resistant participant) and to be able to look at a given behaviour neutrally, it helps to try to see everything that may lie behind a resistant behaviour as creative adjustment or a self-protective mechanism. The following overview can provide a basis for this:

Mechanism	Survival function	How it shows up in behaviour
Desensitisation	Not ready to take in information (emotionally preoccupied with something else). Too many external stimuli (stress, trauma) – the nervous system switches off to protect itself from overload.	Apathy, an "I don't care" attitude. Cannot put their feelings into words, does not answer, does not understand the task on a cognitive level.
Introjection	Seeks to gain others' acceptance through constant agreement	Does what is expected of them, without a will of their own. Adapts to everything. Overly rule-abiding, never questions the rules.
Projection	Deflecting inner tension and responsibility – this is how they push their own	Victim role: Everyone around me is hostile, they don't accept me, they

Mechanism	Survival function	How it shows up in behaviour
	inner negative feelings away from themselves.	mean me harm. Meanwhile they themselves are angry/rejecting.
Retroflection	Fear of conflict or of others' judgement – action directed towards the environment (e.g. talking back) would be too dangerous.	Self-destructive behaviour, psychosomatic symptoms (e.g. stomach ache). Nail-biting or even self-harm.
Deflection	Dampening vulnerability and intense intimacy. Protection against the experience of failure.	Humour, verbalising (talks about it but does not experience the feelings), trivialising. Cynical, hyperactive, avoids eye contact.
Confluence	Dampening the fear of isolation. Preserving the sense of belonging somewhere at all costs.	Excessive adaptation, lack of an independent opinion. Complete absence of ego boundaries.

The Role and Toolkit of the Trainer

In the Gestalt approach it is very important that the trainer's task is to work with the group dynamics at least as much as with the topic/learning process. In this approach, the professional's basic attitude is authentic **presence**, controlled sharing of their own emotional responses, and **acceptance**. Body awareness also plays a major role in this approach: the trainer/therapist often starts the reflection process by sharing their own bodily sensations (e.g. "as I listen to you, my stomach has tightened / a painful, heavy feeling has appeared in my shoulders"). It can also be useful to amplify small bodily movements and look at them, in order to make suppressed emotional messages visible.

Below we have collected a few possible trainer tools for dealing with the different manifestations of resistance:

- If we notice *desensitisation*, let us move towards awareness by identifying bodily sensations: "What do you feel in your stomach right now?" or "What physical sensation accompanies this thought?" Various grounding techniques and simple exercises involving physical contact can be helpful.
- *In the case of introjection*, encourage "chewing". Help the participant separate their own values from learned rules: "Whose voice do you hear in your head right now when you say 'this is how it must be done'?" Here we can include small-group

tasks in which those struggling with "introjection" have to collect arguments precisely against the rules, or examine a rule or statement from different perspectives in a small group.

- *In the case of projection*, the most important aim may be for the participant to try to turn the focus they have projected onto the world back onto themselves. The trainer's accepting closeness can be very supportive here, as can reassuring them that they are a very important part of the group and deserve attention, even at the cost of pausing the group's work. Support them in expressing, in the form of I-statements, all the feelings running through them in the given situation.
- *With retroflection*, the participant often suppresses their anger. Create a safe framework in which they can experiment with directing energy outwards (throwing, pressing, pushing, stamping, trampling, tearing apart – an excellent example for practising all of these is the Paper Snowball exercise, which at first looks like a team dexterity competition).
- *In the case of confluence*, our most important tool is linguistic differentiation. Ask the participant to use "I-statements" instead of "we" and "people". This helps restore the boundary and bring awareness to their own needs that differ from the group's.

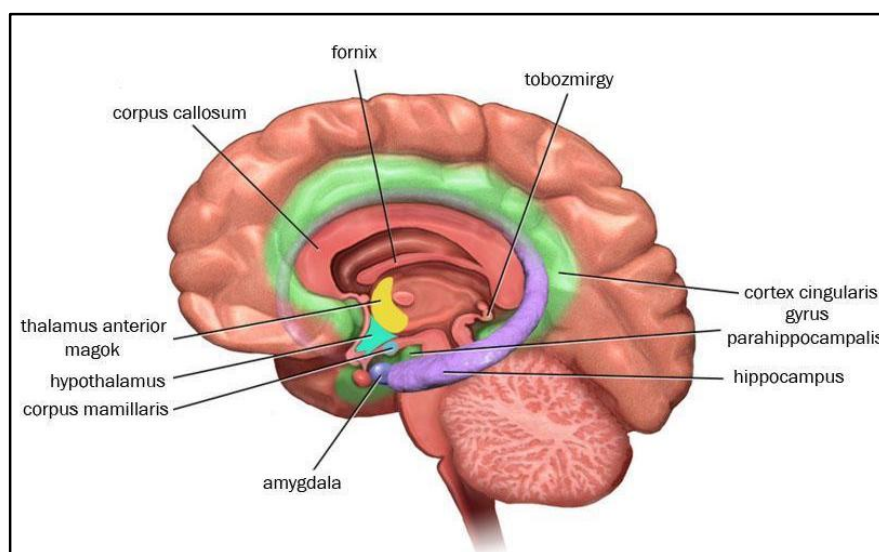
As trainers, we need to recognise that resistance is not a mistake, but a current attempt at a solution to maintain safety.

The key to development is awareness: if participants become able to recognise their own typical blockages – be it a deflecting manoeuvre or an introjected rule – they regain the possibility of responding adequately and of living through the cycle in full.

The Neurobiology of Connection

Human connection is not only a psychological phenomenon but also a deeply biological one: our nervous system is fundamentally organised for social functioning. The quality of our relationships has a direct effect on how our brain works, how we regulate our emotions and how we respond to stress. The neurobiological basis of this lies in the coordinated functioning of several levels of the nervous system. The brain is organised hierarchically, and different areas perform different functions in connection.

The **brainstem** is the most ancient part of the nervous system, responsible for basic life functions and survival. This is where it is decided whether the environment is perceived as safe or dangerous. If we detect danger, the brainstem activates automatic stress responses such as fight, flight or freeze. From the point of view of connection, it is crucial that this system perceives safety: if the nervous system feels in danger, the capacity for connection narrows significantly.



Limbic system⁴

The **limbic system** is the centre of emotions, attachment and social relationships. It includes, for example, the amygdala (fear processing) and the hippocampus (memories). This is where connection appears on an emotional level: empathy, attunement, attachment. "Limbic resonance" (in other approaches, co-regulation) means that two

⁴ Source:

https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hat%C3%A1rk%C3%A9rgi_rendszer#/media/F%C3%A1jl:Limbicus_rendszer.jpg

people's nervous systems mutually affect each other – for example, a calm presence is able to regulate another person's nervous system.

The **frontal lobe** (prefrontal cortex) is responsible for self-regulation, decision-making and conscious connection. This is where impulse inhibition, decision-making and understanding others' mental states (mentalisation) take place. A precondition of well-functioning connection is that this area integrates the emotional and bodily information coming from the lower levels and enables flexible, adaptive responses. It helps us reflect on our feelings, inhibit impulses and respond flexibly to others.

In connection, ideally these three levels work in an integrated way:

- safety (brainstem),
- emotional attunement (limbic system),
- conscious regulation and mentalisation (frontal lobe).

The brainstem provides the sense of safety, the limbic system enables emotional connection, and the frontal lobe supports mindful presence and self-regulation. We call this integrated functioning neural integration.

Under the influence of exhaustion, stress or trauma, however, this balance can easily be upset. In such cases the lower brain structures – especially the amygdala and the brainstem – become dominant, while the functioning of the prefrontal cortex decreases. As a result, the individual may enter a narrowed state, become impulsive or freeze, and lose the capacity for connection. This explains the everyday experience that in highly emotional situations "we can't think".

One of the most important functions of connection is nervous system regulation. Humans are capable not only of self-regulation but also of social regulation (co-regulation). According to polyvagal theory, the nervous system continuously scans the environment for signs of safety or danger. A safe, accepting relationship activates the social engagement system, which reduces stress responses and enables a calm, open state.

This process is particularly important in childhood, when the relationship with the parent/caregiver lays the foundations for the development of the nervous system. Attachment theory points out that secure attachment supports the development of emotional regulation, self-confidence and social functioning. Yet in adulthood, too, the relationships that surround us play a significant role: a stable, supportive relationship is able to re-regulate previously damaged nervous system patterns.

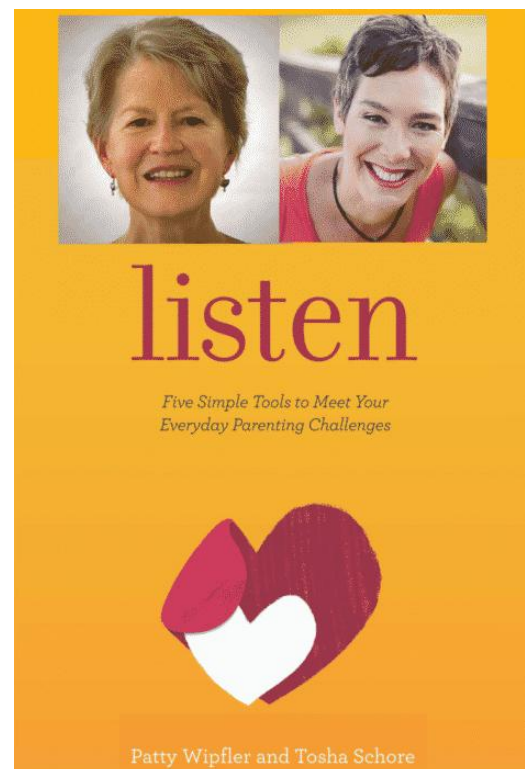
Connection is therefore a fundamental organising principle of how the nervous system works. Safe relationships promote brain integration, support self-regulation and contribute to psychological well-being. Understanding this is particularly important in the helping professions, where the relationship itself becomes one of the most important tools of healing.

Connection as Nervous System Regulation – Reflections on the book *Listen*

The book *Listen: Five Simple Tools to Meet Your Everyday Parenting Challenges*⁵ makes the central claim that the key to understanding and supporting a child's behaviour is the quality of connection. The chapter entitled "Connection Is the Key" emphasises that children fundamentally strive for cooperation, connection and learning as long as their nervous system feels safe. Difficult behaviours – such as tantrums, resistance or withdrawal – do not stem from bad intentions, but are signs of a break in connection and of accumulated emotional tension.

This approach can be well understood within the framework of interpersonal neurobiology, according to which the functioning of the human brain is fundamentally shaped by relational experiences. Connection is not merely an emotional experience, but one of the basic tools of nervous system regulation. When a child experiences a safe, accepting presence, their nervous system calms down and flexible, adaptive functioning becomes possible.

The phenomena described in the book correspond well to the hierarchical functioning of the brain. In a safe situation the nervous system functions in an integrated way: the brainstem, responsible for basic survival reactions, the limbic system, which handles emotional processing, and the frontal lobe, responsible for conscious regulation, work in



⁵ Image source: https://www.handinhandparenting.org/listen-sample-listen-five-simple-tools-meet-everyday-parenting-challenges/?srsltid=AfmBOorCfaF_GYwU4gc8j2DnYJ4klmWhrJv_oZTGeewPSCHeKXpmE26a

harmony. At such times the child is able to think, cooperate and stay connected with others.

When connection breaks down, however – for example when the child is left alone with strong feelings or does not feel understood – the nervous system perceives danger. This state can be described well with the help of polyvagal theory: the body switches into defensive mode and survival reactions are activated. At such times the limbic system and the brainstem dominate, while the prefrontal cortex is pushed into the background. As a result, the child's behaviour can become impulsive and irrational, and they lose the capacity to cooperate.

One of the most important practical tools of *Listen* is so-called "Staylistening", i.e. listening accompanied by presence. This means that the adult does not immediately try to stop or divert the child's strong emotions, but stays beside them with a calm, accepting presence. According to the authors, emotional expressions such as crying, anger or even liberated laughter are natural ways of releasing tension.

From a neurobiological point of view, this process can be understood as a form of co-regulation. The child's nervous system is able to calm down within the relationship: the adult's stable presence reduces the stress response and allows neural integration to be restored. This process is related to what the literature describes as limbic resonance, i.e. that two people's nervous systems mutually affect each other and are able to regulate one another.

One of the most important messages of the book is that connection is not a tool for controlling behaviour, but its precondition. A child becomes cooperative when their nervous system feels safe and is able to return to integrated functioning. This approach is also consistent with the basic tenets of attachment theory, according to which safe relationships play a key role in shaping emotional regulation and psychological development.

The book *Listen* expresses in practical language what neurobiological research also supports: connection is a fundamental organising principle of how the nervous system works. A safe, accepting presence not only provides emotional support, but has a concrete biological effect on the functioning of the brain. Recognising this is particularly important in parenting and in helping relationships, where the quality of the relationship is the very basis of change.

Trauma-Informed Approach

In recent decades the trauma-informed approach has become one of the defining directions of the helping professions. It is appearing ever more widely in the psychological, educational, social and health fields, because it is built on fundamental insights that enable a deeper understanding of human functioning. This approach does not view the individual as an isolated phenomenon, but interprets them in their bodily, neural and relational context. Behaviour, emotions and reactions are thus placed in a broader context in which both life history and the current state of the nervous system are significant.

Within this framework, trauma can be understood as an overwhelming experience that, at a given moment, exceeds the processing and regulating capacity of the nervous system. During such experiences the individual cannot fully integrate what is happening, and so the events become fixed at a bodily and neural level. Later these imprints can be activated, even in entirely everyday situations. A tone of voice, a look, a touch, a mood or an inner sensation may be enough for the body to relive the earlier overwhelm. This phenomenon helps us understand why someone reacts intensely in situations that do not seem threatening from the outside.

Understanding how the nervous system works is key in the trauma-informed approach. The different levels of the brain perform different functions, and under safe conditions they work in harmony. The lower levels are responsible for the basic reactions needed for survival, while the higher-order areas support thinking, self-reflection and decision-making. Under threat, the nervous system's priorities are rearranged: survival comes to the fore and cognitive functioning narrows. In this state a person's reactions are fast, automatic and often hard to control.

- **Stress Responses**

Our body automatically responds to threat through the functioning of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems – these are the so-called **stress responses**, i.e. physiological survival reactions. Physiological **stress responses** are organised along well-known patterns. Fight and flight reactions are linked to mobilisation, while freeze and submission are rather the consequences of overwhelm. These responses are deeply embedded functions of evolutionary origin that serve survival. In everyday life, however, they are often activated in situations where there is (no longer) any real danger. Even

then, behaviour remains understandable if we bear in mind that the nervous system is striving to restore safety.

Classic stress responses:

- **Fight** – the "hit" reaction, active defence aimed at regaining control (e.g. anger, confrontation, hitting, shouting).
- **Flight** – running away, avoidance, hyperactivity, "escaping" the situation (either physically or mentally) – this is also an active reaction.
- **Freeze** – freezing, immobility, inability to decide, "blocking" – this is no longer an active reaction.

Other behaviours that can be understood as stress responses:

- **Fawn** – submission/appeasement – putting others' needs first for the sake of safety, conflict avoidance.
- **Flop** – collapse/disconnection – complete passivity, lack of energy, "collapsing", often linked to the dorsal vagal state.
- **Friend** (or sometimes **Attach**) – seeking connection – seeking safety through others, heightened clinging, holding on to another person.

Window of Tolerance

The concept of the **window of tolerance** helps capture the optimal range of functioning within which the nervous system is in a flexible and regulated state. The term was introduced by the American psychiatrist Dan Siegel – in this zone the individual is able to perceive and express their emotions, remain connected with others and adapt to changing circumstances. Learning, creativity and cooperation all become accessible in this state. When the load is too great, the nervous system leaves this range. At such times survival reactions automatically take over, and we either become over-activated (hyperarousal) or shut down (hypoarousal).

- The **hyperaroused** state may be accompanied by heightened vigilance, anxiety, irritability or anger. In this state the body is preparing for fight or flight: it is characterised by tension, restlessness, anxiety, anger, a pounding heart and heightened alertness.
- The **hypoaroused** state, by contrast, involves a lack of energy, emptiness and withdrawal. In this state the nervous system "shuts down" because of too great a

load. At such times a person freezes, goes numb, becomes emotionally empty, finds it hard to think, and struggles to experience connection with themselves or others.

Being within the window of tolerance therefore means that our nervous system is optimally activated: neither too tense nor too slowed down. This state makes learning, processing emotions, empathy and self-regulation possible. Trauma, however, often narrows this window. For someone living under the effects of trauma, the nervous system leaves balance much more quickly and more often, even in response to seemingly small stimuli. This is why it can seem as though they are "overreacting" to something or "not reacting to anything" – in reality their nervous system is trying to survive the situation. Healing from trauma and developing self-regulation mean precisely gradually widening the window of tolerance. This can happen through safe connection, body-based exercises (e.g. breathing, movement, rhythm), emotional awareness and self-acceptance. The goal is not never to feel stress, but to be able to return to balance – in other words, to learn to feel at home in our own nervous system again.

The process of healing and "functioning well" is closely linked to this dynamic. The goal is to increase the flexibility of the nervous system, enabling a return to the regulated state. This process is gradual and requires a safe framework. Body-based experiences, emotional awareness and relational experiences all help the individual to be present with themselves and others across an ever wider range.

The basis of trauma-informed practice, then, is not to try to "correct" the symptom or behaviour, but to understand the story and the bodily and neural processes behind it. The key question is therefore "*What happened to them?*" instead of "*What is wrong with them?*".

The three pillars of trauma-informed practice:

- **Knowing the effects of trauma** – we understand how trauma affects the functioning of the brain, the nervous system and connection. We know that behaviour has often been a means of survival.
- **Recognising the signs** – we learn to notice when someone is reacting under the effects of stress or trauma – for example, if they are hypervigilant, mistrustful, avoidant or in a frozen state.
- **Prioritising and re-establishing safety** – the most important goal is for the person to feel safe again – physically, emotionally and psychologically.

Trauma-informed practice is based on an accepting, empathic and non-judgemental attitude that respects the other person's pace, boundaries and resources. At its centre is connection as the precondition for healing: a safe relational space where the nervous system can calm down and the experience of safety becomes possible to live through. In such an environment difficult topics can also emerge, since the emphasis is on creating frameworks and ways of connecting that hold the individual together with these experiences.

An important element of the trauma-informed approach is the reinterpretation of behaviour, aimed at recognising the patterns and experiences underlying reactions. This perspective allows curiosity and compassion to play a greater role in the helping relationship, while the client's experiences become understandable as part of a coherent story.

The foundation of the helping relationship is the creation of safety, present at the physical, emotional and relational levels alike. Predictable frameworks, an accepting presence and clear boundaries help the nervous system calm down and create an opportunity for deeper processing and for change to unfold.

Polyvagal Theory

A **Polyvagal theory** (Stephen Porges) further enriches this understanding by describing the functioning of the autonomic nervous system in terms of three basic states. The vagus nerve is the main nerve of the parasympathetic nervous system, mediating between body and mind. According to polyvagal theory, the nervous system switches between three main states depending on the sense of safety. Our behaviour depends on which branch of the nervous system the perceived information travels along: in a state of safe connection the individual is open, present and capable of connection – the ventral vagus; sympathetic activation mobilises energy and prompts action; while the dorsal state – the dorsal vagus – represents the shutdown that develops as a result of overload:

State	Nervous system branch	Reaction	Experience
Ventral vagus	Parasympathetic (safety, social connection)	Calm, presence, trust	"I am safe"

State	Nervous system branch	Reaction	Experience
Sympathetic activation	Fight/flight	Tension, anxiety, anger	"I am in danger"
Dorsal vagus	Freezing, shutting down	Helplessness, emptiness	"It's hopeless, there's no point trying"

A **Neuroception** is our body's automatic, unconscious **perception of safety**. According to Porges's concept, the nervous system continuously "scans" our status: Safety? Danger? Life threat?

The concept of neuroception points out that the perception of safety or danger is in many cases not a conscious process. The nervous system continuously evaluates the environment and tunes the body's functioning accordingly. As a result of trauma this system can become more sensitive and signal danger more often. This inner alarm system determines how safe we feel in the world and in our relationships.

The Role of Connection

The role of connection in this process is outstanding. The nervous system is fundamentally regulated in a social environment, so another person's presence has a direct effect on our state. In co-regulation, the helper supports the client in coming into balance with their own calm, regulated nervous system. Tone of voice, gaze, rhythm and attention are all subtle signals that convey a sense of safety. Trauma often develops in a relational space, and so healing, too, happens through relationships. A safe relationship offers new experiences: the opportunity for the individual to experience being held, accepted and in a reciprocal relationship. These experiences gradually transform earlier patterns and support neural integration.

The first step in providing help is restoring safety and connection, which can be supported by bringing awareness to bodily sensations – for example through grounding or a body scan – as well as by using rhythm, movement and sound, through activating the ventral vagal state. All of this is completed by empathic presence, when the helper

supports the other person in calming down and coming into balance with their own regulated nervous system.

The trauma-informed approach is both a professional framework and a human attitude. It expresses deep respect for the individual's experiences and acknowledges the strength inherent in adaptation. In this space the helping relationship becomes a place where safety, connection and dignity become defining values.

Change as a Process of Growth

Virginia Satir's Change Model

The question of change is one of the central themes of psychology and the helping professions. The functioning of individuals, families and groups is constantly evolving, yet it is often found that entrenched patterns are hard to change, even when they no longer serve development. Change often involves uncertainty, emotional strain and temporary instability, which is why people often resist it. Virginia Satir's change model provides a significant theoretical framework for understanding the process of change; it describes change as a dynamic, cyclical process and emphasises the role of personal growth and the transformation of identity.

Virginia Satir was one of the defining family therapists of the 20th century, whose work contributed significantly to the development of family therapy. Her approach was shaped by the outlook of humanistic psychology, which emphasises the potential for development inherent in people and the importance of personal growth. In the course of her therapeutic work, Satir observed that change does not happen in a linear way, but often comes about through a phase involving temporary instability. These observations led to the description of the process of change that is later referred to in the literature as the Satir Change Model.

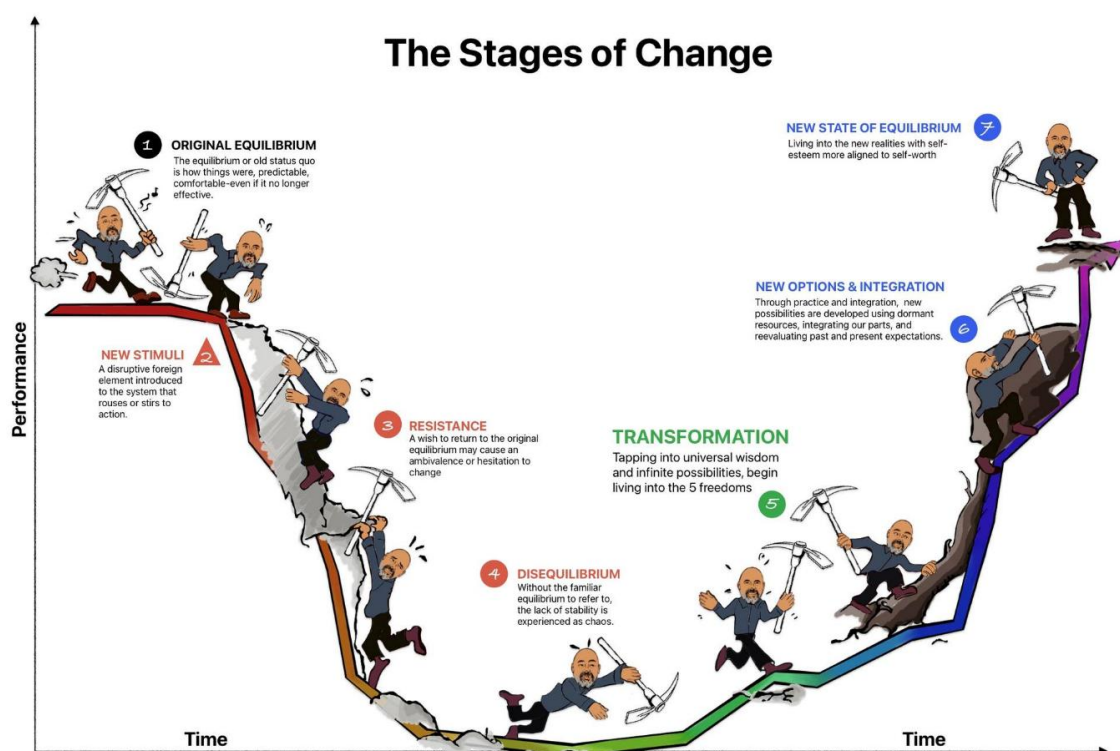
It is important to emphasise that the Satir model is based primarily on clinical experience and observation rather than on experimental research. Nevertheless, the model has become widespread in the helping professions because it describes well the psychological processes experienced during change. The model has become particularly influential in family therapy, but it is also used in individual therapy, group work and other helping processes.

The Core Idea of the Change Model

The Satir Change Model is based on the recognition that every system – whether an individual, a family or a group – strives to maintain stability. This stable state provides predictability and a sense of safety, but at the same time often limits development. Change therefore usually begins when the existing way of functioning no longer proves sufficient and new ways of adapting are needed.

According to Satir, change does not simply mean a modification of behaviour; it may also involve a deeper transformation at the level of identity. During change, the individual begins to think in a new way about themselves, their relationships and the world. This process often brings significant reorganisation at both emotional and cognitive levels.

The Satir model describes change in several successive stages. These stages are not always sharply separated, and the process unfolds differently for each individual, but the model helps us understand the general dynamics of change.



The Stages of Change (Satir Model)⁶

⁶ Sartir, V., Banmen, J., Gerber J., & Gomori M. (1991). The Sartir Model. Palo Alto, CA.

The status quo – the existing balance

The starting point of change is the status quo, i.e. the state of existing balance. In this stage the individual or system functions according to familiar patterns. These patterns may be adaptive or dysfunctional, but what they have in common is that they provide stability.

In the status quo, functioning is predictable, which gives a sense of safety. At the same time, familiar patterns often make change difficult, even when the existing situation is unsatisfactory. Change therefore often meets resistance, since new ways of functioning bring uncertainty with them.

The appearance of the foreign element

According to the model, change is triggered by the appearance of a so-called foreign element. This may be an external event, a new experience or even the therapeutic process itself. The foreign element calls the existing way of functioning into question and throws the system off balance.

Under the influence of the foreign element, previous strategies no longer prove sufficient, which leads to uncertainty and tension. This stage is often accompanied by emotional reactions, since the breakdown of familiar functioning can seem threatening.

The stage of chaos

One of the central elements of the Satir model is the stage of chaos. In this period the old ways of functioning no longer work properly, but new patterns have not yet developed. This state often involves disorganisation, uncertainty and heightened emotional activity. The stage of chaos can be hard to tolerate, since familiar structures break down. At the same time, this stage creates the opportunity for new ways of functioning to emerge. The loosening of old patterns makes room for new experiences and meanings.

According to Satir's observations, this unstable stage is often unavoidable during change. However, the process is not always of the same intensity, and it can manifest differently from person to person.

The transforming idea

After the stage of chaos, a new insight or experience may appear that helps develop new ways of functioning. This transforming insight may be a new perspective, an emotional experience or the discovery of a new way of coping. The transforming insight does not necessarily happen in a single moment; it can develop gradually. During the process the

individual begins to make sense of their experiences in a new way, which promotes the development of new ways of functioning.

Integration and a new balance

The final stage of change is integration. In this period the new ways of functioning are gradually incorporated into everyday life. The individual tries out the new behaviours and gains experience of their effectiveness. During integration a new state of balance emerges that enables more flexible functioning. This new status quo, however, is not final; over time it may become the basis for further change.

The Model's Impact on the Helping Professions

The Satir model has had a significant impact on family therapy and other helping professions. The model emphasises the role of relationships, the importance of a safe environment and the natural character of the process of change.

For helping professionals, one important message of the model is that uncertainty and temporary instability are natural phenomena during change. The helper's task at such times is to support the process and create a safe framework.

Specific Features of Multiply Disadvantaged Groups

The previous chapters laid down the theoretical foundations of group dynamics, Gestalt psychology and the trauma-informed approach. This knowledge, however, becomes truly critical in work with multiply disadvantaged young people. Owing to the particular life situation of this target group, chronic stress and traumatic experiences often narrow their "window of tolerance", and they are highly sensitive to threats in their environment (neuroception). For this reason, involving them, creating safety and handling resistance require special attention.

Conceptual Frameworks of Vulnerability and the Dimensions of Vulnerable Youth

Young people's vulnerability is an extremely complex, multi-layered phenomenon arising from the interaction of age-specific characteristics, their current social situation and a rapidly changing environment. The life stage of the 15–30 age group is defined by the critical period of **searching for identity, becoming independent and choosing a career**. In this vulnerable phase, young people are simultaneously exposed to the expectations of family, school, peer groups and wider society, while their psychological stability, decision-making competence and social embeddedness are still taking shape. In general terms, vulnerability can be described as a state in which **the individual is highly exposed to unfavourable environmental influences and has a limited capacity to cope with them or to avert their negative consequences**. In the case of young people, this state is typically linked to transitional life situations (for example changing schools or entering the labour market), to family and financial dependency, and to inner resources that have not yet developed – such as a lack of a realistic self-image, knowledge of careers or social capital.

The international literature defines a specific, more severe group within vulnerability as **"Highly Vulnerable Young People" (HVYP)**. This group includes young people who live with several mutually reinforcing risk factors, at least one of which is lasting or permanent in nature (for example deep poverty, persistent mental strain, or leaving institutional care). **For them, disadvantage is not a temporary crisis but a long-term condition that radically increases the risk of dropping out of education, exclusion from the labour market and social isolation**. For this reason, in mentoring programmes and trainings it is essential to provide more structured, more flexible and considerably longer professional accompaniment.

To understand young people's backgrounds accurately, the trainer needs to distinguish between three main dimensions.

1. In the **psychological–emotional** dimension, adolescent mood disorders, anxiety and unstable self-esteem give rise to uncertainty in decision-making and difficulties in adapting, which can be further aggravated by learning disorders and

difficulties with emotional regulation that fall under individual–psychological vulnerability.

2. In the **social–relational** dimension, family background, the degree of parental support and the quality of peer relationships predominate; exclusion, bullying and marginalisation increase the likelihood of dropping out and deviance.
3. The **economic–structural** dimension, meanwhile, encompasses housing difficulties, labour-market insecurity and territorial inequalities, where persistent poverty can entrench disadvantages across generations, directly limiting future career opportunities.

Minority Existence, Housing, Isolation and the Manifestations of Family Trauma

When working with multiply disadvantaged young people, the trainer must pay particular attention to cultural and identity-related vulnerability. This type specifically affects groups belonging to ethnic, religious or cultural minorities, who are particularly threatened by the direct effects of discrimination and social prejudice. The everyday lives of young people growing up as a minority are often made harder by language barriers and the inner burdens arising from a dual identity. Structural exclusion not only drastically narrows their chances on the labour market, but also places a serious obstacle in the way of developing a positive identity and healthy self-esteem.

The trainer's task is to create an accepting, non-judgemental environment in which cultural differences can emerge as a resource for identity during group processes.

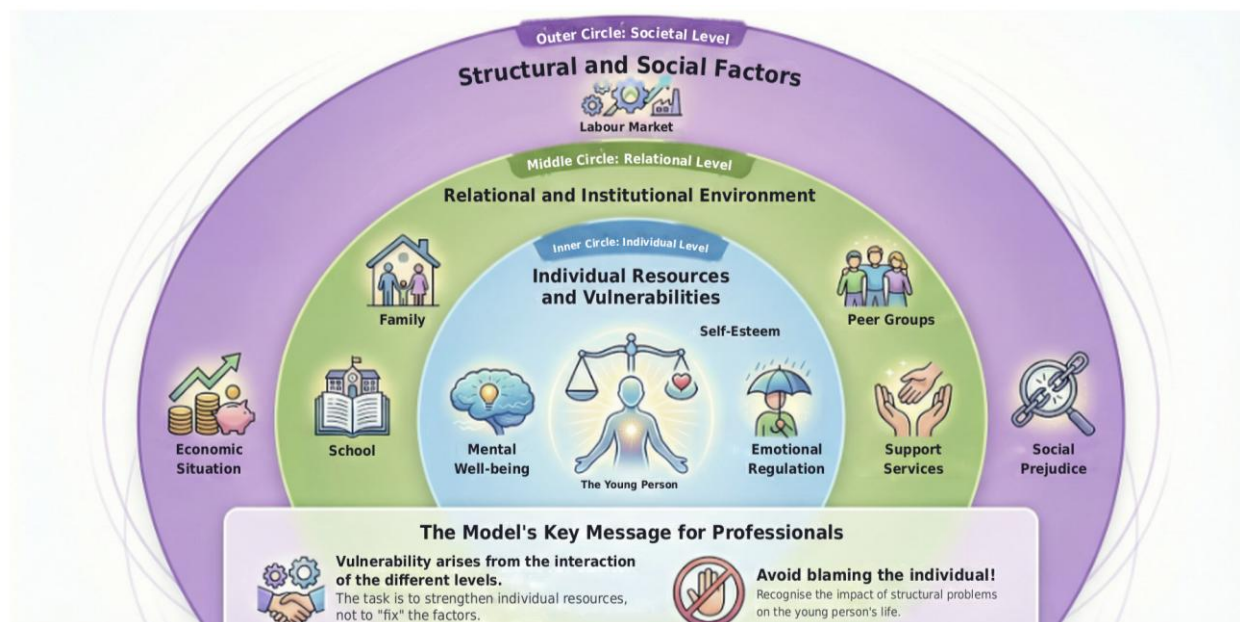
Social–disadvantage-related vulnerability is closely linked to poverty and to parents' low level of education. One of the most significant physical manifestations of these disadvantages is residential segregation and the presence of serious housing difficulties. Young people living in isolated, rural or peripheral areas grow up in compounded isolation: their surroundings almost entirely lack career guidance and educational infrastructure, job opportunities are narrow, transport is limited, and access to information and communication technology and digital services is inadequate. This territorial isolation drastically reduces opportunities to follow positive role models,

crushes aspirations for further education and reduces the chances of mobility, thereby increasing the risk of early school leaving and dropping out.

Alongside structural and environmental difficulties, applying a trauma-informed approach is essential, since the roots of vulnerability can often be traced back to dysfunctional family relationships. Young people affected by domestic violence, neglect or abuse arrive at the programme with deep psychological wounds. Their characteristics include a severely damaged basic sense of safety and chaotic attachment patterns, which are directly reflected in their social relationships and in declining school performance. Because of their experiences, these young people are deeply mistrustful of institutions and helping professionals, which makes it difficult for them to engage with services. The trainer must recognise that mistrust or resistance is a protective mechanism of trauma, which can only be resolved through a consistent ethical framework and a safe environment.

A Methodological Map of Intervention: The Concentric Model and the Facilitator's Approach

The concentric vulnerability model helps professionals avoid narrowing a young person's situation down to a single isolated problem.



Concentric model⁷

⁷ Google. (2026). NotebookLM [Large language model]. <https://notebooklm.google/>

At the centre of the model is the young person, surrounded by three interacting concentric circles.

1. The **inner circle** contains individual resources and psychological state: self-esteem, mental well-being, emotional regulation and confidence in decision-making, which directly influence how the young person responds in career guidance situations.
2. The **middle circle** represents the relational and institutional environment (family, school, peers, local community and support services). Supportive or rejecting relationships coming from the environment can fundamentally strengthen or weaken the functioning of individual resources.
3. The **outer circle** encompasses macro-level structural factors such as the state of the labour market, territorial inequalities, the economic situation and social prejudice. Although these lie outside the young person's direct influence, they nevertheless fundamentally determine their opportunities.

The main professional message of the concentric model is that difficulties appearing at the individual level – such as low self-confidence, anxiety or uncertainty in decision-making – are most often the consequences of structural and relational influences, not personal shortcomings of the young person. This perspective helps the facilitator avoid blaming the individual for structural problems and encourages the formulation of realistic expectations. The trainer's task is not to "fix" external factors or the background the young person brings, but to consciously recognise their effects and to create a safe learning environment in which individual resources can be strengthened.

From a professional point of view, it is justified for career planning and career guidance interventions to compensate for structural disadvantages (by providing extra information, mentoring and network-building), to strengthen individual resilience, self-awareness and decision-making competences, and to create a youth-friendly, easily accessible service environment. In providing support, the young person must be seen not as an "object of treatment" but as an active, autonomous agent whose right to make decisions and human dignity must be respected under all circumstances.

The Specific Features of the Seven Defined Target Groups

1. Young people facing socio-economic difficulties and mental health problems

This group includes young people whose socio-economic circumstances (extreme poverty, domestic violence, institutional care, community isolation) have a lasting effect on their mental health. Their persistent obstacles include neglect suffered in early childhood, traumatic experiences and an unstable family background, which affect their development in the long term.

A specific challenge in mobility programmes: the length of the preparation period is critical for them – the longer the time between applying and the exchange, the greater the risk of dropping out. Intensive programmes can be overwhelming for them, and continuous, personalised contact is essential during preparation.

2. Refugees, displaced young people, migrants and minorities

This group comprises several subcategories: refugees (for whom the denial of asylum may mean mortal danger), internally displaced young people, economic migrants and national minorities. What they have in common is the risk of discrimination on ethnic, national or religious grounds and the trauma associated with displacement.

The primary obstacle to their participation in mobility programmes is the lack of the necessary travel documents. Further limiting factors are language barriers, travel costs that must be paid in advance, and the fact that information materials typically appear only in the language of the country concerned.

3. Roma youth

Young people from the Roma community are affected by historical and systemic marginalisation. Their persistent obstacles include ethnic and cultural discrimination and centuries-long exclusion. Their temporary difficulties include the risk of leaving school, extreme poverty, and early marriage and parenthood.

Specific challenge: Roma young people often do not even know about the various opportunities, do not feel entitled to them, and their families and communities may also hold them back from participating. Cultural insensitivity is also a significant deterrent.

4. Young people living in remote areas and facing financial difficulties

This group includes young people living in isolated rural areas or peripheral regions, especially where geographical isolation is combined with a lack of basic services (electricity grid, clean water, safe transport, internet). It also includes young people from poor urban neighbourhoods with high rates of youth crime.

In many cases these young people have no access at all to information about international opportunities, and organisations do not have sufficient capacity to deal with their funding difficulties. At the same time, for some young people mobility programmes represent their first experience of travel, and even their first adequate hygiene conditions.

5. Young people discriminated against because of their gender or sexual identity

This category includes, on the one hand, members of the LGBTQ+ community and, on the other, young people excluded by their local community because of gender-based stereotypes. Examples: Roma girls living in traditional or patriarchal communities; lesbian, gay or trans young people in conservative communities; queer or non-binary young people discriminated against in school or children's home settings.

A critical problem is that a safe environment is not guaranteed even in mobility projects: partner organisations do not always pay attention to awareness-raising, and there are currently no clear consequences if an organisation behaves in a discriminatory way. Good practices try to address this need with concrete tools – for example, participants' expectations related to their gender identity are assessed already during preparation.

6. Young people in alternative care and care leavers

This group includes young people whose care is provided by the state (foster families, institutions, shelters), as well as those who leave the state care system – usually at the age of 18 – and are forced into independent living. Their persistent obstacles: severe

trauma, an unstable or absent family environment, and the stigma arising from their care status.

Their participation in mobility programmes is hindered by complex bureaucracy – especially in the case of minors in care, where state approval is needed for travel. For care leavers, the pressure to make a living (holding several jobs at once) hinders participation. At the same time, mobility can have a transformative power: they could experience that they are not "cared-for children" but equal participants.

7. Young people facing learning and social challenges at the same time

This group includes those whose learning difficulties (leading to school failure or dropping out) are combined with an upbringing environment that hinders educational progress. Such environments may include working-class housing estates (poverty, migrant background, drug use) or an absent or dysfunctional family background.

Among the barriers to accessing mobility programmes, a lack of information and the mediating role of street social workers are particularly important – without the latter, organisations find it hard to reach this group. Financial and human resource constraints also prevent the long preparatory processes that would be needed to genuinely involve these young people.

Interview

Kriszta Gyöngyösi – The Role of Safety, Boundaries and the Comfort Zone in Work with Vulnerable Groups

*Kriszta
children*

*make this
and the*



Gyöngyösi has been working with disadvantaged and adults for nearly two decades. Her professional experience and personal insights conversation, which explores safety, contracting comfort zone, particularly valuable.

What does safety mean to you in everyday life?

For me, safety is first and foremost an inner state: a calm nervous system. It's when I sense that everything is fine. This usually takes several factors being present at once. What often helps is connecting with nature, or with people and activities that balance my nervous system. At such times I'm able to be present in situations with confidence.

In group trainings, how does safety – or the lack of it – show up at the beginning?

Participants usually connect easily, because programmes built on experiential education are exciting, lively, playful and engaging. We design them so that it's easy to step into the process. Even so, there are always some who find it harder to connect, and the more vulnerable the target group we work with, the more often this happens.

At the start, they often feel safe if they stay on the edge, or "team up" with someone, or perhaps only seek eye contact. At such times they're trying to gauge how far they can step closer while it still feels safe for them.

Many kinds of social danger can arise that they fear because of earlier bad experiences: being humiliated, laughed at, rejected. Participants feel safe when we create an environment in which they dare to step closer without having to fear that shame or some other difficult feeling will come their way.

So can we say that safety is the foundation of group processes?

That also depends on the kind of training. Some trainings deliberately work with uncertainty, and that has its own power too. With vulnerable, disadvantaged or multiply disadvantaged groups, however, creating safety is especially important.

If we don't support their involvement, resistance appears. Their nervous system may switch into a "fight or flight" reaction, or into freezing, and then staying on the outside becomes the typical self-protective reaction. In some cases this can also show up as provocative behaviour, "trolling", resistance, teaming up with other resistant participants, and in other ways.

How do you try to make sure that their sense of safety allows them to take part?

First of all, it's important to accept that not everyone reacts in the same way. What works in other groups won't necessarily work with vulnerable target groups. That's completely natural.

It's very important to adapt to their pace: not to rush them, but to keep offering invitations. The possibility of choice also helps a lot: it makes a big difference if they can decide whether they want to take part and aren't forced into anything. We also need to watch for the moment a wish to connect appears, so that we can gently support it.

It also helps if it's clear to them why they are there. If they understand the goals, they calm down more easily and can step closer.

An accepting atmosphere, opportunities to connect, the presence of a likeable adult who behaves in a healthy way, kindness, a smile – and time – are all fundamental. But perhaps the most important thing is invitations instead of compulsion.

How does the comfort zone relate to this?

The comfort zone is the space where we move around safely and do the things we're used to. Stepping out of it takes courage. For some people this is easier, for others harder.

With vulnerable groups, even small changes can mean a big step out of the comfort zone. In a camp situation, for example, an unfamiliar environment, a new place, a strange bed or room, or the presence of people they don't know can all heighten uncertainty. At such times it's natural for them to look for something to hold on to. This might be familiar routines, coping strategies, particular behaviours or resistance. The point is that the nervous system strives for safety at all costs. These things to hold on to can help make stepping out of the comfort zone less of a strain.

It's also very important that they can make decisions. If they feel they have an influence on something, it increases their sense of safety.

To what extent does contracting contribute to a sense of safety?

At Élményakadémia's Alap!Camp there are basic rules that are not up for discussion. These apply to everyone, including the organisers.

There are also rules that participants have a say in. For example, we ask them what they'd like to play, and we negotiate what time lights-out and wake-up should be, how free time should work, what wishes they have, and what would make their camp experience complete. Returning campers take a more active part in this, but those attending the camp for the first time can also join in.

The large group is divided into small groups, and here we often use the so-called "five-finger contract". Each finger symbolises a value, a shared principle for working together. Its big advantage is that our hands are always with us, so it's easy to bring out and easy to remind ourselves and the group of what we agreed.

- **Thumb** – everyone is okay, we are equals: I am OK, you are OK.
- **Index finger** – taking responsibility for ourselves. When I point at someone, three of my fingers point back at me. Even children understand this as a symbol that, before we start blaming someone, it's always worth examining our own responsibility too.
- **Middle finger** – not held up, of course, but turned downwards – reminds us to show respect and to listen to one another.
- **Ring finger** – commitment. I'm here for a reason, so let me keep in mind what my goal is, what I can get here, why I'm here and what I can commit to. If I came to a camp to have a good time, I can commit to that goal: to make sure that I'm doing well, and also that others are, since that's why they came too. That's why we can work at it together.
- **Little finger** – the smallest finger is surrounded and protected by the others. It reminds us that some among us are more vulnerable, and that we ourselves can be too, so let's look out for the "little ones".

The open palm symbolises openness, and the fist the strength of cooperation.

We create this together and then sign it, so that it becomes a real agreement.

What happens if the contract is broken?

The contract is up on the wall, and our hands are always with us, so we can come back to it at any time. Participants themselves often refer to it when someone breaks the agreements. It's an important tool for the trainer too, because we can return to the jointly accepted framework. In fact, a great deal can be learned from the reflections that follow: What am I good at? What do I find difficult? When do I make mistakes? If I break the contract, what's behind it? Can I accept the rules? How am I present in the community? And so on.

How can the boundaries of the comfort zone be assessed?

Continuous observation is very important. You have to watch how each person reacts, when they explode and when they freeze. You can learn from this.

There was a girl, for example, who was cooperative at first, then suddenly her behaviour changed and she exploded: she became aggressive and started a fight. This made things difficult for the whole group and damaged trust. But it also showed us that we had missed something: we hadn't seen what triggered her, or how she got into the state in which she reacted unconsciously and defensively, which on the surface often looks like attack.

It's also important to give people the opportunity to say no. If someone doesn't go up on the ropes course, for example, we can work with that too. They must not be forced.

STORIES FROM ON HIGH

Under this title, I told stories at the online Kaleidoscope conference of the Trainers' Training Camp Association (Tréneri Edzőtábor Egyesület). They were about my work as an outdoor trainer, mostly about the miracles I've experienced on the high ropes course. I'm happy to share them with you here too.

*

The moment is still vivid in me, when this autumn I got myself into the ridiculous situation, as a trainer, of sitting on a 30 x 40 centimeter platform, 7 meters up. The safety rope is clipped to my back, but there's nothing to hold on to, and the pole under me is swaying. I know the task: turn around somehow, then stand up, then jump into nothingness, or rather into the top belay. But for the moment even breathing evenly isn't going well.

It can't be that hard, I tell myself. I've done this before, and the participants before me, my dear participants, all did it too. They struggled, but they did it.

How did I end up here? flashes through my mind. I didn't have to come up here, I'm the trainer. The group's encouragement, the fact that we had just enough time, and the curiosity awakening in me all led me here, and now there's no way back.

I'm sweating. In the background a chainsaw starts up, and I can't help associating it with them cutting down the pole under me. I even cry out: "Jesus!"

They laugh down below, and I realize that I'm safe, I can't fall, I'm in my colleague's hands, I can trust him! The laughter and the connection help me pull myself together a little. 7 meters is high, you know! Without a handhold especially, and when I stand up it will be almost 9 meters. I have to stand up, everyone did it before me!! My heart is pounding.

I know the others below are rooting for me. I can barely hear their voices. I don't know whether it's because everyone is watching with bated breath, or because the adrenaline is roaring in my ears and has switched off my hearing. Slowly I start to turn. Once I'm facing the right direction, it crosses my mind that I could just throw myself off. Jácint said that whoever can't stand up should simply fall.

Oh, the wonderful easier way! Damn, I can't do that! I have to stand up, everyone stood up. The pressure to perform weighs on me. Suddenly, as if by inspiration, several things come to mind:

I'm safe. They will catch me. The situation is frightening, but not dangerous. I have to stand up for myself. Not as the trainer, who would be embarrassed not to stand up, but for myself, to experience what's in me and what I'm capable of.

At this point I think of Judit, the participant whose story has accompanied me throughout my whole career, and it's about how it's possible to say no. It's too late for that now, of course.

Quite a few years ago, but right here in Galyatető, Judit said no. She didn't stand up with the others on the low ropes. Terror on her face, the light in her eyes dulled, afraid. We invited her a few times, kindly, without pushing. She didn't come. She just stood there, frozen. We led the process, but from time to time we stepped over to her and tried to take care of her, respecting her decision.

The next morning Judit reported that she hadn't been able to sleep, that something was preoccupying her deeply. Physically she was there with us, but deep in her thoughts and feelings, without sharing, barely eating,

barely sleeping, barely speaking. She asked us to leave her be, saying that something very important was happening inside her.

The second part of the training continued a few months later in Sovata. I wasn't there, but my colleagues told me that Judit was in on every challenge. She was the first to volunteer for everything, took on every task and challenge, and played without inhibition. In one of the reflection circles she said, in tears, that what she had learned in Galyatető was that she can say no.

For the first time in her life she felt that she said no, and that people accepted it.

That she is someone who has a voice, who can make decisions, who can say yes or no. The thought struck her that maybe she could have been making decisions about anything all along, she just hadn't dared.

I love this story. The learning wasn't in our getting her to do it, but in her being able to choose whether to do it.

This story helps me a lot when I run camps for children in state care.

They say trauma is invisible, and I can report that it really is. You can't know how something will land, or what movement, sentence or word will send someone's behavior in an unexpected direction. A touch can make someone withdraw, a sentence not caught in time can lead to a fight. These children have to get used to safety and learn that they don't have to be constantly defending themselves, standing on the attack. This story helped me accept it when someone says no, when someone stays at the edge of the field.

But how beautiful it is when they do accept the challenge.

For example, at last year's AlapTábor, eleven-year-old Nóri, who lives without parents and wants to become a doctor. I know because before the exercise she wrote it on a piece of paper that is now tucked in her pocket, her dream, the reason she is struggling on the high ropes element now, and she showed it to me. So she, who wants to be a doctor, climbs up on trembling legs and sets out on the monkey ladder. That's a rope stretched between two trees, about 6 to 7 meters up and 10 to 12 meters long, with another rope running higher up that you can hold on to as you go.

Tears are rolling down Nóri's face. She fights for every step, but her dream is in her pocket, and she can't give up. Down below, encouraging her, is Márk, every camp leader's nightmare, an 18-year-old teenager from a children's home. Márk would tell me to go to hell, in the crudest terms, without a second thought if he didn't like what I said. I mention this only so you can feel the atmosphere. So Márk walks beneath Nóri, and they breathe together. Right now Márk isn't chasing girls, he's helping. He breathes

along with her... come on, little girl, come on! Just one more step! And she takes a step.

Nóri looks down with her big teary eyes straight into Márk's eyes, and she steps again. That's how the two of them go. We don't breathe either. A miracle is happening. Two neglected souls from hard backgrounds are holding on to each other. Márk experiences that he is truly helping. And Nóri trusts and steps. She can do it. Her dream is in her pocket. She'll make it, she can't give up. At the end we celebrate in tears, the whole little group in a huddle.

But back to the platform.

I turned around, decided that I wouldn't fall, that I would try. My palms are sweating. I remind myself that I'm doing this for myself, that I don't have to live up to anyone's expectations. That failure is good experience too, that I can be vulnerable. That I want to know whether I can do it. I remind myself that I'm insanely strong, which sometimes surprises even me in the gym.

I'm not going to say it out loud here, but inside I'm swearing like a trooper. But there's no way back, I have to stand up. Now I can hear the voices encouraging me. Come on Gigiiiiii!

I stand up. I don't even understand how, when a moment ago the whole thing seemed impossible. Somehow I tucked one leg under me, and from there, with some kind of single-leg squat-like movement that never usually works for me, I stood up.

Past the hardest part, all that's left is to jump into nothingness, but what is that to me? Nothing.

Well, it was a miracle. Weeks later I can still feel in every fiber of my being what barriers broke down in me. I'm grateful to the participants for praying me up there, and to myself for daring to say yes.

I hope I managed to convey a little of what these ropes on high can give.

Thank you for your attention!

Have you had an experience where saying no turned out to be especially important?

There was a woman in my practice who said no to a low ropes element. Afterwards she withdrew for days, and then later she threw herself into every challenge. She told us afterwards that the most powerful experience for her had been that her decision was accepted.

This was a very important lesson for me: drawing a boundary is a strength too.

How can a trainer best prepare for this target group?

It's important to know where participants come from and what circumstances they live in. The trauma-informed approach is also essential: understanding how the nervous system works, how trauma shows up in behaviour, and what the signs are that someone has lost control or is heading that way.

At the same time, unexpected situations are unavoidable, so practice and self-awareness are key. How do we ourselves react in stressful situations? How do we handle someone saying no, resistance, verbal attacks and conflicts?

What are the "buttons" that get pushed most often?

It's important to know that people fundamentally want to be good. If someone behaves strangely, it's often because their sense of safety is being hurt at that moment, and this is how it shows.

According to polyvagal theory, neuroception is constantly at work in us. It's an unconscious, automatic mode of perception that monitors whether we're safe and, if not, how great the danger is. If it senses danger, automatic reactions kick in. We don't consciously decide on them; they simply happen. We freeze, fall silent or jump out of the way.

If we notice this in a child at camp, what can help in practical terms is turning towards them with our presence, breathing together, going for a walk, reassuring them or offering some other supportive presence, depending on what the participant responds well to. Patience is important, as is understanding that the child is unreachable at that moment. Their cognitive functions aren't working, and because of their emotions and inner processes they probably don't understand what we're saying. But if we radiate acceptance and safety, that can help them come back.

Where do you experience success?

Success in this work is often quiet and hard to measure. An opening up, a moment of trust, or participation in itself is already a result.

We don't always see what happens after the camp, but it feels good to know that perhaps we gave them something they can draw on later.

A podcast with Kriszta Gyöngyösi is available [at this YouTube link](#). Topic: the trauma-informed approach, connected parenting and the importance of helpers' mental health (Tandem Podcast, Season 4: Every Child Wants to Be Good).

Foundations of Experiential and Adventure Education⁸

Experiential Education and Experience-Centredness

When planning and delivering trainings, it is essential for professionals to clarify the theoretical and practical differences between the two concepts, since the notion of experiential education is still often confused with that of experience-centred teaching. Although the two approaches share common roots, the specific criteria of experiential education processes do not necessarily appear in purely experience-centred teaching. The foundation of both methods is the provision of novel stimuli and challenges, which have an intense effect on participants' senses and cognitive schemas, jolting them out of the world of everyday routines.

- **Experiential education:** This is an explicitly active form of learning, identified in the international literature as "learning by doing". In this structured process, the participant's direct, personally lived experience serves as the primary and most important source of information. For this reason, this approach is the polar opposite of traditional forms of education based on passive listening or reading, where knowledge is acquired from other people's narrated experiences. The trainer's task is to create artificial but psychologically and physically completely safe situations that deliberately take participants out of their usual comfort zone. The unfamiliar problems and challenges created in this way provide the basis for developing real problem-solving skills. The effectiveness of the process is

⁸ Liliána Kaszmán-Saróka (2026). Katedra journal. Volume XXVI, Issue 1.

multiplied by the power of social cooperation, so that individual experience is organically complemented by the social dimension of group learning.

- **Experience-centred teaching:** This concept denotes not a closed



methodological system, but rather a trainer/teacher attitude and flexible educational approach that seeks to activate participants emotionally and intellectually. It does not require stepping out of the comfort zone; instead, it focuses on arousing intrinsic motivation and sustaining natural curiosity. Here the trainer's methodological toolkit can be varied very freely according to their creativity: they readily use rich audio-visual source material or the latest digital e-learning solutions. On a practical level, they use interactive tasks that leave ample room for structured communication, argumentation and open debate. A key aim is to encourage changes of perspective and shape critical



attitudes, with learning motivation itself provided by the excitement of previously unfamiliar types of puzzles and problems.

The Flow Experience (Mihály Csíkszentmihályi)

One of the highest-level aims of experience-based trainings is for group members to reach the "optimal experience" defined by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi – the state of flow. Flow is a deep, intrinsically motivated state in which the participant becomes completely absorbed in the activity at hand while directing their actions with absolute awareness. Csíkszentmihályi's quarter-century of research showed that attention functions as a kind of psychic energy, and that control over it is our most important tool for improving the quality of experience. The optimal experience does not come to us in a passive, relaxed

state; we create it deliberately by stretching our physical or mental performance to the limit through sheer will in order to accomplish a difficult but important task. As trainers, we can foster this state of flow by consciously providing and nurturing the following 8 basic elements:

1. **Concentration:** The participant becomes capable of deep, undisturbed focus, with their attention fixed firmly on the activity at hand.
2. **Clear goals:** At every moment of the process, the individual knows exactly what they need to achieve; this structured system of goals makes the mind orderly and focused.
3. **The right level of challenge:** There is a real chance of achieving the goal given the actual circumstances – that is, the level of challenge is in perfect balance with the participant's current abilities.
4. **Immediate feedback:** While carrying out the activity, continuous, direct and unambiguous feedback arrives on how successful one's actions are.
5. **Deep involvement:** The participant acts of their own accord, from inner motivation and without strain, while the worries of everyday life fade completely into the background.
6. **Control:** A sense of complete control and security over one's own actions and the external activity emerges.
7. **Loss of self-consciousness:** During the activity, anxious self-reflection and the compulsion to meet the outside world's expectations dissolve – yet, paradoxically, once the flow experience fades, the sense of self returns even more structured and stronger.
8. **Altered sense of time:** The objective passage of time is put in brackets; in the individual's perception, minutes and hours may speed up extraordinarily or stretch out and slow down.



Theoretical Pillars for Trainers

Modern experiential education and training methodology is not a collection of isolated exercises, but rests on the solid theoretical pillars of three outstanding twentieth-century theorists.

John Dewey's Experience-Centred Pedagogy

The theoretical cornerstone of experiential education was laid by the philosopher of education John Dewey at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Dewey recognised that in a modernising, stimulus-poor environment the opportunities for natural experience had narrowed. According to his principles, learners' own authentic experiences must be at the centre of the learning process, since a pedagogy built on real experiences carries within itself the intrinsic motivational base that can thus be sustained and remain functional into adulthood. Dewey firmly believed that social cooperation and adaptive behaviour should not be taught in theory, but acquired through shared activities and lived experiences. His ideas served as a direct basis for today's movements of outdoor education, adventure education and play-based education.

David Kolb – The Experiential Learning Cycle

The Kolb cycle is discussed in detail in the chapter [*"The Process of Learning: Applying the Kolb Model"*](#).

Carl R. Rogers – The Person-Centred Approach

The psychotherapist Carl R. Rogers demonstrated that the person-centred approach is the key to effective development in group learning environments too, where the trainer is present not as a direct instructor but as a facilitator who stimulates processes. According to Rogers, the combined presence of three basic trainer attitudes is necessary and sufficient for participants' personal development:

- **Genuineness (congruence):** The most important factor; the trainer should be authentic, and dare to become aware of and openly own their feelings in front of the group, including the transparent expression of negative feelings where necessary.
- **Unconditional positive regard:** Full, unprejudiced respect for participants' individual autonomy, boundaries and personality.

- **Empathic understanding:** A deep, understanding sense of participants' inner



motives, behavioural reactions and experiences.

[Experiential education YouTube video](#)

Labyrinth Walking as a Development Tool

Labyrinth walking as a tool formed the central element of one of the two professional retreats held in the first phase of the project. The main theme around which this event was built was life-path planning and life-path reflection. This theme can be approached at many levels of depth: we could also have focused on presenting the methods in TANDEM's toolkit that concentrate on career counselling and career guidance, since applying these is also relevant for the main target group, vulnerable young people. At the same time, we also wanted to model how the mental well-being of helping professionals can be supported by a training whose foundations lie in deeper self-awareness work.

We consider it very important that burnout prevention and mental health appear as real priorities in helpers' professional lives; yet everyday experience shows that, alongside work with the target group and day-to-day project management tasks, there is very rarely an opportunity for this. That is why, when planning the professional content of the retreats, we decided that we wanted to create a more permissive learning environment that offers the possibility of slowing down, and to invite participants to work with their own professional identity at a deeper level. We therefore devoted the core of the retreat to getting to know and passing on labyrinth walking as a development tool – from the historical and theoretical background of labyrinths, through the technical know-how of building them, to the methodology of facilitating labyrinth walks. We experienced the results of this shared learning on two levels throughout the whole project: on the one

hand, a very deep shared space for reflection developed among the participating professionals; on the other, Élményakadémia's staff actively integrated labyrinth walking as a tool into their everyday practice.

In the following chapter we provide a historical overview and theoretical background so that those who, after getting to know labyrinth walking through their own experience, would like to learn more about this special space – or would like to start experimenting with building a labyrinth or accompanying labyrinth walks themselves – can place labyrinth walking as a tool in context.

The Labyrinth: An Ancient Symbol and a Therapeutic Space⁹

The labyrinth is one of humanity's most ancient symbols, created in the most varied forms – the labyrinth is a kind of archetypal figure.



The labyrinth is a complex symbol: it represents at once the path leading to the deepest core of the personality (in Jung's concept of the Selbst: the deep self), the inside of the body – especially the womb – the underworld, and rebirth from death. A person walking the labyrinth sets out with a twofold aim: to find the centre, and then to return from it unharmed. This twofold journey presents the process of transformation, initiation and purification in a physically walkable form.

⁹ Source: "Gondolatok a labirintusjárásról" [Reflections on Labyrinth Walking] (Halász, Halász & Rábainé Domszky, 2024).

The Difference Between a Labyrinth and a Maze

It is important to distinguish a labyrinth from a maze. A maze is a logic puzzle: it has several entrances and exits and tests the walker with dead ends and misleading paths. It primarily activates waking consciousness and rational thinking (β brainwaves).

A labyrinth, by contrast, offers a single winding path to the centre, from which one returns along the same route. It has neither dead ends nor crossroads. The challenge lies not in finding one's way, but in the decision to enter: are we willing to take on the spiritual transformation that the path offers? While walking it, many people enter a slightly altered state of consciousness (α waves); intuition, visual thinking and creativity are heightened. A maze develops cognitive skills; a labyrinth develops the personality.

The Historical Roots of Labyrinths

The classical seven-circuit labyrinth can be found in many parts of the world – among the Nazca Lines in Peru, in European rock tombs, in Indian rock carvings and in the basket patterns of the Hopi people alike. This prevalence suggests that it played a fundamental role in every culture. The oldest known depiction of a seven-circuit labyrinth can be seen at the entrance of the Tomba del Labirinto in Sardinia, dating from between 2500 and 2000 BC.

The word labyrinth may derive from the Greek labrys (double axe, sacrificial axe). The double axe was one of the most important symbols of Minoan culture: one half symbolised the waning Moon (death), the other the waxing Moon (birth). The labyrinth myth associated with the palace of Knossos actually stems from a reinterpretation of a fertility rite: in the original Minoan belief system, the bull embodied the power of nature that dies and is reborn every year. The legend of Theseus and the Minotaur grew out of this ancient ritual.

For the Romans, the labyrinth symbol was linked to the story of Aeneas: the hero, returning from the underworld, performed a ritual dance in honour of his father, and from this developed the labyrinth game called the Game of Troy. As the empire expanded, the motif spread throughout Europe and Asia on mosaic floors, coins and pottery.

After the fall of Rome, Christianity filled the ancient figure with new content: walking the labyrinth became a symbol of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The labyrinth on the floor of

Chartres Cathedral, 12 metres in diameter, had to be traversed by the faithful on their knees in order to obtain forgiveness of sins. In the 1990s, inspired by this labyrinth, Dr Lauren Artress founded Veriditas and laid the foundations of the methodology of modern labyrinth walking.

In the Gothic period the labyrinth symbol gradually receded into the background. From the Renaissance onwards, the spiritual labyrinth was increasingly replaced by the entertaining hedge maze. The spectacular, tall-clipped hedge mazes of 16th–17th-century aristocratic gardens became settings for festivities and courtship celebrations, and their sacred content faded.

Fertility and the Symbolism of the Body

The labyrinth is closely intertwined with ideas of the body, birth and fertility. Babylonian clay tablets around 4,000 years old depict spiral labyrinths, with accompanying texts referring to the entrails of animals – indirectly denoting the body, the lower abdomen and birth. The Hopi know two kinds of labyrinth: one symbolises the life-giving path of Father Sun, the other – called Tápu'at (Mother and Child) – the birth of a child.

The Indian Mahabharata tells of the Chakra-Vyuha labyrinth, which the hero Abhimanyu was able to enter (he had heard the way in while in his mother's womb), but he did not know the secret of returning, and died a hero's death at the centre. According to the midwife Pam England, this is a metaphor of unfinished initiation: walking the labyrinth symbolises the mother's victory over her fear and pain. In India the custom still survives of a woman in labour drawing the labyrinth shape in saffron and then drinking it.

Dance and the Labyrinth

Labyrinths were settings for ritual community dances. The crane dance (geranos) known on the island of Crete – which Homer also writes about – evoked Theseus's escape from the labyrinth: the dancers wound their way inwards and then outwards holding a thread. In a development free of Babylonian influence, among the Malakula people of Vanuatu the labyrinth drawing is part of the cult of the dead: the deceased must correctly redraw a labyrinth pattern in order to enter the realm of the dead – which encourages a conscious way of life.

In the Hungarian folk dance tradition, labyrinth dances form an archaic group of chain dances. The Lenten circle dances (karikázó), the "green branch walk" (zöldágjárás) and

processional children's games all evoke the shape of the labyrinth: the girls moving along in a snaking line sang magical songs, radiating magical power over the community's spaces. These rites enacted the cycle of life, death and rebirth.

Rhythm and Altered States of Consciousness

John W. Rhodes's 2008 summary study, reviewing the results of sixteen studies, identifies the so-called labyrinth effect: increased levels of calm, reduced anxiety and stress, greater openness, self-confidence and inner peace. Some participants reported changes in their perception of time and space and a free flow of thoughts. The rhythmic, alternating steps shift brain activity towards α waves – similar to the REM phase of dreaming.

Walking Meditation

The motto of labyrinth walkers is: *Solvitur ambulando* – "it is solved by walking" (St Augustine). The labyrinth is perhaps humanity's most ancient contemplative tool: it looks back on more than five thousand years of history and is still suitable today for spiritual development, initiation and personal development alike. The way labyrinth walkers move forward along their path with slow but rhythmic steps and non-judgemental attention has been shown to reduce stress levels and have a calming effect on the nervous system.

Walking a labyrinth is not a maze: you cannot get lost in it. The only decision is to enter. Yet this seemingly simple decision carries deep responsibility: are we willing to undergo transformation? In inner work the labyrinth functions as a metaphor: everything that happens in it is a reflection of one's life path. The walk slows down the mind, opens the heart, and allows hidden emotions, conflicts and insights to come to the surface.

The Three Phases of the Walk

1. Preparation: The ritual begins as soon as we formulate our intention to enter. It is worth arriving with a concrete question or intention. We should pay attention to the hindering and supporting forces that appear in our lives at this time – these are messages too.
2. Walking in (the inward path): The aim is to empty the mind and let go of expectations. Our own body sets the pace. Emotions may surface; it is worth

observing them but not getting stuck in them. The presence of others and the inevitable encounters reflect the frictions and connections of our life path.



The centre: Praying, meditating, with an open heart, we receive the gift of the moment. Transformation does not necessarily happen at this point – the theme we have walked with may keep working in us for days or weeks in the form of dreams and unexpected insights.

3. The outward path: Accompanied by the inner silence and knowledge gained

at the Centre, we return to the outside world. The end result of the labyrinth is finding ourselves: clarifying personal goals, processing grief, relationship questions, resolving blockages.

Who Is It Recommended For, and Who Not?

It is worth trying for anyone who is mentally healthy and searching for their own path. It is not recommended for people with more serious psychiatric conditions – especially those prone to psychosis, diagnosed with schizophrenia, or with a heightened tendency to regress – because the dissolution of ego boundaries can lead to panic attacks or severe regression. For people who have experienced birth trauma, the presence of a psychotherapist is strongly recommended.

With children and young people it is worth making the framework much more playful, since for them the emphasis may not be on reaching a deep, meditative state; rather, the labyrinth as a space brings out their playfulness. At the same time, entering the labyrinth with a goal, intention or theme, paying attention to themselves and their encounters, and bringing in a symbolic object that is meaningful to them (and placing it wherever feels right to them) can be realistic for children too.

Guide to Facilitation

Organising a successful labyrinth walking event requires serious preparation: defining the target group, choosing the venue, communicating the participation criteria and

conducting a preliminary interview with participants. The facilitator's task is to support the group dynamics neutrally and impartially with guided questions and reflection.

The main elements of the event: an opening circle (participants arrive with their thoughts and expectations), walking the labyrinth (in silence, in a meditative atmosphere), then a closing circle (non-judgemental sharing of experiences in the form of I-statements). The facilitator's toolkit includes the agenda, ensuring protected time, timeboxing and active, engaged listening.

It is important to pay attention to setting up frameworks such as avoiding alcohol and mind-altering substances, switching off mobile phones, and confidentiality. Eating lightly is also recommended for the facilitator, as it provides mental freshness and sharper perception.

When we start a labyrinth walk, ideally the labyrinth is already waiting for participants at the venue, but some facilitators also build the labyrinth together with the target group. Before the walk begins, we should always give a short introduction about what is going to happen, since few people are familiar with this tool and it may cause uncertainty or confusion. Things that give participants something to hold on to: the symbolic walk of our life path, a path leading to a goal that is important to us, transformation as a symbol, and the physical effect on our body and nervous system of stepping rhythmically along circular paths – the connections between the brain hemispheres are stimulated and the nervous system calms down.

Before entering, or before the walk begins, we can use cards (labyrinth cards, various emotion cards, images depicting archetypes, etc.) from which participants draw or choose, but we can also work with various objects (natural objects, symbolic "treasures", scarves) that participants carry with them and place somewhere. We can even include stations where participants receive a question or have to solve a task while walking their path, or group members can choose companions from among each other to support them on their walk. It is important to remember that everything that happens in the space of the labyrinth can carry a symbolic message – so it is worth coming back to it in the debriefing circle and reflecting on which encounters took place with whom, and what the defining moments were.

Labyrinth Walking in the 21st Century

For people living in modern cities, the labyrinth is primarily a tool for quieting down, meditation and self-awareness. Dr Lauren Artress founded Veriditas in San Francisco in 1995 and laid the methodological foundations of contemporary labyrinth walking at Grace Cathedral. She applied the method in hospitals, prisons, churches and public parks alike. The Labyrinth Society, as a global online community, connects labyrinth builders and walkers around the world and promotes scientific research.

Recommended music for labyrinth walking includes Hildegard von Bingen's Gregorian melodies, Arvo Pärt's minimalist music, Indian mantras and contemporary meditation compilations. The recommended literature and useful websites (e.g. veriditas.org, labyrinthsociety.org, labyrinthica.hu) offer further opportunities to go deeper.

The symbolism of the labyrinth is universal: the cycle of life, death and rebirth, the path of initiation and self-knowledge. Walking it requires only one decision – to enter – but this one step can set off a profound inner journey. The labyrinth does not give ready-made answers, but it creates space for us to find our own.

The labyrinth is a spiritual tool: it reduces stress, quiets the mind and opens the heart. A walking meditation, a path of prayer – a blueprint where psyche meets Spirit.

– Dr Lauren Artress

[Labyrinth walking YouTube video](#)



Drawing the Seven-Circuit Labyrinth¹⁰

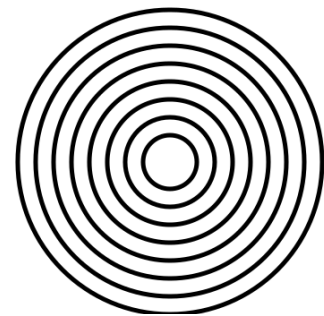
1. Seed Pattern Version

One of the most recommended ways of designing a 7-circuit (also called seven-level) circular labyrinth is the so-called "draw and cut" technique. This method means that as the drawing progresses, some of the previously drawn lines later have to be erased – "cut" – to create the passages. This optimised procedure results in a labyrinth divided into 4 sections, which is much less complicated than methods based solely on single-line drawing, which require a great many extra steps.

Building the labyrinth consists of three clearly distinct steps:

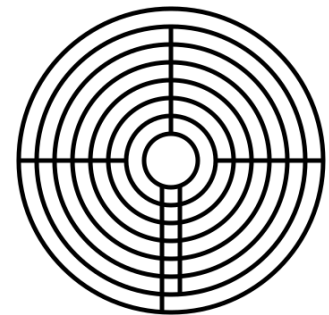
Step 1: Drawing the concentric circles

The very first step of the process is to draw 8 concentric circles. These circles must be spaced perfectly evenly apart, and they enclose an innermost, central circle that functions as the ultimate goal (centre) of the labyrinth.



Step 2: Forming the four inner walls

In the next phase the inner walls must be drawn, which create the correct paths and turning points. This can be achieved by placing four straight lines according to the positions on a clock face:



- At 12 o'clock, draw a line outwards from the centre that blocks every path except the outermost ring.
- A line placed at 3 o'clock closes off every path except the innermost path, the one closest to the goal.

¹⁰ Source: "How to Draw a Classical 7 Circuit Labyrinth" (DoYouMaze, 2019).
Online: <https://www.doyoumaze.com/blog/2019/how-to-draw-a-classical-labyrinth>

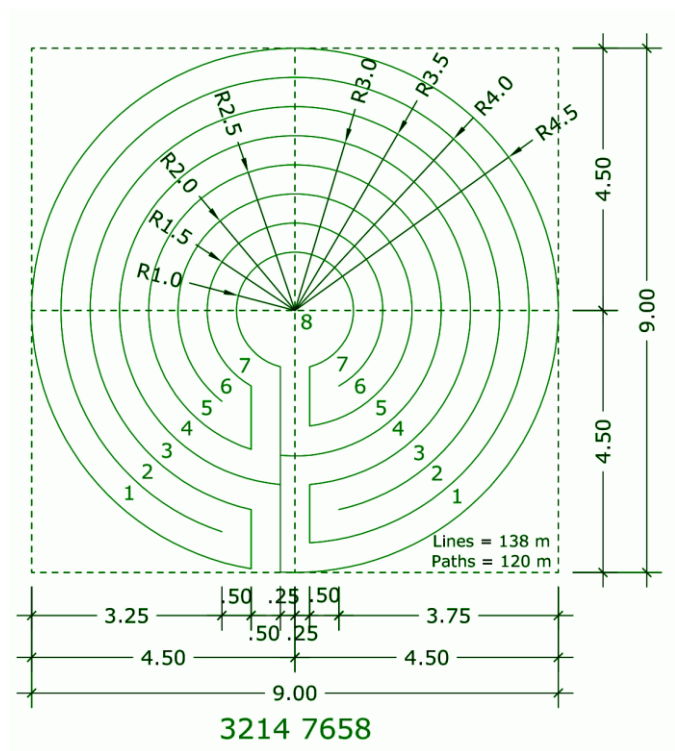
- From the centre towards the bottom edge, form a path leading downwards with two lines. They are not exactly at the 6 o'clock position, but are centred. The left-hand line crosses all the circles, while the right-hand line crosses everything except the outermost path.
- At 9 o'clock, draw a wall that closes off every path except the one immediately next to the goal.

Step 3: Opening the paths

In the final phase, the lanes must be opened at the sections at 3, 6, 9 and 12 o'clock by erasing (cutting) the appropriate segments of the concentric circles. The exact number and size of the passages depend on how we draw and erase them.

2. Classical Version¹¹

The path sequence of the classical (Cretan) type is 3-2-1-4-7-6-5. If we examine its seed pattern, we can see that the right-hand side of the pattern is shifted up by one path width. The horizontal arms of the central cross and the angles are curved, so essentially only the vertical lines of the pattern are needed for the construction. To complete the labyrinth, the free points and line ends must be connected from left to right (or vice versa).



The labyrinth can be sized (scaled) as desired, but a well-proven layout follows these proportions:

- Path width: 50 cm
- Diameter of the centre (goal): 2 metres (four times the path width)
- Total outer diameter: 9 metres

¹¹ Source: "How to Make a Circular Classical 7 Circuit Labyrinth and Seven New (up to know unknown) Circular 7 Circuit Labyrinths in Sand" (Reißmann-Frei, 2013) Online: <https://blogmymaze.wordpress.com/2013/09/01/how-to-make-a-circular-classical-7-circuit-labyrinth-and-seven-new-up-to-know-unknown-circular-7-circuit-labyrinths-in-sand/>

- Total length of lines: approx. 138 metres
- Length of the walkable path to the centre: approx. 120 metres

If we want to build the labyrinth twice as large (for example with a total diameter of 18 metres), every value must be multiplied by two. In this case the path will be 1 metre wide and the walk to the centre will be 240 metres long.

As a point of interest, we can also mention an earlier, so-called "shortcut" method, based on extending a 5-circuit labyrinth. In this solution two more circuits are drawn onto the basic 5, and the exit is formed by extending the left middle line to the bottom edge. Although this option seems simple when described in a single sentence, implementing it and drawing the lines is much more complicated than with the new, clean 4-section design.

Collection of Games

Rights and Laws

Our Own Rules – Creating a Game Together

Duration: 30–40 minutes

Group size: 10–30 people

Materials needed: A spacious area (room or outdoor venue); optionally a flipchart and markers for the reflection

Aim of the exercise: Participants experience first-hand why rules are needed, how shared norms come about, and what role rules play in cooperation. The exercise helps them recognise that rules are meant not to restrict but to create safety and predictability, and that they work well when members of the community create and follow them together.

Description

We take the group out to a spacious area, where their task is to play, for 10 minutes, a game they invent themselves. They receive the following instructions:

- Everyone must take part in the game.
- The game must be safe; nobody should get hurt.
- They must not cause any damage to the surroundings.

Apart from this, they receive no further guidance. The participants' task is to invent the game together and to define its rules.

Throughout the process the trainer stays in the role of observer. They do not intervene in the rule-making unless safety is at risk. During the game it is worth observing how the system of rules develops, who takes the initiative, how decisions are made, whether there is a clear leader, and whether negotiation takes place.

The game is followed by a reflection round, in which we can work along the following questions:

- How did the rules come about?
- Was there a situation where a rule was missing?

- How did it feel when someone did not keep to the jointly accepted framework?
- What helped everyone to be able to take part?
- How did the rules change or become more precise during the game?

During the discussion it can be made clear that rules help the community when they are understandable to everyone, jointly accepted and possible to follow. It can be highlighted that a good system of rules is not oppressive but based on solidarity: it serves everyone's safety and participation.

At the end of the exercise the group can formulate a few principles for how they would like to work together from now on.

Variations

- At the end of the game the group can also record the rules that emerged in writing.
- During the reflection, parallels can be drawn between how group rules and society's laws work.

Risks and experiences

It is important to define the safety framework clearly at the beginning of the exercise. The trainer must make sure that the game does not become exclusionary and that every participant has the opportunity to join in. The group may find it hard to reach a joint decision at first; this is part of the process and can become a valuable learning point during the reflection.

Five-Finger Contract

Duration: 45–60 minutes

Group size: Small groups of 3–4

Materials needed: Flipchart or wrapping paper, markers, post-it notes or note sheets

Aim of the exercise

Participants jointly formulate guidelines according to which they can work together safely, supportively and responsibly. The aim of the exercise is for group members to experience first-hand that jointly created rules strengthen commitment, responsibility and the sense of belonging to the community.

Principles:

- we create the rules together;
- group members can express their opinions and feelings;
- we take responsibility for everything we have agreed to;
- we strive to create a supportive, safe environment;
- we set down guidelines that everyone can follow;
- the contract enables everyone to be a full member of the group;
- the contract is always available in a simple, written form.

Description

The trainer presents the symbolic meaning of the five fingers and explains their content in detail.

1. Little finger – Safety

The little finger is the most vulnerable, so it reminds us of the importance of physical and emotional safety. We strive to make sure that everyone in the group feels safe, and we pay attention to one another's vulnerability.

Helping questions: What does safety mean to you? What do you need in order to feel safe here?

2. Ring finger – Commitment

The ring is a symbol of commitment. By joining the group we commit ourselves to one another and to the shared process, and we undertake to be the best possible members of the group, even in times of difficulty.

Helping questions: What does commitment mean to you? What do you need in order to commit?

3. Middle finger – Respect

In many cultures the middle finger signifies disrespect, so here it reminds us of the importance of respect. We must respect one another despite our differences, ourselves through active presence, and the group's leaders as well.

Helping questions: What does respect mean to you? What do you need in order for us to respect one another?

4. Index finger – Responsibility

The index finger points at others, but at the same time three fingers point back at us. This reminds us not just to look at other people's responsibility, but also at our own role in a situation.

Helping questions: What does taking responsibility mean to you? What do you need in order to be able to take responsibility?

5. Thumb – Positive attitude

A raised thumb means: everything is fine. A positive outlook helps us to be open to new things, to persevere in times of difficulty, and to enjoy the success of finding a solution.

Helping questions: What does a positive attitude mean to you? What do you need in order for us to respect one another?

After the presentation, participants work in small groups. Each group formulates concrete, simple rules that can be followed, along the lines of the five fingers.

After the small-group work we collect the suggestions together and, category by category, vote on the guidelines that the group accepts as shared rules. The finalised PRESENCE contract is recorded in writing and kept in a visible place during the rest of the work.

Variations

- Every participant can sign the contract.
- Later in the process we can return to the rules and modify them if necessary.

Risks and experiences

It is important that the rules really come from the participants and that the trainer does not formulate them on their behalf. If the formulations are too general, it is worth making them more concrete with helping questions. A jointly created contract that is visibly displayed strengthens the sense of safety, commitment and responsibility in the group.

From Values to Rules – The Societal Level

Duration: 40–50 minutes

Group size: 10–30 people

Materials needed: Flipchart or wrapping paper, markers, post-it notes

Aim of the exercise

Participants recognise that values and rules formulated at group level also appear at the level of society. The aim of the exercise is to raise awareness that laws and social norms are rooted in shared values, and that understanding, interpreting and shaping them is part of active citizenship.

Description

The exercise is carried out as a continuation of the five-finger contract.

The trainer recalls the meaning of the five fingers (safety, commitment, respect, responsibility, positive attitude) and then asks participants to think about how these values appear at the level of society.

Participants work in small groups. Each group receives one value and thinks along the following questions:

- What does this value mean at the level of society?
- What rules, laws or norms help to put it into practice?
- What happens when this value is missing from a society?

The groups collect their thoughts and then present them to one another. The trainer helps them recognise connections and make examples concrete. The exercise ends with a shared reflection on how the group level and the societal level are similar, why it is important for rules to be backed by values, and how a citizen can influence these rules.

Variations

The groups can also create their own "mini social contract" for an imagined community. They can look for concrete examples from their local community, for example the school or the town/village.

Risks and experiences

It is important that the discussion does not slide into a party-political debate. The focus should be on values and how they appear in society. It is worth helping participants to bring concrete, understandable examples, especially if the group is less informed about social issues.

Basic Human Rights

Duration: 45–60 minutes

Group size: 10–30 people

Materials needed: Projector or printed handouts on basic human rights, flipchart, markers, cards or sheets with individual rights

Aim of the exercise

Participants learn about basic human rights and recognise their significance in their own lives and communities. The aim of the exercise is for human rights to appear not as abstract concepts but linked to concrete, everyday situations, and to raise awareness of the connection between rights and responsibilities.

Description

The exercise begins with a short, structured presentation on basic human rights. The trainer explains what we call human rights, the principles on which they were founded, and why they can be regarded as rights to which every person is entitled. The emphasis is on understandable examples close to everyday life.

After the presentation, participants work in smaller groups. Each group receives a few cards or statements containing human rights. Their task is to:

- put into their own words what the given right means;
- give a concrete example of how this right appears in everyday life;
- think about what happens when this right is violated;
- link the given right to the responsibility that goes with it.

The groups make a poster or a short presentation and then present their results to one another. The trainer helps them recognise connections and emphasises that rights and responsibilities complement each other.

The exercise ends with a shared reflection on which rights participants consider the most important in their own lives, and what they can do to make sure these rights are upheld in their own community.

Variations

- Role play can be used, in which participants act out a situation where a human right is violated or upheld.

- The group can also rank human rights according to which they consider most decisive in their own life situation.

Risks and experiences

It is important that the presentation is not too long or too theoretical. The emphasis should be on interactive processing. It is worth handling sensitively topics that may touch participants personally, and ensuring that it is safe to speak.

Court

Time limit: 25–30 minutes

Group size: 12–30 participants (a whole class)

Materials needed: none / the situation to be discussed written on paper

Aim of the exercise: Through a concrete situation, students form opinions about the importance of certain things. They notice that in a situation it is not necessarily only one party who can be right; the background and circumstances of actions need to be examined. They become aware that there is no need to judge hastily – "there are always two sides to every coin".

Description: Part 1: We outline a situation. Example: Peti ate Robi's mid-morning snack (1 croissant roll) because he was hungry. Unfortunately, Peti's parents don't have the money to pack a snack for Peti every day. Peti is very ashamed that they are poor, so he doesn't dare admit that he has nothing to eat, and he doesn't dare ask anyone for food. Robi's family, on the other hand, has a lot of money; he gets plenty of snacks, and Robi won't go hungry if one of his rolls is eaten. When Robi finds out that Peti stole from him, he gets very angry.

4. Part: We divide the students into 3 groups (if the group is larger, into more, in which case several groups will have the same task). The students in one group will be Peti's lawyers, those in the second group Robi's lawyers, and the third group will be the jury. If we wish, the group leader can be the judge. In each group the students appoint a spokesperson. The first group represents Peti's interests, the second Robi's, and the jury's task is to consider the interests of both parties and outline a possible solution, or perhaps how each person should have behaved in the given situation.
5. Part: The students discuss the task in their groups (6–8 minutes). During this time the group leader does not interfere in the discussions. It is important to tell

the lawyers' groups to support with concrete arguments why the actions, opinions, reactions, etc. of the person they are defending were justified... And with the jury it is important to make clear that they should not take anyone's side. A scribe can also be appointed in each group to take minutes of what is said. At the end of the discussion, first the two lawyers' teams and then the jury's spokesperson relay to the group what was discussed. It is important that the jury speaks last.

If an argument develops, it is important that the group leader directs the hearing in the role of judge.

Risks and experiences: It is important that the situation is phrased in the students' language and is realistic, so that they can imagine it happening to them or around them. The risk of the task lies in this same realism, since an unfortunate situation may arise in which a student sees themselves specifically in a scenario and takes offence; therefore the group leader must choose the situation very carefully.

Belonging to a Community

Which Communities Am I a Member Of?

Duration: 40–50 minutes

Group size: 10–30 people

Materials needed: A4 sheets or wrapping paper, markers, coloured pencils

Aim of the exercise

Participants become aware that throughout their lives they belong to several different communities, and recognise their own role in these systems. The exercise helps strengthen the experience of belonging to a community, as well as the understanding that the individual is part of society on several levels.

Description

At the start of the exercise the trainer talks briefly about how we are all members of several communities at the same time. These communities exist at different levels, from the closest personal relationships to the wider social or even global level.

The participants' task is to make a "community map" of themselves. They draw themselves in the middle of the sheet (with their name or a symbol), and then write or draw around themselves the communities they are members of.

The trainer can help their thinking with examples:

- family
- circle of friends
- class or school
- sports team or club
- town or village
- country
- Europe
- humanity

It is important that they think not only of formal communities but also of informal groups.

Once the maps are finished, sharing in small groups follows. During the joint reflection it can be made clear that communities at different levels affect one another, and that a given topic (for example environmental protection or respect) can appear at several levels.

Variations

- Participants can also use colours to mark the communities in which they feel safe and where they would like to take on a more active role.
- It is also possible to place the maps side by side and look for common patterns.

Risks and experiences

- Some participants may name only a few communities. In such cases their thinking can be supported with helping questions, without forcing answers on them.
- It is important that sharing is voluntary and that everyone decides for themselves what they want to show from their map.

Self-Awareness – What Do I Give to My Community?

Duration: 40–50 minutes

Group size: 10–30 people

Materials needed: A4 sheets, markers, adhesive tape

Aim of the exercise

Participants become aware of their own strengths and of the values they can bring into their communities. The aim of the exercise is to reinforce the idea that every person has qualities, skills or attitudes that can be useful to others. The emphasis is on everyone being able to contribute to the development of their community.

Description

Participants receive a sheet of paper on which they trace around their own hand. In each finger they write a strength, quality or skill with which they help others or contribute to how the community works.

It is important to emphasise that these can be simple everyday things (e.g. I'm helpful, I listen to others) or concrete abilities (e.g. I communicate well, I'm creative, I'm technically skilled).

Once everyone has made their own "resource hand", feedback follows.

This can be done in several ways:

- A blank sheet is attached to each participant's back, and group members can anonymously write on it a positive strength they see in that person.
- Participants talk in pairs and give each other concrete feedback on where they see the other person's strengths.

The exercise ends with a joint reflection on how it felt to think about their own strengths and to receive positive feedback from others.

Variations

Participants can mark separately the strengths they already actively use in the community and those they would like to develop more consciously.

Risks and experiences

Some participants may find it difficult to name their own strengths. In such cases the process can be supported with helping questions or with positive feedback from the group.

It is important that feedback is always respectful and affirming. The aim of the exercise is to strengthen self-confidence and the sense of contributing to the community, not comparison.

Roles in the Community

Duration: 30–40 minutes

Group size: 8–30 people

Materials needed: The names of the parts of the Pegasus's body (roles) printed separately on A4 sheets, flipchart, markers

Aim of the exercise

Participants become aware that different roles appear within a community, and that every role is valuable and necessary for working together. The exercise helps them recognise that active participation in the community is not tied to a single ideal role, but can take many forms. A further aim is for participants to recognise their own strengths in community life and to make a conscious commitment to their own development.

Description

The trainer presents the Pegasus model, which links the different roles that appear in a group to the body parts of the mythical creature. The trainer places the printed names and short descriptions of the roles in the middle of the room, visually "assembling" the Pegasus.

Body part	Description
Head	A dreamer and visionary, full of ideas. Shows direction, takes the initiative. Can sometimes be less practical, and stubborn in clinging to their own ideas.
Mane	Eye-catching, enthusiastic and present. When the direction is clear, able to work in a disciplined and orderly way for the team. Also influences the group through their outward appearance.

Body part	Description
Back	A stable support. Continuously supports the others and helps them to flourish. Sometimes overcommits and takes on too many tasks.
Ear	Sensitive to information, quick to notice changes and subtle shifts. Hears both spoken and unspoken messages, but may be prone to passing on gossip.
Brain	A strategic thinker who organises, plans and analyses. A good problem-solver. May be less action-oriented, thinking rather than acting.
Memory	Keeps hold of experiences, keeps track of commitments and monitors progress. Helps refer back to plans. Sometimes finds it hard to let go of old patterns.
Heart	Empathic, compassionate, attentive to people's feelings. Strengthens group cohesion. Can sometimes seem oversensitive or "soft".
Mouth	The team's communicator and spokesperson. Expresses ideas easily and represents the community. Can sometimes become too dominant when speaking.
Weight	Can give momentum or act as a brake. A defining presence, hard to move. Can provide stability but may resist change.

Body part	Description
Skin	Sensitive to external influences, reacts quickly to changes in the environment. Provides protection, but sometimes reacts oversensitively.
Hoof	Practical, realistic, the person who gets things done. Has both feet on the ground. Sometimes overly pragmatic and less open to dreams.
Tail	Relies on past experience and seeks security. Cautious about change and slower to adapt.
Eye	Looks ahead, notices opportunities and dangers. Warns of problems – sometimes even when they are not yet entirely real.
Wing	An inspiring, energetic, motivating force. Helps the team to develop and "rise up". Gives direction and momentum to the joint work.

While briefly presenting the roles, the trainer emphasises that no role is better or more important than another; each contributes to how the community works. Once all the roles have been presented, in the first round participants go and stand by the role they feel is most their own. A short sharing follows along these questions:

- Why did you choose this one?
- In what situations does this role appear in you?
- How does this role contribute to how the community works?

The trainer then gives a new instruction: participants should now move to a role they feel is less their own but which they would like to try out in a subsequent cooperation task.

This is a conscious commitment to stepping out of their comfort zone and connecting with the community in a new way.

At the close of the exercise – after a cooperation game – a short debrief takes place:

- Did you manage to try out the new role?
- What was difficult or unusual?
- What did you learn about yourself?

During the reflection it can be highlighted that a community can function really effectively when its members recognise their own role, respect others' roles and are able to adapt flexibly when necessary.

Variations

Participants can discuss in small groups which roles were strongly present in the group and which were missing.

Concrete competences can also be assigned to the roles (e.g. communication, empathy, decision-making, problem-solving), and these can be consciously linked to active citizenship skills.

The exercise can be used as preparation before a larger cooperation task, or as a debriefing tool at its close.

Risks and experiences

It is important to emphasise that the exercise is not about labelling but about raising awareness. Taking on roles should be voluntary, and no situation should arise in which someone gets stuck in a role that is uncomfortable for them.

Crossing the River

Duration: 30–45 minutes

Group size: 8–25 people

Materials needed: A spacious, obstacle-free area (preferably outdoors), A4 sheets of paper (one fewer than the number of people in the group)

Aim of the exercise

Team-building, raising awareness of the roles that appear in the group, joint strategy-making and developing cooperation. The exercise helps participants experience that a

shared goal can only be achieved through coordinated work, trust and taking responsibility.

Description

The facilitator marks out the two banks of the "river". The distance depends on the size of the group and the level of difficulty. Every member of the group – except one – receives a sheet of paper. The sheets serve as "stepping stones" for crossing the river.

The rules:

- You may not step on the ground; you may only step on the sheets of paper.
- If anyone touches the ground or falls, the whole group has to start the crossing again.
- If a sheet of paper is not touched by anyone, either by hand or foot, it is "lost" because the current carries it away.
- The number of sheets does not change, unless the group loses one.

The group has 10–15 minutes to work out a joint strategy. They can try out their ideas, but only outside the area marked as the river. Then the crossing begins: the group tries to reach the far bank by moving from sheet to sheet. The facilitator makes sure the rules are followed.

After a successful crossing, the facilitator can increase the distance between the two banks, announcing that "there has been a flood". As the number of sheets does not change, the group has to find a new, more creative solution.

Variations

- The difficulty can be increased by widening the river or reducing the number of sheets.
- A communication restriction can be introduced, reducing the possibility of verbal coordination.
- The group can be divided into two teams working on separate courses, who can then compare their solutions.

Risks and experiences

It is important to provide a safe space and to protect participants' physical safety. The facilitator must consistently make sure the rules are followed.

During the evaluation it is worth asking:

- How did you manage to make a joint decision?
- How much did you feel like a cooperating team?
- What roles developed during the process?
- What helped or hindered a successful crossing?

The exercise links well to raising awareness of roles and to the theme of active community participation.

What Connects Us Is...

Time limit: 5 minutes

Group size: 6–30 participants

Materials needed: a ball of brown string

Aim of the game: winding down, affirmation, finding and pointing out the things and values that connect the group

Description of the game: The aim of the game is for the ball of string to reach everyone, connecting everyone and raising awareness of the values we share. Let's sit in a circle. The first player winds a little string around their finger and then, completing the sentence "What connects us is...", passes the ball on to a partner of their choice, linking them with the string. Keep the string taut, but not too tight. The next player also winds a little string around their finger and then passes the ball on. This continues until the ball has reached everyone, forming a web between us. Then we take the string off our fingers and lay the web of string on the floor. We stand up on our chairs and look at the intricate web from there. Let's try to summarise the values that connect us all. We can write these on cards and put them up on the noticeboard as a reminder.

The Great Egg Drop

Duration: 45–60 minutes

Group size: 8–30 people (in small groups of 3–4)

Materials needed: Per group: 25 drinking straws, 1 roll of clear adhesive tape, 1 raw egg; optionally string, a plastic cup, a bag; a large tray or plastic sheet to protect the floor

Aim of the exercise

Participants experience first-hand the dynamics of cooperation, decision-making, rule-making and taking on roles. They become aware of how competences – communication, responsibility, problem-solving, initiative, trust – show up in a creative situation under pressure.

Description

Participants form small groups of 3–4. Every group receives the same set of materials. The task: within the given time (approx. 30 minutes), design and build a structure that protects the raw egg during a fall of 2.5–3 metres (which can be increased if necessary).

The trainer explains the rules:

- The groups may only work with the materials provided (the set of materials can be modified depending on the difficulty).
- When the time is up, a designated member of each group drops the egg.
- The egg must hit the ground; it may not be caught or held.
- A group is considered successful if its egg remains intact.

During the work, the trainer observes how the joint planning begins, how decisions are made, whether spontaneous roles emerge, how conflicts are handled, how far responsibility is shared, and how they react to time pressure.

When the time is up, the structures – together with the eggs – are dropped from a designated higher point. The testing is followed by joint observation and reflective debriefing.

Variations

- An observer can be appointed for each group to evaluate the process and give feedback.
- Roles can be assigned in advance (e.g. director, encourager, timekeeper, builder, person responsible for aesthetics), which are evaluated at the end of the exercise.
- The exercise can be made harder or easier by modifying the set of materials or changing the time available.

Risks and experiences

Success – whether the egg stays intact – is secondary. The emphasis is on the process: how the group works, how responsibility is shared, and how leader and follower roles appear.

In the reflective discussion we work along the following questions:

- How did the joint work start?
- Who took on what role during the process?
- How were decisions made?
- What helped or hindered cooperation?
- Which competences were key?
- How does all this show up in a school, volunteer or community project?

The exercise is particularly suitable for stepping out of the comfort zone, becoming aware of personal development goals, and strengthening active community engagement.

The Tragedy of the Commons

Duration: 90 minutes

Group size: 8–18 people (in small groups of up to 4)

Materials needed: Paper, pens, flipchart

Aim of the exercise

Participants experience the tension between cooperation and competition, the dilemmas of ethical decision-making, and the consequences of overusing shared resources. The exercise helps them recognise how short-term individual interests can clash with long-term community interests.

Description

The exercise is a simulation game that models a real-life situation. Participants form smaller groups of up to 4 people. Each group represents a "household", and the households live around a shared pasture.

Each household has two cows, but the shared pasture does not provide enough grass for all the cows. The game consists of 10 rounds. In each round the households must decide whether to send one or two cows to graze on the common pasture.

- If a household sends only one cow, it earns less income than if it sent two (assuming others also hold back).
- If everyone sends two cows, the pasture is overused, there is not enough grass, and everyone earns less income.
- If everyone sends only one cow, the common pasture remains sustainable and the group as a whole earns more income, but each household individually earns less than if one of them alone sent two cows.

The households do not know how many cows the others sent; they only see how much income they received in the given round. The trainer records the results on a flipchart, without showing the detailed decisions.

Every three rounds, one representative from each household can confer with the others for 2 minutes to develop a joint strategy.

After the 10th round, the group looks at the overall results together, and a reflective discussion follows.

Variations

- The game can be made harder by reducing the number of opportunities to communicate.
- A written agreement can be introduced, and compliance with it examined over the rounds.
- The game can be adapted to other resources (e.g. water, fishing, energy).

Risks and experiences

During the debrief we work along the following questions:

- Who tried to cooperate, and who chose individual advantage instead?
- Did you manage to develop a joint strategy?
- Were the agreements kept?
- How did it feel when someone broke the joint decision?
- How did individual decisions affect the community as a whole?

The discussion can be extended to how people use natural resources in real life and what consequences overuse can have (for example overfishing, extinction of species).

The exercise links well to the themes of sustainability, responsible citizenship and democratic cooperation.

Paper Snowball

Time limit: 15–20 minutes

Group size: 10–30 people (divided into two teams of equal size)

Materials needed: old newspapers, used flipchart or wrapping paper, a music player and upbeat music, safe objects found in the room (chairs, tables, cushions), optionally adhesive tape to mark the boundary, and a whistle or bell.

Aim of the exercise: experiencing a shared, liberating team experience, safely releasing accumulated individual and group tension and anger, playfully stirring up competitive spirit, developing cooperation and quick team strategy, and experiencing the joy of movement, laughter and play.

Description: At the start of the game, a spacious, safe area free of fragile objects is divided into two halves, and the boundary between the teams is marked. In the first phase, the teams have to scrunch as many snowballs (paper balls) as possible from the available paper while upbeat music plays in the background. An important rule is that the snowballs may be made only of paper; nothing hard or potentially injurious may be put inside them. When the music stops, snowball production ends, and the teams quickly build a barricade on their own half from the safe items in the room (chairs, mats, boxes). When the next upbeat track starts, the snowball fight begins: the aim is to throw as many paper balls as possible into the opponents' half from behind your own barricade. Players may only collect balls from their own half, may not cross the halfway line, and throwing at the face or head or from close range is strictly forbidden. When the trainer ends the game with a whistle or by stopping the music, everyone stops immediately, and the sides count together which half has fewer snowballs left – that team is the winner. The game leader must keep an eye on safety throughout; if the atmosphere becomes too aggressive or personal, the game must be stopped immediately and tempers calmed.

Reflection questions: How did you manage to release the accumulated energy and tension? What strategy did your team use for making the snowballs, building the fort and in the battle itself? How easy was it to stick to the safety rules in the heat of the battle, and how did you experience the shared, carefree play?

Variations: The game can be played over several rounds, with short team discussion time between rounds to refine tactics or modify the barricades. To make it harder, a rule can be introduced that participants may only use one hand to make the snowballs, which demands even more concentration and speed from the teams.

Communication and Active Participation

Chinese Puzzle

Duration: 60 minutes

Group size: 10–25 people

Materials needed: drawn and cut-out puzzle pieces

Aims: developing cooperation, problem-solving and communication within the group

Description: The puzzle pieces are distributed among the participants. They may not show them to each other or draw them in the air or on a surface, but they can share any information about them verbally. Each puzzle piece has 4 symbols along its sides. The task is to lay the pieces down so that next to every symbol there is the same symbol on another puzzle piece. Any amount of time can be taken for planning, but as soon as the first piece is placed on the table or floor, from then on nobody may speak or communicate with each other. A piece that has been placed may not be moved.

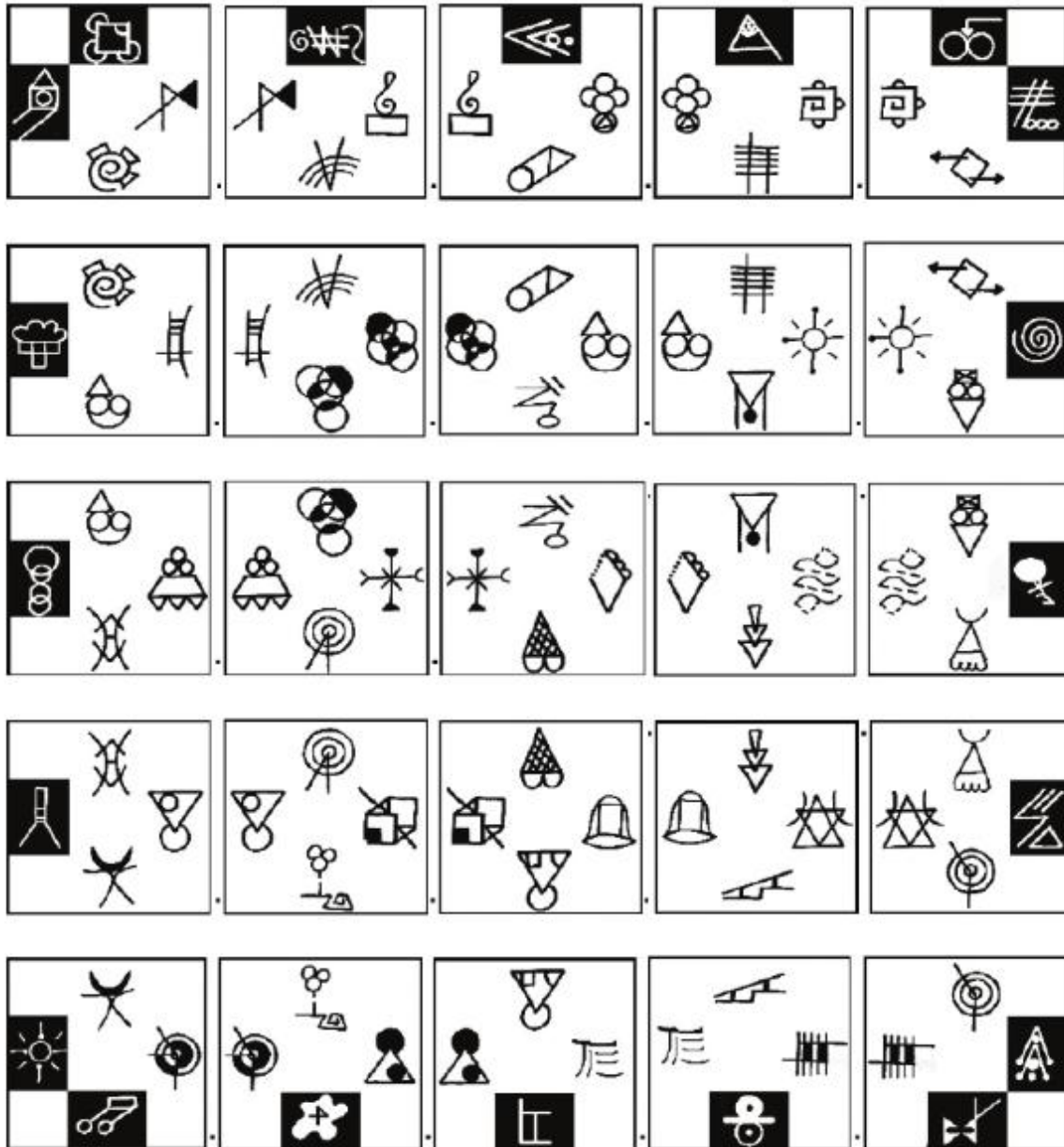
Some squares have coloured symbols; these will be on the edge of the final puzzle, but the group has to figure this out for themselves.

Notes and variations:

- We can make the task easier by telling them that it is a 5x5 puzzle.
- Each symbol appears at most twice in the puzzle, so each piece can go in only one place, because a symbol has exactly one pair – or, in the case of an edge symbol, none. However, this information does not have to be shared with the group; let them work it out themselves! If we want to make the task harder, we can modify the puzzle pieces so that some symbols appear in two pairs.
- If we play with exactly as many participants as there are puzzle pieces, the task can be for people to position themselves in space as the puzzle pieces would be, instead of laying the pieces down. In this case group members can talk throughout until

everyone has found their place, and at the very end they can show each other their pieces and check whether the solution is correct.

Puzzle pieces





[Chinese tiles YouTube video link](#)

Misinterpreted Messages

Time limit: 30 minutes

Group size: the whole class

Materials needed: none

Aim of the exercise: practising non-verbal communication and raising awareness of the consequences of unsuccessful communication.

Small groups of five or six are formed. Members are numbered from one to five or six, which indicates the order in which they perform. Participant no. 1 thinks of an everyday activity and mimes it (e.g. buttering bread). No. 2 tries to understand it and, without revealing what they think it was, continues the action through mime (e.g. spreads jam on the buttered bread and makes sandwiches). No. 3 continues miming (e.g. may pass the sandwiches around), and the following participants do the same. (Continuing the example, no. 4 eats the sandwiches and no. 5 washes the plates.) An important rule is that during the exercise nobody may speak to anyone else or comment on the situation through metacommunication.

When all the groups have finished the task, they discuss what player no. 1 wanted to convey and to what extent the others did or did not connect to it. After all the groups have played, we can also discuss together why the exercise might be called misinterpreted messages, how we encounter this problem in everyday life, and what can be done so that others interpret our messages as closely as possible to what we intend.

Variations: A volunteer mimes the opening activity in front of the whole group. Anyone in the group who thinks they have recognised it stands up and continues with the next

step. Whoever recognises that also stands up and continues the sequence of events. This continues until everyone has taken part.

Drawing Engineer

Time limit: 30 minutes

Group size: 8–24 people (an even number is needed)

Materials needed: Pre-printed simple drawings, blank sheets, coloured markers or pencils, clipboards (or a hard surface to lean on), chairs or cushions.

Aim of the exercise: Developing expressive skills, raising awareness of the importance of precise verbal communication, and understanding the other person's perspective.

Players form pairs and sit back to back so that they cannot see each other's work. The pairs spread out around the space. One member of each pair ("the drawer") receives a blank sheet and a marker. The other member ("the instructor") receives from the leader a drawing made up of simple shapes (lines, circles, simple faces). The instructor's task is to guide their partner using words only, and the drawer has to draw what they hear as precisely as possible. The drawer may ask questions, but turning towards each other is strictly forbidden.

There are 10 minutes to complete a drawing, after which the pairs compare the original picture with the copy. Then they swap roles with a new picture, for which participants again have 10 minutes.

At the end of the task the group discusses its experiences together along the following lines: What helped or hindered understanding? When does the precise meaning of words become critical in everyday life? How does not seeing the other person's reactions affect how a message gets across, and what can we achieve by phrasing things more consciously?

Variations: The task can be made harder by not allowing the drawer to ask questions (one-way communication), which places even greater responsibility on the instructor to phrase things precisely and to find a shared set of concepts.

Zin Obelisk

Duration: 45 minutes

Group size: 8–15 people

Materials needed: Information cards (each card carries one piece of information from the list below)

Aim of the exercise

Participants experience the importance of structured communication, information sharing, cooperation and joint problem-solving. The exercise develops active attention, argumentation and awareness of roles within the group.

Description

The information cards are distributed among the participants. Everyone may read only their own card. They may share the information on it with the others, but may not show the card to anyone else.

Task: In the ancient city of Atlantis, a rectangular obelisk named Zin was erected in honour of the goddess Tina. Construction took less than two weeks. The task is to determine on exactly which day of the week the structure was completed.

Participants work on the solution together, sharing the information with each other verbally. The trainer observes how information flows, how leadership emerges, how much each person contributes to the joint thinking, and how they organise the data.

Information cards (Each card should contain only one of the following pieces of information!)

In Atlantis the basic unit of time is the day:

An Atlantean day consists of schlibs and ponks.

The length of the Zin is 50 feet.

The height of the Zin is 100 feet.

The width of the Zin is 10 feet.

The Zin is built of stone blocks.

Each stone block is 1 cubic foot in size.

The first day of the Atlantean week is called Aquaday.

The second day of the Atlantean week is called Neptiminus.

The third day of the Atlantean week is called Sharkday.

The fourth day of the Atlantean week is called Mermaidday.

The fifth day of the Atlantean week is called Daydoldrum.

There are five days in an Atlantean week.

A working day consists of 9 schlibs.

Each worker rests for 16 ponks per working day.

A schlib consists of 8 ponks.

A worker lays 150 stone blocks per schlib.

During working hours, a shift of 9 people always works at a time.

One person in the group always has religious duties and therefore does not lay stone blocks.

People do not work on Daydoldrum.

A cubitt is a cube-shaped body, each side of which is 1 megalithic yard long.

1 metre = 1 megalithic yard

The Zin is made of green stone blocks.

The colour green has special religious significance on Mermaidday.

There are two women working in every shift.

Work begins on the first day of the Atlantean week.

Only one shift works on building the Zin. What is the Zin?

Which way does the Zin face?

What is a cubitt?

Do people work on Sundays?

During the debrief we work along the following questions:

- What helped and what hindered the group in solving the task?
- How did leadership emerge within the group?
- Who spoke the most, and who the least? Why?
- How could the group's performance be improved?
- How did you feel during the exercise?

Solution: **Neptiminus.**

Explanation:

- Given its dimensions, the Zin contains 1,500 cubic metres of material.
- The stone blocks are 30 cubic decimetres in size, so 50,000 of them are needed in total.
- People work for 7 schlibs a day.
- A worker can lay 150 stone blocks per schlib, so their output per day is 1,050.
- Eight people work each day, so together they can lay 8,400 stone blocks a day.
- The 50,000th stone block is therefore laid on the sixth working day.
- Since they do not work on Daydoldrum, the sixth day is Neptiminus.

Variations

- The group can appoint a note-taker to organise the information that is shared.
- A time limit can be introduced for each contribution so that everyone gets a chance to speak.

Risks and experiences

When working with disadvantaged young people, it is important to bear in mind that for many participants speaking in front of the group, or putting their thoughts into a structured form, may in itself be a challenge. As trainers, we need to make a conscious effort to ensure that they too get space and can contribute in a safe atmosphere.

With this target group, paying attention to each other and keeping to the principle of one person speaking at a time can often be difficult. If this hinders the joint work, the trainer can step in, give structure to the communication and help with structured information sharing.

Because of the complexity of the exercise, the task may drag on or cause participants excessive stress. In such cases it is worth simplifying the information cards or supporting their thinking with more structuring questions. It is important that the challenge is motivating but not overwhelming — always adjust the level of difficulty to the group's current level and its communication and cooperation skills.

Leila and Mohamed

Duration: 1 hour

Group size: 8–30 people

Materials needed: Paper, pens, board, the Leila and Mohamed story (original and revised versions)

Aim of the exercise

Practising argumentation in a playful setting, and experiencing how large a role our prior expectations, assumptions and prejudices play in the decisions we make. The exercise develops the ability to form informed opinions and to engage in structured debate.

Description

Tell the participants that we are going to tell them a story and that their task is to listen carefully.

Read out the original story below.

To make it easier to follow, the names in the story (Leila, Mohamed, Ali, Ahmed, Jafar) can be written on the board.

Then ask the audience to rank the characters individually according to how sympathetic they find them. Following the logic of school grades, the most sympathetic character should get 5 points and the least sympathetic 1 point.

Once everyone has finished, ask participants to form two groups and, within 10 minutes, to agree on a joint ranking based on their individual preferences.

The scoring method stays the same (5–1 points). Write the rankings produced by the two groups on the board. It is almost certain that there will be differences between the scores given to individual characters.

Then ask one representative from each group to try to convince each other of the validity of their own ranking and to agree on a joint final order. The spokespeople can present their arguments alternately in speeches of 1 minute each. From time to time they can consult their own group. If either group changes its opinion, make a note of it. Let the debate continue as long as there are new arguments.

Once the joint ranking is finished, tell participants that we have learned new information about the characters in the story. Then read out the revised version, and ask them to rank the characters again and compare the result with their previous ranking.

At the end of the exercise, sit in a circle and discuss:

- How did they feel during the debate?
- What difficulties did they have while arguing?

- Did their opinion change as a result of the new information?
- What does this exercise show us about forming informed opinions?

1. The original story

Leila, a young girl, is madly in love with Mohamed, who unfortunately lives on the far side of a crocodile-infested river. She would like to meet him, but she has no boat, so she asks Ahmed to take her across the river in his boat. Ahmed refuses her request, so she then asks Ali. Ali offers to take Leila across the river if she spends the night with him. Leila agrees to the deal, and the next day she meets Mohamed and tells him about her ordeal. Mohamed, however, rejects her advances and sends her home. Leila is very sad and sets off for home. On the way she meets Jafar and tells him what happened. Jafar then gives Mohamed a good beating.

2. The revised version

It turns out that Leila is a 16-year-old schoolgirl who is hopelessly in love with her teacher, Mohamed. Mohamed lives a happy family life with his wife and two children; he never loved Leila and never led her on. Ahmed is Mohamed's colleague and good friend. He does not want to play any role, positive or negative, in Leila and Mohamed's relationship, so he does not help Leila cross the river. Ali is Leila's grandfather; he tries to talk his granddaughter out of her plan, so he asks her to stay the night at his place in the hope that she will change her mind after sleeping on it. Jafar is a raving madman who is madly in love with Leila and beats up anyone who causes her pain.

Variations

- Before the debate, its basic rules can be set down (one person speaks at a time, we do not interrupt each other, we respond to arguments, we do not make it personal).
- The characters' names can be changed, but it is not advisable to use names with which participants may have strong cultural or personal associations.
- With a larger group, several smaller debate groups can be formed.

Risks and experiences

- In the heat of the game participants can easily forget the rules of debate, so it is worth reminding them several times.

- The exercise provides a good opportunity to discuss why it is important to be properly informed before a debate, and to examine the source and credibility of information.
- The task highlights how quickly we form judgements on the basis of incomplete information, and how our opinions are shaped as new perspectives emerge.
- When working with disadvantaged young people, it is particularly important to maintain a safe atmosphere and to handle emotional reactions, since the story can easily bring up personal experiences or strong moral positions.

Opinion Line

Duration: 30–40 minutes

Group size: 8–25 people

Materials needed: Open space, pre-formulated polarising statements

Aim of the exercise

The aim of the exercise is for participants to become aware of their own position on various social issues, to experience that differences of opinion are natural, and to practise making brief contributions backed up by arguments.

Description

The trainer marks two end points in the room. One represents "Strongly agree" and the other "Strongly disagree". An imaginary scale runs between the two points. The trainer reads out a statement. Participants indicate how much they agree with the statement by where they position themselves in the space.

Example statements:

- The state should regulate how and for what purposes young people can use social media.
- The most important consideration when choosing a career is that I do what I love.
- Wealth is one of the most important measures of success.
- Success depends mainly on hard work, not on educational qualifications.

Once everyone has taken their place, the trainer asks a few participants to briefly explain their position. Participants may change position as a result of the arguments they hear. Movement is a natural part of the learning process.

After working through 3–4 statements, a joint reflection follows:

- How did it feel to take a position?
- Was it easy to decide?
- Did anyone change their position? Why?
- How were you affected by other people's arguments?

Risks and experiences

- It is important to choose topics that are genuinely divisive but not offensive.
- When working with disadvantaged young people, special attention must be paid to making sure that speaking up happens within a safe framework. The trainer must actively safeguard respectful communication.

Structured Debate

Duration: 45–60 minutes

Group size: At least 6–8 people

Materials needed: 4 chairs in the middle of the room, a pre-selected polarising statement

Aim of the exercise

Participants practise argumentation and keeping to the rules of debate, and experience representing their opinion persuasively.

Description

The trainer chooses one of the statements discussed earlier. Four chairs are placed facing each other in the room: two chairs each for the representatives of the two opposing positions.

The trainer asks the participants standing at the two ends of the scale, who hold the strongest opinions, to form two teams of two and sit on the chairs.

The rules of the debate:

- One side argues for 1 minute without interruption, while the other side only listens.
- Then it is the other side's turn to argue for 1 minute without interruption.
- The sides alternate for 3–4 rounds.
- The trainer keeps time and makes sure they do not interrupt each other.
- The other participants initially sit in silence, listening to the arguments.

After the first two one-minute rounds, the audience stands up and lines up behind the team whose arguments were more convincing. Nobody may stay in the middle. This is a forced choice that gives the debaters immediate feedback.

In the following rounds, listeners may move to the other side during the debate in response to the arguments. The movement shows that an argument was persuasive – or off-putting.

After the debate, a joint debrief follows:

- What was harder: taking a position or defending it?
- Which arguments proved strong?
- What influenced the listeners' decisions?
- How does evaluating a person differ from evaluating an opinion?

Risks and experiences

- The debate can easily turn personal. The trainer must continuously safeguard the respectful framework.
- It is important to emphasise that the debate is not about "defeating" the other side, but about testing arguments against each other.
- When working with disadvantaged young people, it is particularly important to provide a safe space for speaking, to make the rules of debate clear and to give the debaters positive reinforcement.
- The exercise links well to the theme of active citizenship, since argumentation, speaking in public and forming opinions are basic democratic competences.

Taking Responsibility

Problem Map

Duration: 45–60 minutes

Group size: 8–25 people (in small groups of 3–5)

Materials needed: flipchart paper or wrapping paper, markers, post-it notes

Aim / expected outcome:

Participants jointly identify and organise the problems they perceive in their own immediate environment and at the wider social level. As a result of the discussion, a shared, visually presented problem map is created, which captures the group's joint thinking and serves as the basis for further solution-finding work.

Description:

The trainer introduces the exercise by pointing out that smaller and larger problems are present simultaneously in the world and in our immediate surroundings. One of the foundations of active citizenship is that we are able to recognise and articulate them.

Participants form small groups of 3–5. Each group receives a large sheet of paper, which they divide into several parts, for example:

- Their own everyday life
- School / local community / town or village
- National / global level

In 15–20 minutes, the groups collect the problems they see or experience at each level. It is important to emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers; any phenomenon they experience as a difficulty, an injustice or a lack can go on the map. Once the small groups have finished, each group briefly presents its problem map. During the presentations the trainer collects the recurring themes on a shared flipchart and creates the joint "big problem map". The trainer can indicate that in the next steps we will focus on possible solutions.

Variations:

- Problems can be collected on post-it notes, which the groups stick to the appropriate level.
- The groups can also freely choose which levels they work with.

- A separate time frame can be given for each level to make sure every area receives attention.

Risks and experiences:

Care must be taken that global problems do not become too abstract. If necessary, the trainer can support their thinking with helping questions: Where have you come across this problem? How does it affect you or your surroundings?

What Would They Do?

Time limit: 30 minutes

Group size: 8–20 people

Materials needed: none

Aim of the exercise: deepening self-awareness and empathy, clarifying team members' images of each other and their values, and community development.

Participants are divided into small groups of three or four. In each round, one member of one of the teams leaves the room. Before they leave, the game leader presents an unfinished story involving a moral dilemma or a decision (e.g. you find a full wallet with no owner in the street; or you come home and find your flat in total chaos). The player outside has to think about what they personally would do in this situation. Meanwhile, the teammates who remain inside discuss how, based on what they know, they think their teammate would decide or act.

When those inside have formed their opinion, the player who was sent out returns and tells them their own solution. The other teams (those whose turn it isn't) score (2, 1 or 0 points) how well the teammates guessed the player's answer – that is, how well they know them. The game continues with the next team until everyone has had a turn.

At the end of the exercise it is worth discussing the experiences together: What was most surprising in our teammate's answer? How closely did the image others have of us match reality? Why might we feel in certain situations that we know in advance how the other person will react? The discussion can highlight the diversity of decision-making situations and the importance of paying attention to one another.

Variations: The game can also be played without scoring, focusing purely on the self-awareness and empathy experience. With a larger group, several players (from different groups) can go out at the same time, speeding up the game.

Solution Workshop

Duration: 45–60 minutes

Group size: 8–25 people (in small groups of 3–5)

Materials needed: flipchart paper, markers, post-it notes, the results of the earlier problem map

Aim / expected outcome:

Participants choose a few of the problems identified earlier and formulate concrete, feasible ideas for solving them. Through the joint work, the group experiences that community problems can have realistic answers that can be implemented at the local level.

Description:

The exercise builds on the problem map created earlier. The trainer briefly recalls that we identified many kinds of problems at different levels. Now the focus is on possible solutions.

The group jointly selects 3–5 problems (by voting or consensus) that they would like to continue working on. These may be local or global problems, but it is important that they are relevant to the participants.

In 15–20 minutes, participants use brainstorming to collect ideas on:

- What could be done about this problem at the local level?
- What could a young person or a group of students do?
- What is already working well somewhere?
- What would be a first, small, realistic step?

The rules of brainstorming:

- Every idea goes on the list; no immediate criticism.
- The aim is as many ideas as possible, not perfection.
- In the first round, quantity comes before quality.

A plenary discussion follows, during which the trainer points out that a problem can have several answers and that not every solution requires large resources. Action often starts with small steps.

Variations:

- The ideas can be sorted into categories (quick to implement / longer term / individual level / community level)
- The groups can rotate and work on several problems.
- After the brainstorming, participants can score the ideas by feasibility and impact.

Risks and experiences:

- The group may propose solutions that are too general or unrealistic ("the whole world should change"). The trainer can make them more concrete with helping questions: Who could get this started? Where exactly would it happen? What would be the first step?
- It is also important that no premature criticism or belittling of each other's ideas develops during the idea generation. A safe, accepting atmosphere is particularly decisive here.
- The exercise achieves its aim if participants experience that problems are not only a source of frustration, but also an opportunity to take the initiative and take responsibility.

Project Ideas

Duration: 60–90 minutes

Group size: 8–25 people (in small groups of 3–5)

Materials needed: a project planning sheet (canvas template) per group, flipchart paper, markers

Aim / expected outcome:

In response to a problem of their choice, participants jointly formulate an imagined project idea and develop it in a structured form. As a result of the exercise, each group presents a well-thought-out initiative aimed at a concrete goal.

Description:

The exercise builds on the earlier problem map and solution workshop. The trainer briefly summarises that so far we have identified problems and collected possible solutions. Now the aim is to turn one of them into a concrete project.

Participants form small groups of 3–5. Each group chooses a problem or solution idea that they would like to continue working on.

The groups receive a simple project planning template (Project Canvas), which supports their thinking along the following questions:

- What problem does the project respond to?
- Who is affected? (Who is it for?)
- What is our goal? (What do we want to achieve?)
- What concrete activities are we planning?
- What do we need for it? (materials, people, venue)
- Who would take on what in carrying it out?
- What would be the first concrete step?

The groups have 30–45 minutes for planning. The trainer goes around, helps make ideas concrete with questions, and supports structured thinking. At the end of the work, each group presents its project idea in 5–7 minutes. The others can ask questions, give feedback and add to the idea.

In closing, the trainer points out that a project does not necessarily have to be large in scale – what matters is conscious planning and defining the first steps.

Variations:

- The groups can give each other supportive feedback on their projects (what its strengths are, what could be developed further).
- The ideas can be presented in a timed "project pitch" format (max. 3 minutes).
- At the end, the groups can vote on which project they would most like to launch.

Risks and experiences:

- For young people, project planning may seem too abstract or too "grown-up". In such cases it is important that the trainer supports their thinking with concrete examples and guides the group through the questions in small steps.
- It is important that the exercise does not become frustrating. The aim is not to produce a "perfect" project, but for participants to experience the process of conscious planning and shared responsibility.

Personal Commitments

Duration: 30–45 minutes

Group size: 8–25 people

Materials needed: paper, pens, optionally envelopes, markers

Aim / expected outcome:

Participants also formulate a concrete, realistic commitment at the individual level. As a result of the exercise, each participant says or writes down an action that they would like to carry out in their own environment and that contributes to the development of their community or wider surroundings.

Description:

The trainer briefly summarises the process so far: we have identified problems and looked for solutions. Now the question is: what can I personally do?

The trainer asks the question:

- What is one concrete thing I can do myself in the coming weeks?
- What small step can I realistically commit to?
- How can I strengthen my own community?

It is important to emphasise that the goal is not big, heroic commitments, but concrete, achievable steps. Participants work individually for 5–10 minutes and write down their own commitment. The commitment should be concrete and have a time frame.

Participants can then share their commitments in pairs or small groups.

At the close of the exercise, the trainer highlights that social responsibility is not an abstract concept, but a series of concrete, everyday decisions.

Variations:

- The commitments can also be put up on a shared "commitment wall".
- Participants can formulate a short "action sentence" to take away with them.
- We can return to the commitments on a later occasion, and participants can share their experiences.

Risks and experiences:

- The thought "what I do doesn't matter anyway" may often come up. It is important that the trainer reinforces that change often starts with small steps.

- Commitments may be too general ("I'll be a better person"). The trainer should help make them concrete so that the commitment is measurable and achievable.
- Care must also be taken that nobody feels external pressure or compulsion in formulating their commitment. The decision should be voluntary and fit the individual's current possibilities and life situation.
- The exercise achieves its aim if participants regard their decision as a personal commitment, and if by the end of the joint work the possibility of action has also taken shape in them on an individual level.

Trust and Self-Awareness

The Blind Leading the Blind

Time limit: 30–40 minutes

Group size: at least 10–15 people

Materials needed: dark scarves for blindfolds, slips of paper with arbitrary (non-consecutive) numbers on them.

Aim of the exercise: deepening trust, developing the ability to cooperate in non-verbal situations, and raising awareness of responsibility.

Before the game, prepare as many numbered slips as there are participants. The group chooses a leader from among themselves, then everyone draws a slip, memorises the number and tells nobody. Then every participant – including the leader – is securely blindfolded. The task is for the blindfolded leader to arrange the others in the room in ascending numerical order. There must be complete silence throughout the exercise; neither the leader nor the members may speak. Before starting the task, the group has 2 minutes to agree on a joint strategy.

When the game is over (when the leader judges that the line is complete), participants can take off their blindfolds and check the order. The process ends with a joint discussion: How did it feel to be completely at others' mercy? How could you communicate without speech or sight? What did responsibility mean for the leader, and what did trusting the leader mean for the members? It is also worth discussing what lessons can be drawn about how successful the strategy-making was.

Note: We recommend the exercise only for groups whose members already know each other well, since physical contact and loss of control require a high degree of trust.

Variations: The task can also be done without an appointed leader; in this case the group has to find a way of forming the line organically and together, in complete silence.

Blind Triangle

Time limit: 20–30 minutes (or until the task is completed)

Group size: at least 8–20 people (can also be played in several smaller groups)

Materials needed: a long rope that reaches all the way round, scarves for blindfolds.

Aim of the exercise: developing trust, improving complex problem-solving skills and increasing the effectiveness of cooperation in uncertain situations.

Group members are blindfolded, and then a rope is placed in their hands so that everyone is holding it. The task is to form a regular, equilateral triangle with the rope. An important rule is that nobody may let go of the rope, and participants may not swap places with each other. There is no opportunity for strategy-making before starting: participants receive the rules and the task when they are already blindfolded.

Since "blindness" and the lack of verbal coordination can cause high tension and uncertainty, the game leader must make it clear that anyone can step out of the role if they become too frustrated. The aim is to achieve shared success while preserving one another's physical and emotional well-being.

At the end of the exercise the group takes off the blindfolds, faces the result, and then analyses the process together: How did leadership emerge within the group? What strategies did they start with without sight? What are they proud of in the solution, and what was the hardest point in communication?

Note: This is a higher-level exercise that requires close attention to one another. It is recommended primarily for communities in which a basic level of trust has already developed between members.

Variations:

- **Several shapes:** Different small groups have to form different polygons (e.g. a square, a pentagon).

- **Time frame and "bargain":** The game is played against the clock, but extra time can be requested from the game leader in exchange for some "sacrifice" (e.g. in exchange for 5 extra minutes, one member takes a vow of silence until the end of the game).

Hand Mirroring

Time limit: 10–15 minutes

Group size: 8–24 people (an even number is needed)

Materials needed: skewers or thin twigs, a music player.

Aim of the exercise: developing attunement to one another, concentration and non-verbal cooperation.

Participants form pairs and stand facing each other. In the first part of the exercise, the pairs hold their hands up, palms facing their partner's. At the leader's signal, one partner starts moving their hands in the plane of the palm (in any direction), and the other follows the movements like a mirror, without touching. After 2–3 minutes they swap roles.

In the second part, the pairs hold two skewers (or twigs) between them, supporting them only with the tips of their facing index fingers. Again one partner leads, and the other has to follow their movements so that the sticks do not fall. If a stick falls, the pair can pick it up and carry on without stopping. The game leader can regulate the dynamics of the movement through the tempo of the music, and can instruct the pairs to interact with others (for example, by ducking under each other's sticks).

The exercise ends with a joint discussion: What was needed to keep the sticks up? How did attention change when roles were swapped? What was harder: leading the movement or following it? The discussion can highlight the importance of continuous feedback and paying attention to one another in joint work.

Variations: The task can be made harder if the pairs also have to walk around the space holding the sticks, or if, at the group leader's request, partners try to hand over control to each other along the way without saying a word.

Bouncing Info

Time limit: 5–10 minutes

Group size: at least 10 people

Materials needed: a ball that bounces well.

Aim of the exercise: getting to know each other better, developing knowledge of others and self-awareness, and practising quick decision-making and concentration.

The group forms a circle, and a volunteer stands in the middle with the ball. The player in the middle unexpectedly throws the ball to someone in the circle. Whoever catches the ball has at most 5 seconds to share a piece of information or a fact about themselves (one that has not been mentioned before). Once they have done so, the player throws the ball back to the person in the middle, who immediately passes it on to the next participant.

If someone runs out of time and cannot say anything about themselves within 5 seconds, they swap places with the person in the middle and become the new thrower.

At the end of the game it is worth reflecting for a few minutes: How did the unexpected situation and the time pressure affect you? What was harder: catching the ball or suddenly coming up with a relevant piece of information? What new, previously unknown things did we learn about each other?

Variations: The game can also be given a theme (e.g. only favourite foods, hobbies or future plans may be mentioned). To make it harder, a rule can be introduced that the ball may only be caught after it has bounced, which requires even more concentration.

Life Path – Rope Path

Duration: 20–30 minutes

Group size: 5–25 people

Materials needed: A long, thick rope, string, ties, scissors for setting up the rope, noise-making devices, rattles, musical instruments, a spraying device/water pistol, something to provide a scent stimulus (a mild essential oil spray, a lavender pillow, coffee beans ready in a bowl, etc.), small biscuits, blindfolds.

Aim of the exercise: to model symbolically the external influences, obstacles and things to hold on to, the "noise", and the supportive and distracting messages we may encounter on our life path, followed by a conversation with participants in which they can reflect on their own ways of functioning and motivations.

Description: The aim of the session is to live through a life-path walk in a symbolic sense, during which the students can experience some experiences and influences, decision situations and dilemmas that symbolically represent the events on our life path.

Because it takes place blindfolded, the game is also a kind of trust game and a test – blindfolded, deprived of the information that comes through sight, blindly entrusting ourselves to a single guiding thread, the rope, which an external leader places in our hands, and walking the path marked out by the rope. In terms of self-awareness, this session touches on values such as trust and self-confidence, courage, risk-taking, purposefulness and a sense of adventure. The aim of the experiences lived through during the game is to make it possible to talk with the students about the topics listed above in the debriefing conversation, and for them to reflect, through their own experiences, on situations they live through in real life – for example, how aware they are of the guiding thread of their life, what paths lie ahead of them and which of these is the path of taking risks and which the path of avoiding risks, where their inner voice leads and where external expectations lead, etc.

The students coming to the session gather at a meeting point at set intervals, from where the session leader accompanies them to the starting point of the rope course prepared outdoors. Here, in a short introduction, the leader explains to the students what is going to happen (it is important to mention the blindfold, that they will be given a rope to hold which will guide them along their path, that they must not let go of this rope under any circumstances, and that at the end of the course they will receive a clear signal that they have reached the end. If they meet someone, it is their own decision whether to overtake or wait. The rope course is safe, and the leaders of the game will make sure that nobody gets physically hurt). After this, we blindfold the students with the scarves provided and start them off on the rope course one at a time. At this point it is worth reminding them once again not to let go of the rope, and wishing them a good journey in a warm, encouraging way. As the students walk the rope course, volunteers assigned to this task give them various stimuli: these may be positive gestures, touches, noises and rustling, and there may also be voices trying to lure them off the path ("Come this way, not that way!", etc.). As stimulus-givers we can also obstruct the students' progress, but in this case it is important to make sure that the progress of the young person walking the rope course is not made completely impossible. When a group member has completed the route, a person waiting at the end signals to them that they have reached the goal and can take off the blindfold. Once every student in the given group has walked the path, we settle down in a space suitable for conversation, and a sharing circle led by the session leader follows. The point of this is for the students to reflect on their experiences on the rope course and, if they can, to connect these experiences with their everyday lives (e.g.

how did you react to unexpected obstacles during the walk, and how does this reflect your reactions to unexpected situations in real life?).

Variations: If there is no suitable outdoor venue for the session, the game can be replaced with the exercise called "Obstacle or Handhold".

Risks and experiences: There may be students who, for whatever reason, cannot cope with being blindfolded – this must be checked at the start. When preparing the volunteers who give the stimuli, it is important to tell them to try to give everyone stimuli of the same type and intensity (it often happens that more time is spent on someone as they pass through, so they receive harsher stimuli; let us aim for balanced attention). One stimulus-giver can give several kinds of stimuli at different points along the course, and everyone should choose from the available tools according to their own temperament. For setting the difficulty of the rope course, it is very useful if, after setting it up, there is time for the helpers to walk it themselves before the students arrive, so that they too are aware of what those walking the path experience.



[Rope course YouTube video](#)

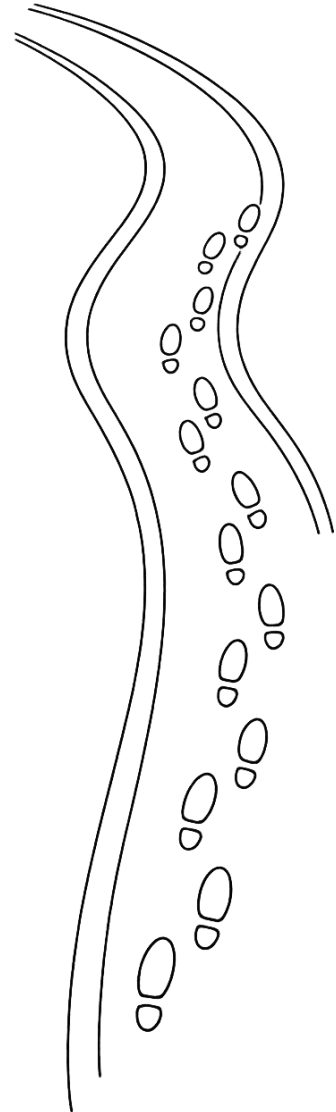
Rope course debriefing worksheet

What happened to you along the way? If you like, note down the important moments!

What did the moments you captured symbolise for you? Whom and what did you meet in a symbolic sense?

What does what happened along the way show about how you walk the path of your life every day?

If you could start again now, how would you walk this path?

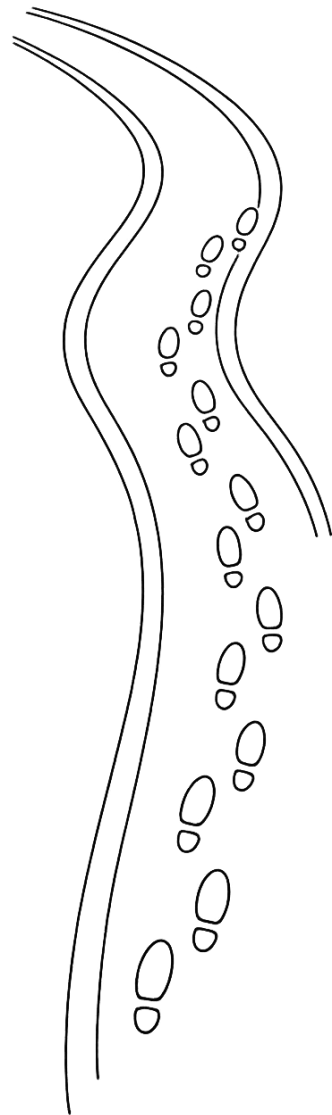


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[High ropes YouTube video](#)