

BODY FOR EMPOWERMENT OF YOUTH

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Erasmus+ Project

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Contents

INTRODUCTION 6
PROJECT PARTNERS 7
WHY WE CREATED THIS PROJECT? 8
HOW TO USE THIS MANUAL? 9

BODY BASED EXPERIENTAL LEARNING AND EMPOWERMENT IN YOUTHWORK 10

UNITY OF BODY, EMOTIONS AND MIND 11
EXPERIENTAL LEARNING AS AN EMPOWERMENT PROCESS 12
CONDITIONS FOR MEANINGFUL EXPERIENTAL LEARNING 14
INTEGRATION: FROM EXPERIENCE TO DAILY LIFE 16

EXERCISES 17

REFERENCES 22

BODY AWARENESS AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION 23

EMOTIONS AS EMBODIED PROCESES 24
- EMOTIONS AND THE BRAIN 24
- BASIC AND COMPLEX EMOTIONS 25
- EMOTIONS – HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WE FEEL? 26
- Wheel Of Emotions 27

WHEN THE CONNECTION IS DISRUPTED 28
- THE NERVOUS SYSTEM, SAFETY AND EMOTIONALEXPERIENCE 28
- The Window Of Tolerance 29
- REGULATION AS RETURNING TO THE WINDOW 29

THE BODY AS A PATHWAY FOR REGULATION 31
- BODY AWARENESS AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION 31
- TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP APPROACHES 32
- REGULATION OF EMOTIONS THROUGH THE BODY (SOMATIC PRACTICES) 33

THE BODY AS A RESOURCE FOR EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION 34

EXERCISES 35

REFERENCES 40

WORKING WITH THE BODY IN A GROUP 41

BENEFITS OF BODY-BASED GROUP WORK 42
RELATIONAL GROUND OF GROUP WORK 43
SENSE OF BELONGING / THE NEED TO BELONG 43
ATTACHMENT THEORY IN GROUP CONTEXT 44
CO-REGULATION AND THE NERVOUS SYSTEM IN GROUPS 45

EXPLORING RELATIONSHIPS AND INTERACTION THROUGH THE BODY 47

EXERCISES 48

REFERENCES 52

IMPROVISATION, CREATIVITY AND PLAY IN BODY-BASED YOUTH WORK 53

CREATIVITY, IMPROVISATION AND PLAY 54
INTRODUCTION 54
CREATIVE PROCESS AS INNER DIALOG 55
SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION AND MEANING-MAKING 55

CREATIVE PROCESS - Imaginaition, interaction, reflection and integration 56
IMAGINATION 56
ACTION AND INTERACTION 57
REFLECTION, INTEGRATION AND TRANSFER 59

EXERCISES 60

REFERENCES 64

DIALOGUE AND EMPOWERMENT 65

DIALOGUE 66
PRAXIS 66
THE BODY AS THE MEDIUM OD DIALOGUE 67
SENSIBILIZATION AND DEMECHANIZATION 68
EMPOWERMENT IS COLLECTIVE 69

EXERCISES 70

REFERENCES 72

SAFETY AND ETHICS 73

UNDERSTANDING SAFETY IN GROUP WORK 74
BODY, MEMORY AND TRAUMA (TRAUMA-INFORMED PERSPECTIVE) 75
THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR AND WORKING WITHIN A SAFE SCOPE 76
SAFETY AS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY IN GROUP WORK 77
GROUP AGREEMENTS FOR ENSURING SAFETY (FACILITATOR GUIDELINES) 78

FINAL THOUGHTS 79

ADDITIONAL BODY BASED PRACTICES AND EXERCISES 80

INTRODUCTION

Body for Empowerment of Youth was a transnational Erasmus+ project developed to strengthen the capacities of youth workers to support young people through body-based and experiential approaches.

It was implemented by Društvo Nega Zemlje in Duha (Slovenia) as the lead organisation in cooperation with Amazonas Association (Croatia) as a partner. It was funded through the Erasmus+ Programme (KA210-YOU – Small-scale partnerships in youth) under the 2024 call, project number KA210-YOU-BE147BB9.

The project had several interconnected objectives. The first was ***to strengthen the capacities of both partner organisations in the holistic empowerment of young people with fewer opportunities. The second was to increase their ability to implement inclusive youth work practices in their local communities.*** A key objective was also to develop a clear and accessible theoretical framework that supports the use of body-based and experiential approaches in youth work, particularly in the areas of mental health, social inclusion and personal development. In addition, the project aimed to make these approaches more understandable, structured and usable for youth workers, including those without a strong theoretical background.

The project consisted of two main components. The first focused on the exchange of knowledge, practices and methods between the partner organisations. Through trainings, study visits and shared learning processes, youth workers explored different approaches to working through the body, exchanged good practices and strengthened their competences for working with diverse groups of young people.
The second component focused on the development of this manual. Based on the exchanged knowledge, practical experiences and collective reflection, the partners created a structured resource that connects theoretical understanding with practical application. The intention was to develop a tool that is both professionally grounded and easy to use, supporting youth workers in integrating body-based methods into their everyday practice.

Through this project, we aim to contribute to the development of more holistic, inclusive and innovative approaches in youth work, and to support a wider recognition of the body as an important medium for learning, emotional regulation and empowerment of young people.

PROJECT PARTNERS

Društvo Nega Zemlje in Duha (Slovenia) is a non-governmental organisation working in the fields of holistic youth development, mental health and sustainable living. Its work combines experiential and social pedagogy with approaches rooted in creativity, nature, body awareness and personal development. The organisation implements educational programmes for youth workers, as well as activities for young people, including those facing social, emotional or economic challenges.

A strong focus of their work is on supporting the mental health and overall wellbeing of young people through holistic approaches that integrate emotional, social and physical dimensions of development. They organise trainings, workshops, youth exchanges, group volunteering and longer-term volunteer programmes that often include elements of experiential learning, theatre-based methods, somatic practices, nature and community work. Over the past years, they have developed educational activities aimed at strengthening youth workers' competences in supporting young people in crisis situations, building resilience and fostering inclusion.

https://nurturingearthspirit.wixsite.com/drustvo

Amazonas Association (Croatia) is a non-profit organisation based in Zagreb, focused on improving the quality of life of children, youth and adults through education, movement and community engagement. Their work is structured around social support, active youth participation and movement-based programmes.
Amazonas is particularly recognised for its work using capoeira, sport and movement as tools for developing social skills, emotional competences and inclusion of young people at risk. They implement psychosocial programmes in schools and social welfare institutions, working with children and youth facing social, economic and behavioural challenges, as well as those at risk of social exclusion.
In addition to direct work with young people, Amazonas also provides education and support to youth workers, teachers and professionals, helping them integrate body-based methods into their work. Through partnerships with schools, institutions and organisations, they actively contribute to the development of inclusive and community-based youth work practices.

https://amazonas.hr/

Together, the two organisations bring complementary knowledge and experience, combining different approaches to body-based work and creating a shared framework that is both practical and grounded in real-life practice.

WHY WE CREATED THIS PROJECT?

In our work with young people, we continuously encounter situations where words are not enough. Many experiences—especially those related to emotions, stress, identity and relationships—are first felt in the body. For many young people, particularly those facing challenges, expressing themselves verbally or reflecting abstractly can be difficult or inaccessible.

At the same time, we see a growing need to support young people in dealing with stress, emotional challenges and a sense of disconnection. In a world where much of communication and interaction is happening through screens, the connection to the body is often weakened, even though it plays a key role in healthy development.

Both partner organisations have long been working with body-based approaches in their practice—whether through movement, sport, somatic work, creative expression or experiential learning. Through this experience, we have seen how powerful these approaches can be in supporting emotional regulation, building resilience, strengthening self-awareness and creating meaningful connections between people.

However, we also recognised a gap. While many of these practices exist, they are often not structured, not clearly explained, or not easily accessible to youth workers who do not have a strong background in these methods. There is a lack of simple, yet grounded resources that connect practice with theory and make these approaches understandable and usable in everyday work.
This project was created as a response to that need. Our intention is to provide youth workers with a clear understanding of why working through the body matters, together with concrete tools they can use in their work. By doing so, we aim to support more holistic, inclusive and effective youth work practices that respond to the real needs of young people today.

HOW TO USE THIS MANUAL?

This manual is designed to support youth workers, educators and other professionals in understanding and applying body-based approaches in their work with young people.

It offers an explanation of the key benefits of working through the body and the role of embodied approaches in youth work and education. The aim is to provide a clear and accessible understanding of why these methods are valuable and how they contribute to the holistic development of young people.

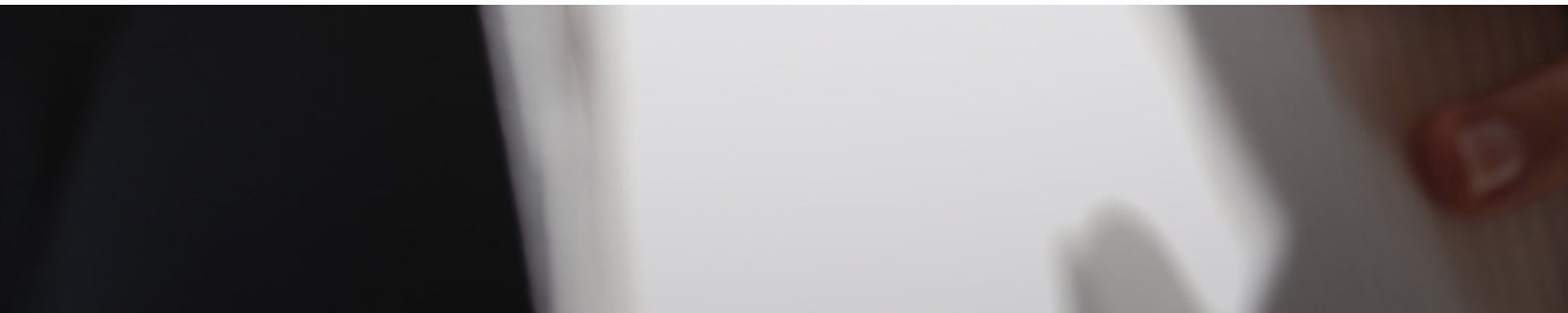
The manual presents a set of thematic areas, each containing practical activities that can be used in different contexts. The exercises are simple, adaptable and designed to be integrated into everyday work with groups, whether in youth work, classrooms or other educational settings.

In addition, the manual includes a resource section with links and references to further materials and practices. This allows users to deepen their knowledge, explore new approaches and expand their work beyond the activities included here.

The intention of this manual is not to prescribe a fixed way of working, but to offer guidance and inspiration. Users are encouraged to start with simple exercises, adapt them to the needs of their groups and gradually integrate body-based methods into their practice, in a way that feels safe, meaningful and appropriate to their context.



BODY BASED EXPERIENTAL LEARNING AND EMPOWERMENT IN YOUTHWORK



UNITY OF BODY, EMOTIONS AND MIND

Our understanding is based on a holistic understanding of the human being as an ***integrated unity of body, emotions, mind and relational existence.*** From this perspective, learning, development and change cannot be reduced to cognitive processes alone, but emerge through the dynamic interaction of embodied sensation, emotional experience, reflection, imagination and social interaction.

The body is not understood merely as a biological organism or a tool for expression, ***but as a primary site of experience and meaning-making.*** Through sensations, posture, movement, rhythm, breath and interaction, people continuously perceive themselves, others and the world around them. Emotions are likewise embodied processes that influence attention, motivation, memory, behavior and relationships. Thought and reflection arise in constant interaction with bodily and emotional experience.

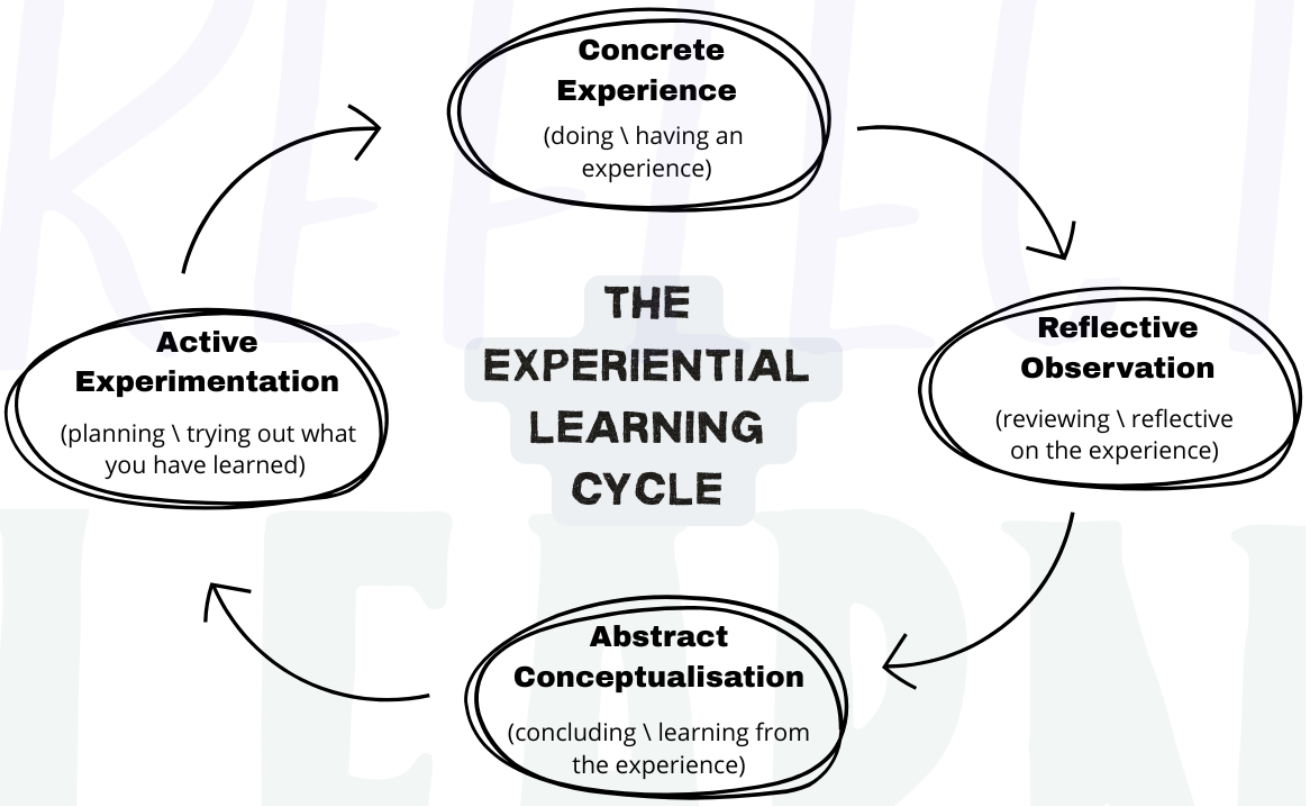
In youth work, this integration is especially important. Many young people today experience different forms of disconnection — from their bodies, emotions, relationships, or sense of agency. In a social context shaped by overstimulation, performance pressure, and increasing digitalization, embodied presence and direct experience often become weakened. Body-based experiential learning offers possibilities for restoring connection between body, emotions, reflection, and social interaction by engaging the whole person in the learning process.

The body can therefore be understood as a primary entry point into experience. Many emotional, relational, and identity-related processes are first sensed in the body before they can be verbalized or cognitively understood. Through movement, sensory awareness, interaction, creativity, and reflection, body-based approaches create opportunities for young people to explore themselves, experiment with new ways of being, and strengthen their capacity for self-awareness and participation.

EXPERIENTAL LEARNING AS AN EMPOWERMENT PROCESS

Experienial learning is grounded in the idea that meaningful learning happens through direct experience, followed by reflection, meaning-making, and application in everyday life. Rather than understanding learning as passive receiving of information, experiential approaches view learning as an active, relational, and embodied process in which individuals participate with their whole being.

David Kolb (1984) describes experiential learning as a cyclical process through which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. The learning cycle includes four interconnected phases:



1. ***Concrete experience -*** *engaging in an activity, trying something new.*
2. ***Reflective observation -*** *noticing what happened, what was felt, what was learned.*
3. ***Abstract conceptualization*** *-drawing conclusions, connecting the experience with ideas, theories, or personal meaning.*
4. ***Active experimentation*** *- applying these insights to new situations, testing out new behaviors.*

The process is not strictly linear; ***learning continuously moves between experience, reflection, understanding, and action.*** Meaningful learning occurs when all phases are present and connected.

Body-based and artistic methods deepen experiential learning because they involve not only cognition, but also bodily sensation, emotions, imagination, movement, and relationships. Experience becomes tangible, lived, and personally meaningful. Instead of receiving ready-made interpretations or solutions, participants actively explore, experience, and co-create meaning through interaction and reflection.

This is especially important in youth work. Many young people learn more deeply through concrete and sensory experience than through abstract explanations alone. Embodied and creative processes allow learning to emerge through participation, experimentation, and direct engagement with oneself, others, and the environment. Experiential learning is therefore closely connected to empowerment-oriented youth work.

This understanding is closely related to the concept of autopoiesis developed by Maturana and Varela (1998), who describe human beings as self-organizing systems that continuously shape and recreate themselves through interaction and experience. From this perspective, change and learning cannot simply be imposed externally. New understanding emerges when individuals encounter meaningful experiences that interact with their existing inner structures, perceptions, emotions, and ways of relating to the world.

Experiential learning supports this self-organizing process by creating opportunities for new experiences, interactions and perspectives that may gradually shift existing patterns and open possibilities for new understanding and action.

This forms an important foundation for empowerment-oriented youth work. Young people are understood as active participants in their own learning and development, capable of self-regulation, meaning-making and growth when appropriate relational and environmental conditions are present. The role of the youth worker is therefore not to control, “fix,” or impose solutions, but to co-create supportive conditions for exploration, participation, reflection and dialogue.

Empowerment develops through experiences that strengthen awareness, participation, self-trust, agency and the capacity to influence one’s own life.

CONDITIONS FOR MEANINGFUL EXPERIENTAL LEARNING

Meaningful experiential learning does not emerge automatically from activity alone. Certain inner attitudes and external conditions support the possibility for deeper experience, creativity, awareness, and transformation.

Fromm (1959) describes several qualities that support a creative orientation toward life and learning. One of these is the capacity to remain open, curious, and capable of wonder. In contemporary society, where speed, performance, and constant stimulation often dominate, many people gradually lose the ability to fully encounter the world with openness and sensitivity. Experiential learning invites participants to reawaken this openness and engage with experience more directly.

Another important condition is concentration and presence. Genuine experiential learning requires the ability to be engaged with what is happening here and now — to perceive, sense, and respond with attention.

Experiential and body-based approaches often use sensory awareness as a doorway into presence and learning. Attention to breath, movement, touch, posture, rhythm, sound, vision, or bodily sensation helps participants shift from automatic or purely cognitive functioning toward a more direct experience of the present moment.

Through sensory perception, individuals often become more aware of subtle emotional states, impulses, tensions, reactions, and relational dynamics that may otherwise remain outside conscious awareness. The body can therefore function as an important source of information, orientation, and self-understanding.

Such embodied attention also supports the capacity for what Bohm describes as "***true perception***" (in Shuller, 2008), — a way of perceiving that is open, immediate, and less shaped by habitual assumptions or automatic interpretations. In experiential processes, this openness may create conditions for new insights, spontaneous responses, and more authentic interaction with oneself, others, and the environment. Similarly, *states of flow* often emerge when attention becomes fully engaged in sensory, emotional, creative or embodied experience.

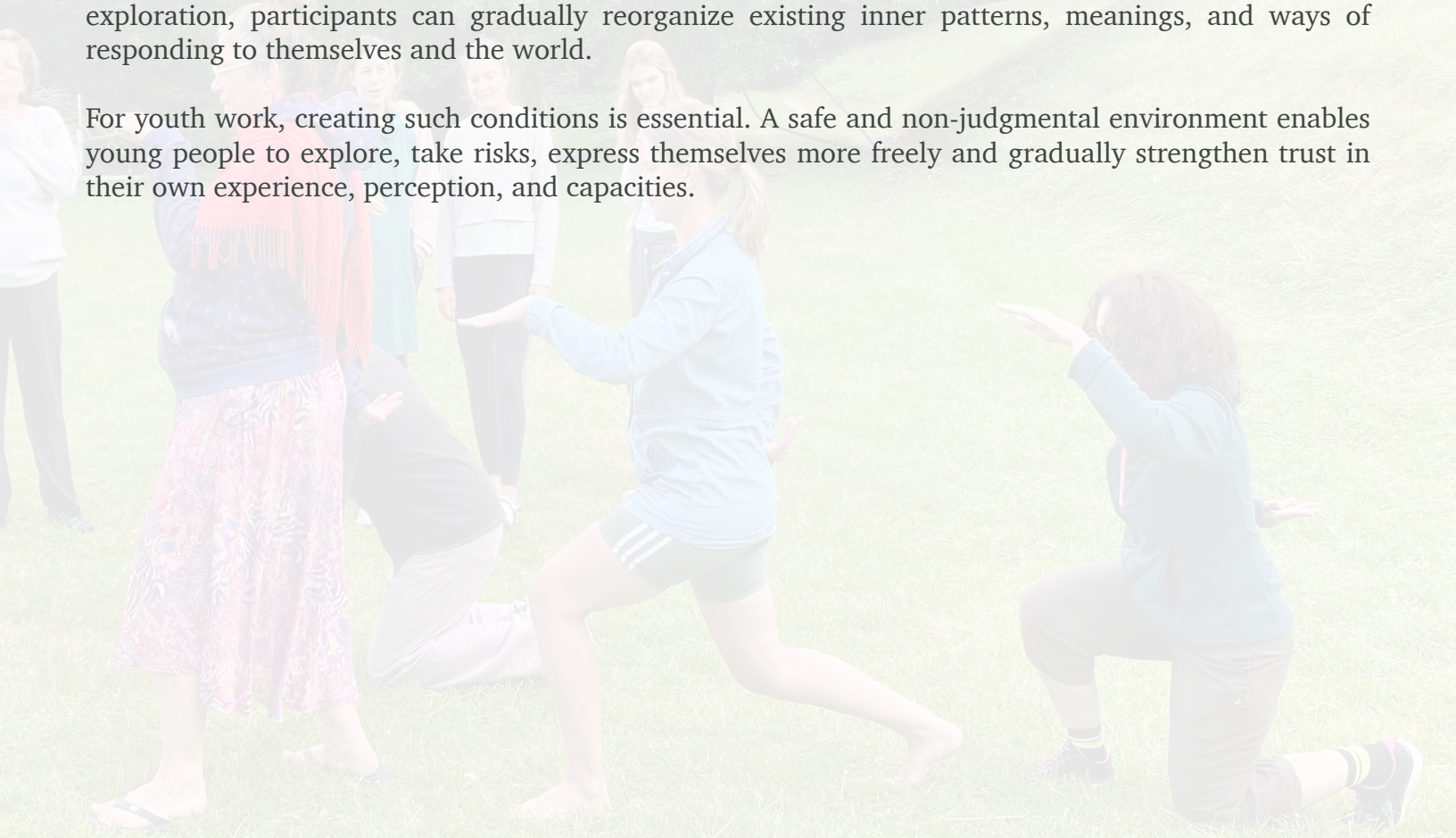
Movement, artistic creation, play, and focused interaction can temporarily quiet excessive self-monitoring and support a more integrated experience of action, awareness, and presence (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

Body-based and artistic methods naturally support these conditions. Through movement, sensory engagement, play, imagination, and creative exploration, participants often become more present, attentive, and connected to themselves and others. Artistic and embodied processes invite participants into a space of experimentation where there is no single correct response, allowing curiosity, spontaneity, and authentic expression to emerge.

The symbolic and imaginative space created through art, play, movement, and embodied interaction also offers a particular form of safety. Experiences within such processes are often deeply felt and meaningful, while at the same time existing within a temporary and ***exploratory "as-if" space***. This creates possibilities for experimenting with new behaviors, perspectives, emotions, and relational patterns without the immediate risks or consequences of everyday life.

Rosmalen (2009) describes this as a "double experience" — an experience that is real and emotionally alive, yet simultaneously separated from ordinary daily reality. Through such embodied and symbolic exploration, participants can gradually reorganize existing inner patterns, meanings, and ways of responding to themselves and the world.

For youth work, creating such conditions is essential. A safe and non-judgmental environment enables young people to explore, take risks, express themselves more freely and gradually strengthen trust in their own experience, perception, and capacities.



INTEGRATION: FROM EXPERIENCE TO DAILY LIFE

Experiential learning becomes meaningful and empowering ***when experience is connected to reflection and integration into everyday life.*** Reflection allows participants to articulate meaning, recognize patterns, become aware of emotions and reactions, and connect embodied experience to their personal and social reality.

Through reflection, bodily and emotional experiences are not left as isolated moments, but gradually become integrated into a broader understanding of oneself and one's relationship with the world. Reflection may happen verbally, through dialogue with others, internally through personal insight, or non-verbally through continued embodied awareness and creative expression.

Body-based and artistic processes are particularly valuable because they allow experiences to be explored symbolically and indirectly. Through movement, imagination, role-play, artistic expression, and interaction, participants can encounter situations, emotions, or relational dynamics in new ways. This may create opportunities for what systemic approaches ***describe as reframing*** — shifting the meaning or perspective through which a situation is understood (Šugman Bohinc, 2000).

In this sense, experiential learning is not focused only on acquiring knowledge or skills, but on opening possibilities for new ways of perceiving, responding and relating. Creative and embodied experiences can support the reorganization of previous experiences and patterns by allowing individuals to encounter themselves and their situations differently.

The final and essential step of experiential learning is transfer into everyday life. Learning becomes empowering when insights, experiences and embodied awareness gradually influence concrete choices, relationships, communication, and ways of acting beyond the workshop or activity itself.

From a youth work perspective, empowerment therefore develops as a gradual process of increased awareness, participation, self-trust, relational capacity and ability to act in one's own life.

The role of body-based experiential learning is not to provide ready-made answers, but to create meaningful experiences through which young people can actively explore themselves, their relationships, and their possibilities for action and change.

EXERCISES

The following exercises are examples of how body-based experiential learning can be applied in youth work practice. They combine bodily experience, interaction, reflection, and meaning-making.

DANGER AND SHIELD

Participants move freely in the space as a group.
Each person silently chooses two people from the group. One person represents their "shield" and one person represents their "danger" (the chosen people are only symbolic representations and should not be understood as personal choices or statements about the relationship with those people).

When the game begins, participants start moving through the space. The task is to stay as far away as possible from the "danger" while keeping the "shield" between themselves and the "danger" whenever possible.

After some time, the facilitator begins a countdown. At the end of the countdown, the "danger becomes bigger and bigger" and everyone freezes in place. After the exercise, the group reflects together.

POSSIBLE REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

How did you try to keep yourself safe?
Did you focus more on the "danger" or on the "shield"?
What was your strategy during the exercise?
Did you notice anything interesting in your own behaviour?
Did you notice any patterns or dynamics in the whole group?
What do "danger" and "shield" represent for you in your own life?
How does this relate to situations, relationships, fears, support systems, or challenges in everyday life?

This exercise can open reflection on themes such as attention, protection, stress, trust, avoidance, support, relationships, and group dynamics.

It is important to adapt the exercise to the group, context, and topic you are working with.

The facilitator may therefore change the metaphor, use different words, or simply ask participants to choose "Person A" and "Person B" and reflect on the meaning afterwards.

STICK DANCE - LEADER, FOLLOWER

Tool: one light, straight stick per pair (approx. 0.5–0.7 m)

The facilitator introduces the stick as a shared point of attention that supports movement and interaction. Participants begin individually by exploring the stick: balancing it on one finger and experimenting with small movements, noticing how the body adjusts to keep the stick stable.

Guiding - following: Participants then form pairs. Each pair holds one stick together, placing one finger each on opposite ends so the stick stays vertical (one person lower, one higher). The task is to keep the stick from falling.

The facilitator introduces leading and following. One participant begins as the leader, initiating movement, while the other follows, maintaining contact through the stick. Participants are encouraged to allow movement to come from the whole body — especially from the core/pelvis — rather than only from the finger.After some time, participants switch roles.

In the next phase, both participants are invited to lead and follow at the same time — listening and responding simultaneously, without fixed roles.
Gradually, the facilitator invites participants to expand their awareness beyond the stick and the partner to the wider environment — noticing the space, other pairs, and (if outside) elements of nature — while continuing the movement.

The focus remains on presence, sensing and responding without overthinking, allowing movement to emerge from the moment and from connection.

INVITATION TO THE REFLECTION:

How was the experience?
How did you feel when you were leading or following, or with no defined roles?
What felt easier?
What felt more challenging?
Do I notice any comparisons with my life?

EXPLORATION OF THE QUALITIES OF INVITING, DIRECTING, SUPPORT AND WITNESSING

We work in pairs and through the body, with different exercises of body action and experience, with a followed reflection on the exercise and transition to daily life - experiential model by Kolb. Approximately 3–5 minutes per person.

Exercise on Inviting
One person gives the other small physical impulses on the body, for example through touch, brushing, gentle pushing, or other forms of contact. The other person responds to the invitation or impulse in whatever way feels natural to them. There is no need to follow the impulse directly or "correctly". The focus is on listening to the invitation and noticing the authentic response that emerges in the body. After some time, partners switch roles.

Exercise on directing and support
One person is the mover, directing and initiating the movement they want to explore. The other person offers support, mainly through weight, grounding, physical contact, or other supportive forms of bodily interaction. The mover chooses how to use the support and how to move with it. The support person remains attentive and responsive, without taking over the direction of the movement. After some time, partners switch roles.

Exercise on witnessing
One person moves freely while the other witnesses from the side. The role of the witness is simply to be present, to hold space with empathy and attention, without judging, evaluating, analyzing, or interpreting the experience. The witness practices being present in an open, compassionate, and non-intrusive way.

SHARING AND REFLECTING IN PAIRS:

How did I experience the qualities of inviting, directing, supporting and witnessing in this exercise?
How can I relate the experience to my own life?
Where do I feel strong or comfortable and where is there potential for further growth?
How do these qualities relate to my youth work or mentoring practice?
How do I offer support through inviting, directing, supporting and witnessing?
Where do I notice potential for development?

THE CALL - HEROES JOURNEY EXPLORATION

Duration:
50 minutes total
10 min demonstration/introduction
20 min per participant in pairs

Setup: Participants work in pairs. Approx. 2 m distance in between.

Purpose:
This exercise explores the idea of an inner "call" through body movement and embodied awareness. Participants investigate both the part of themselves that moves toward the call and the part that resists it, allowing insight to emerge through movement, intuition and reflection.
The exercise supports experiential learning by engaging the body, emotions, imagination and non-verbal knowing.
One person is the active participant exploring the exercise, while the other acts as a witness and supportive guide. The witness may gently remind their partner of the next steps if needed, while otherwise remaining present and observant. Partners stand facing each other with approximately 2 meters of distance between them. After one round, participants switch roles.

Notes for the witness/support partner:
The role of the witness is to: hold presence, support the structure of the exercise, observe without judgment, allow the active participant's process to unfold naturally.

Exercise:
Stand comfortably in a neutral position (the witness, partner is opposite).
Take a moment to notice your body, breath, and presence.

Identify your Call at the moment.
Reflect on what is calling you in your life right now. This may be something concrete or abstract. For example: starting a project, writing a book, travelling, changing something in yourself, entering a new phase of life or nurturing what is already there.
Many things may arise — choose one that feels most alive or present at this moment.

Step Toward the Call, Explore the "Yes", Notice the part of you that says "yes" to this call.
Pause and notice:
* *How do you feel? What do you sense in your body?*
* *What emotions, images, or thoughts arise?*

Then return to a neutral position (step one step back)

Step Toward and Explore the "No"
Now notice the part of you that says "no" to this call.
* What does this part say?
* How does it feel in the body?
* What fears, doubts, or protective impulses might be present?

Return again to a neutral position (step one step back)

Embody the "Yes"
Step forward and allow a movement to emerge that expresses the "yes" voice. Repeat the movement several times. Gradually amplify and exaggerate it.: make it clearer, larger, more expressive. Allow the movement to fully develop in time. Then return to neutral (step one step back)

Embody the "No"
Step forward again and allow a movement to emerge that expresses the "no" voice. Repeat the movement several times. Gradually amplify and exaggerate it. make it clearer, larger, more expressive. Allow the movement to fully develop in time. Then return to neutral (step one step back)

Integration
Now, step forward and move fluidly and intuitively between both movements. Make one and the other and see if there is any transition, whether a new movement, gesture or understanding emerges. You might notice the relationship between the two. Moments of tension or harmony, whether one transforms the other, see if there is any integration.
Allow the body to guide the process without forcing meaning or resolution.

POSSIBLE REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

How did you feel in the different positions and movements?
What did you notice in your body?
Did anything surprise you?
What did you learn about your relationship to your call?
Was there any sense of integration or new understanding?

If desired, the witness may share observations.
Encourage observations to remain as neutral and descriptive as possible, avoiding interpretation or projection. For example: "I noticed your movements became more grounded.", "Your breathing changed during the second movement." Rather than interpretations or labels: "I think you are afraid of success."

Notes for facilitators:
Frame the exercise as an exploration rather than a search for the "correct" answer. Encourage curiosity rather than performance.

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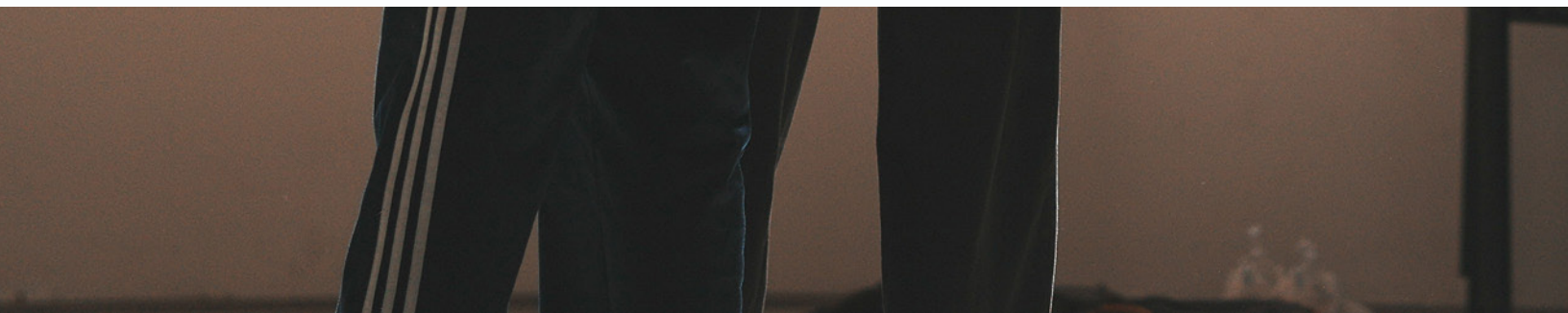
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BODY AWARENESS AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION



EMOTIONS AS EMBODIED PROCESES

EMOTIONS AND THE BRAIN

Emotions are natural and automatic responses that involve both the brain and the body. They help us respond to situations, make decisions and build relationships with others. ***Rather than being "just in the mind", emotions are whole-body experiences.***

When something happens, the brain quickly evaluates whether it is safe, dangerous, pleasant, or uncomfortable. At the same time, the body responds through changes in breathing,heart rate, muscle tension, and posture.

Research in neuroscience shows that emotions are closely linked to bodily states, and that our awareness of these bodily changes plays a key role in how we understand what we feel. Often, the body reacts before we are able to consciously name the emotion.

For children and young people, this is especially important. They may not yet have the language to describe their emotions, but they can feel them in their body. Supporting them in recognising these signals helps build emotional awareness and self-understanding.

Developing this connection between brain, body, and emotions creates a foundation for emotional regulation, learning, and social interaction.

BASIC AND COMPLEX EMOTIONS

Emotions can be understood as simple or more complex.

Basic emotions are universal and biologically based. They include emotions such as ***joy, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust.*** These emotions are typically easier to recognise and are expressed in similar ways across cultures.

Complex emotions develop over time and are influenced by social and cultural context. These include emotions such as shame, guilt, pride, and jealousy. They often involve thoughts about ourselves and others and are shaped by relationships and experience.

For example:

** anger can signal that something feels unfair*
** sadness can signal loss or a need for connection*
** fear can signal potential danger*

Helping young people understand that emotions are not "positive" or "negative," ***but can be experienced as pleasant or unpleasant supports emotional acceptance.*** Regardless of how they feel, all emotions serve a purpose and provide useful information for us.

As we gradually learn to stay present with uncomfortable emotions, instead of pushing them away, the body begins to recognise that these experiences are not dangerous, but manageable. Over time, this builds resilience and a deeper sense of internal safety, allowing emotional responses to move through us rather than becoming overwhelming or suppressed. In this way, we do not need to shut emotions down — we can feel them, process them, and trust in our capacity to cope.

In work with children and young people, this is especially important, as it supports the development of resilience and helps them build confidence in their ability to face and manage emotional experiences.

EMOTIONS – HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WE FEEL?

We often recognise emotions through sensations in the body. Before we can name an emotion, we might *notice physical signals such as tension in the chest, a knot in the stomach, warmth, heaviness, or restlessness.* These bodily sensations are not separate from emotions — they are an essential part of how emotions are experienced.

The ability to notice and interpret these internal signals is called ***INTEROCEPTION.*** It plays a central role in emotional awareness and self-regulation. Through interoception, we begin to connect what is happening in the body with what we feel emotionally.

For many children and young people, this connection is not yet fully developed. They may experience strong internal sensations without understanding what they mean, which can lead to confusion or behavioural reactions. Supporting young people in developing body awareness involves ***helping them slow down and notice their internal experience.***

This includes recognising:

- where they feel something in the body
- what kind of sensation it is (tight, warm, heavy, light, restless)
- how strong it is
- how it changes over time

Simple reflective questions can support this process:

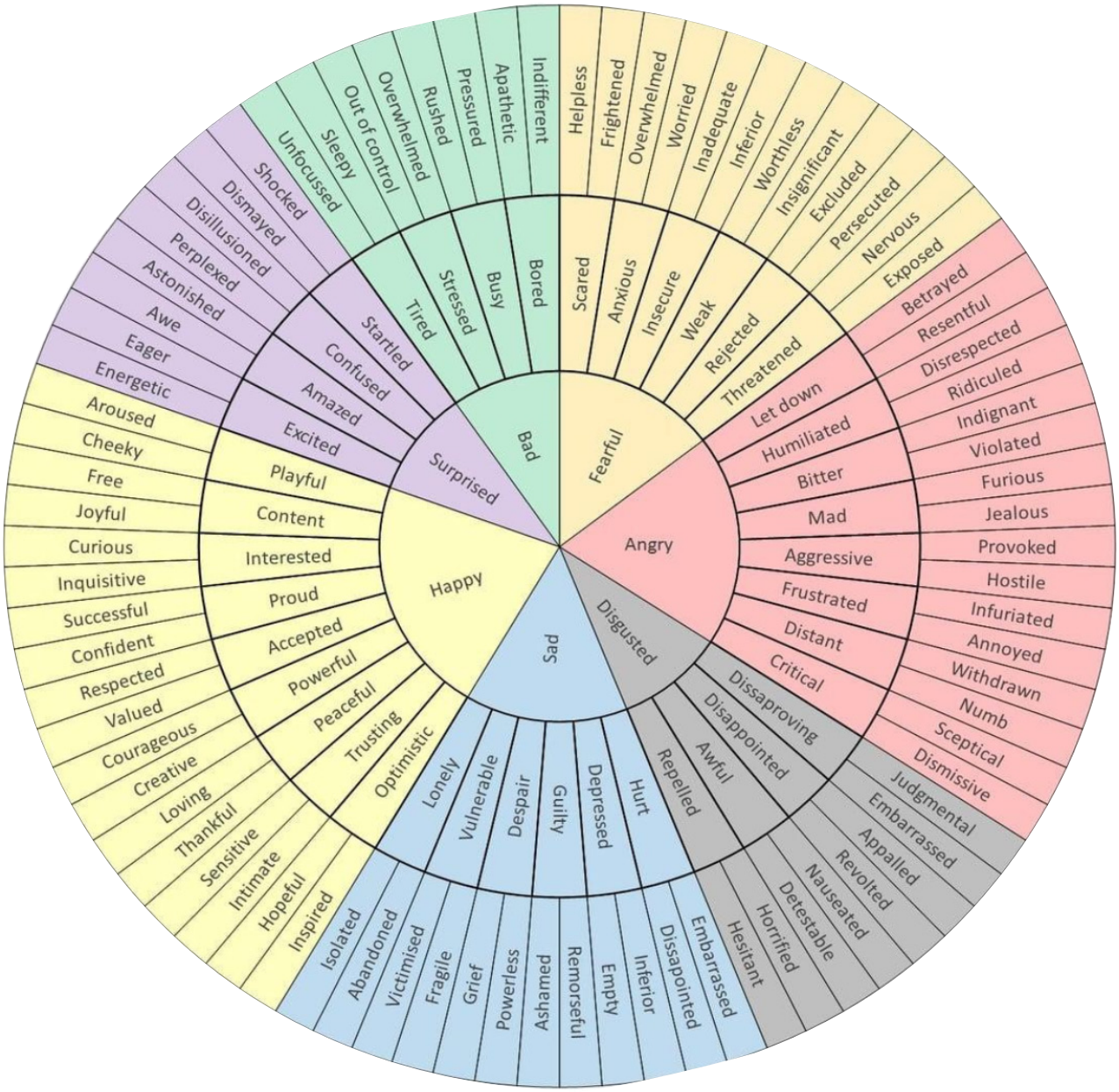
- *Where do you feel this in your body?*
- *What does it feel like?*
- *Does it change when you pay attention to it?*

It is also important to recognise that each person experiences emotions differently. There is no single "correct" way to feel an emotion in the body. Some people may feel emotions more strongly in their chest, others in their stomach, head, or muscles.

Developing a richer awareness and vocabulary for bodily sensations helps young people describe their internal experiences more precisely. Over time, this strengthens the connection between bodily sensations and emotional understanding.

This process is a key foundation for emotional awareness and regulation. By learning to notice and stay with bodily sensations, young people develop the capacity to recognise, name, and gradually regulate their emotional experiences, rather than being overwhelmed by them.

WHEEL OF EMOTIONS



WHEN THE CONNECTION IS DISRUPTED

THE NERVOUS SYSTEM, SAFETY AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

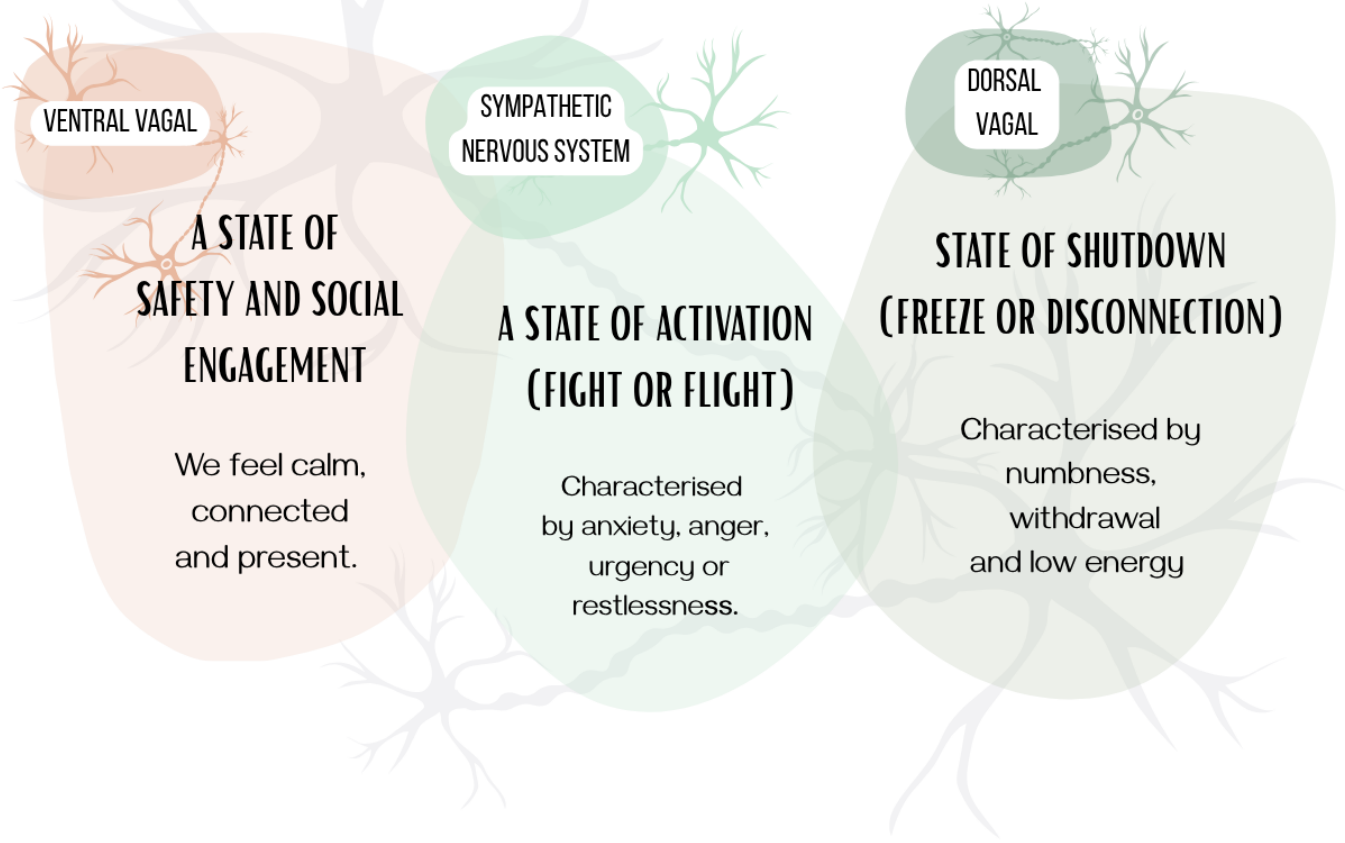
To understand emotional regulation, it is essential to begin with the nervous system and the experience of safety.

Emotions are not only psychological experiences — they are deeply rooted in the body's physiological state. At all times the nervous system is continuously scanning the environment for cues of safety or danger. This process happens automatically and often outside of conscious awareness.

When the body perceives safety, the nervous system supports a state of calm and connection. Breathing is steady, muscles are relaxed and attention is flexible. In this state, we are able to think clearly, relate to others and experience emotions without being overwhelmed.

When the body perceives threat, however, the nervous system shifts into survival responses. These responses are not voluntary — ***they are automatic protective mechanisms designed to ensure safety.***

A useful framework for understanding these shifts comes from the polyvagal perspective, which describes three broad states of the nervous system:



THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

The concept of the window of tolerance, introduced by dr. Dan Siegel helps explain how these nervous system states relate to our ability to function and regulate emotions. It refers to the range of arousal in which a person can function effectively in everyday situations.

When we are inside this window, we can:

- *feel emotions without being overwhelmed*
- *think clearly and reflect on our experience*
- *stay connected to ourselves and others*
- *respond to situations with awareness and choice, rather than react automatically*

However, emotional intensity does not remain constant. When it becomes too high or too low, we move outside the window.

Above the window, the nervous system becomes ***hyperactivated.*** This may be experienced as anxiety, anger, agitation, or a sense of being overwhelmed. The body is mobilised for action, and it becomes difficult to think clearly or stay present.

Below the window, the nervous system shifts into ***hypoactivation.*** This may be experienced as numbness, disconnection, low energy, or withdrawal. The body reduces activity as a way of protecting itself from overload.

Both of these states are natural survival responses. The difficulty arises when a person spends too much time outside the window, or moves in and out of it very quickly, without the ability to return to a regulated state.

REGULATION AS RETURNING TO THE WINDOW

From this perspective, emotional regulation is not about controlling or suppressing emotions. It is about the ability to remain within the window of tolerance, or to return to it when we move outside.

Throughout daily life, it is natural to move in and out of different states. We may feel activated in moments of stress, or withdrawn when overwhelmed. The goal is not to avoid these states, but to ***develop the capacity to return to balance.***

Regulation, therefore, means:

- *recognising when we are outside the window*
- *understanding whether we are in a state of activation or shutdown*
- *gradually returning to a state of safety and presence*

For young people especially, this process often requires support from others. Through relationships that provide safety, attunement and consistency, the nervous system learns that it is possible to return from states of distress to states of balance. Over time, this experience becomes internalised, forming the basis of self-regulation.The key idea is that we are constantly moving around this window. Emotional life is dynamic and changing. The goal is not to stay perfectly regulated at all times, but to develop flexibility — the ability to move back toward the window of tolerance again and again.

Hyperarousal

Anxious, angry, out of control, overwhelmed and impulsive.
Feeling worried, scared and having big feelings.
Your body is in FLIGHT or FIGHT response.

Dysregulation

Discomfort outside the window of tolerance.
Feeling agitated, irritated and frustrated.
Uncomfortable feelings start to increase, but still in control. .

Illness

Grief\Loss

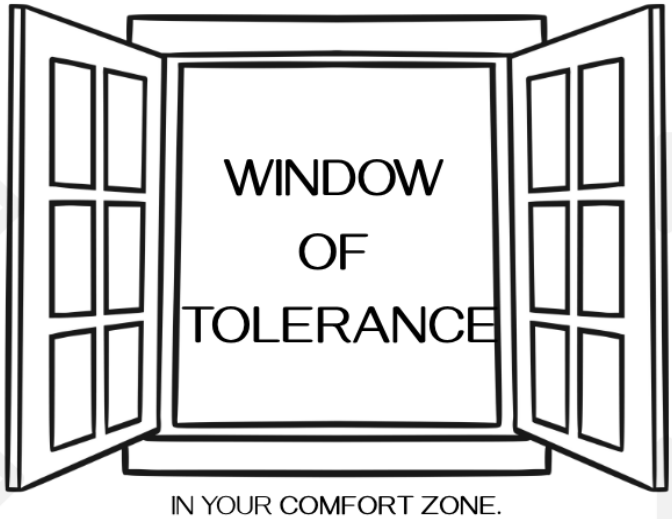
Rejection

THINGS THAT SHRINK YOUR WINDOW

Stress

Trauma triggers

Poor Sleep



IN YOUR COMFORT ZONE.
FEELING CALM, SAFE AND IN CONTROL.
YOU MIGHT FEEL STRESS OR PRESSURE,
BUT DOESN'TBOTHER YOU THAT MUCH.

Positive self talk

Gratitude

Joyful activities

THINGS THAT EXPAND YOUR WINDOW

Breathing exercises

Grounding techniques

Dysregulation

Discomfort outside the window of tolerance.
Feeling depressed, lethargic and zoned out.
Uncomfortable feelings start to increase but still in control.

Hypoarousal

Spacey, zoned out, numb, frozen. Feeling disconnected. No energy.
Your body wants to shut down - it is not something you choose,
these reactions just take over.

THE BODY AS A PATHWAY FOR REGULATION

BODY AWARENESS AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION

In contemporary approaches to trauma and emotional regulation, increasing attention is given to body awareness — the broader ability to notice and be aware of what is happening in the body. One important aspect of body awareness is ***INTEROCEPTION***, which refers to sensing and interpreting signals arising from within the body.

Emotional experiences are not only mental events; they are deeply rooted in the body. Internal states such as tension, breathing patterns, heart rate, and muscle activation are all part of how emotions are experienced and processed. In this sense, emotions are not something we simply "have" — they are dynamic bodily processes that unfold within the nervous system.

Developing body awareness means learning to direct attention inward, toward what is happening inside the body. This includes noticing the breath, heartbeat, muscle tension and subtle shifts in energy or temperature. Through this process, emotions begin to be recognised as embodied experiences. For example, anxiety may be felt as tightness in the chest or rapid breathing, while sadness may be experienced as heaviness, low energy, or reduced muscle tone.

For many people, especially those exposed to stress or trauma, this connection to bodily experience may be reduced or disrupted. As a result, they may struggle to recognise, differentiate, or name their emotions. Strengthening interoceptive awareness helps rebuild this connection, making emotional experience more accessible and understandable.

A further step in developing body awareness involves ***actively exploring the relationship between attention, breathing, and bodily sensations.*** For example, when we consciously direct the breath toward a particular area of the body — such as the chest or abdomen — the quality of the experience often begins to change. Tension may soften, sensations may become more defined, or emotional intensity may shift.

Similarly, consciously relaxing parts of the body can directly influence emotional states. Because emotions are closely linked to the autonomic nervous system, changes in bodily state — such as slowing the breath or releasing muscular tension — send signals of safety to the brain. This reduces the perception of threat and supports a return to balance.

In this way, body awareness becomes a foundation for self-regulation. It allows us to recognise emotions as fluid, changing processes rather than fixed states, and supports the integration of bodily and psychological experience.

TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP APPROACHES

In working with emotions and regulation, two complementary approaches are often distinguished: top-down and bottom-up.

The top-down approach begins with thoughts, interpretation and conscious understanding. It involves cognitive processes such as reflection, naming emotions, reframing situations and changing beliefs. Through this approach, higher brain functions — particularly the prefrontal cortex — can help regulate emotional responses by influencing the limbic system.

For example, recognising "I am feeling anxious, but this situation is not dangerous" can help reduce emotional intensity. This approach forms the basis of many therapeutic models, including cognitive-behavioural therapy. However, in situations of high stress or intense emotional activation, cognitive strategies alone are often not sufficient. The body may remain in a state of activation even when we intellectually understand that we are safe.

The bottom-up approach works in the opposite direction — starting from the body and influencing emotions and thoughts through physical experience. This includes working with breathing, posture, muscle tension, movement and attention to internal sensations.

For example, slowing and deepening the breath, relaxing the shoulders or jaw, or noticing contact with the ground can signal to the nervous system that the body is safe. This signal then "travels upward," reducing emotional intensity and supporting regulation.

Within the context of body awareness, the bottom-up approach is especially important. When we notice a sensation — such as tightness in the chest — and stay with it, breathe into it, or allow it to soften, we are not analysing the emotion but directly experiencing it. Often, the emotion begins to shift on its own — becoming more tolerable, changing in quality, or gradually decreasing in intensity.

It is important to emphasise that these two approaches are not opposed, but complementary. The most effective work integrates both: the ability to understand what is happening (top-down), while also remaining connected to the body and supporting regulation through direct experience (bottom-up).

This integration creates a more stable and flexible emotional system, allowing individuals to respond to their experiences with both awareness and embodied presence.

REGULATION OF EMOTIONS THROUGH THE BODY (SOMATIC PRACTICES)

When emotions become too intense or too distant, the body can serve as a pathway back to balance.

The nervous system automatically responds to stress through protective patterns such as fight, flight, or freeze. However, it can also be supported in returning to a state of calm and safety through body-based practices.

Somatic practices focus on reconnecting with bodily sensations, slowing down and supporting the nervous system in regulating itself. These may include simple actions such as breathing, grounding, or gentle movement.
It is important to recognise that there is no single technique that works for everyone. Each individual's nervous system is unique, and what feels regulating for one person may not feel the same for another.

For this reason, the goal is not to apply techniques mechanically, ***but to develop awareness of what supports a sense of safety, presence and balance in one's own body.***

Effective regulation emerges through this process of exploration — noticing what helps, what does not, and gradually building a repertoire of supportive practices. Over time, this strengthens the capacity for self-regulation and increases flexibility in responding to emotional experiences.

THE BODY AS A RESOURCE FOR EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

Emotions are not only internal experiences — they are also expressed through the body. When words are not available or are insufficient, the body provides alternative ways of communicating what is being felt.

For children and young people in particular, this is especially relevant. ***Emotional experience is often first expressed through action, movement, or physical presence rather than through language.*** In this sense, the body can be understood as a resource — a medium through which emotions can be accessed, expressed, and gradually understood.

Different forms of expression can support this process, including movement, creative activities, and the use of voice. What is important is not the form itself, but the opportunity for authentic expression. When individuals are supported to follow their internal experience, emotions that may have been unclear or unexpressed can begin to take shape.

Expression also has a regulatory function. When emotional impulses are allowed to unfold, the body can move out of states of tension or inhibition. This supports a shift toward greater balance, without requiring the emotion to be analysed or controlled.

At the same time, the body offers access to resources such as grounding, sensory awareness, and movement. These can support a sense of stability and safety, making emotional experience more manageable. In this way, the body is not only a place where emotions are felt, but also a means through which they can be supported and transformed.

EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION IN CONTEXT: MEANING AND INTERPRETATION

Although the body plays a central role in emotional expression, emotions cannot be understood outside of their context. Emotional experience is shaped by relationships, environment, and individual history. The same behaviour or expression may have different meanings depending on the situation in which it occurs. For this reason, it is important to look beyond what is visible and consider what the experience might represent.
Behaviour can often be understood as an expression of underlying emotional states. Instead of focusing only on the behaviour itself, it becomes more useful to explore what the person might be feeling or needing.

At the same time, emotional work is not only about expression. It also involves making sense of experience. As individuals begin to recognise and express emotions, they can gradually develop an understanding of what those emotions are connected to — such as needs, boundaries, or responses to their environment. Working through the body can support access to emotional experience, but it becomes most meaningful when it is integrated with reflection, language, and relational understanding. In this way, expression is connected with interpretation, allowing emotional experience to become more coherent.

EXERCISES

“BREATHING IN FOURS” AND “BOX BREATHING”

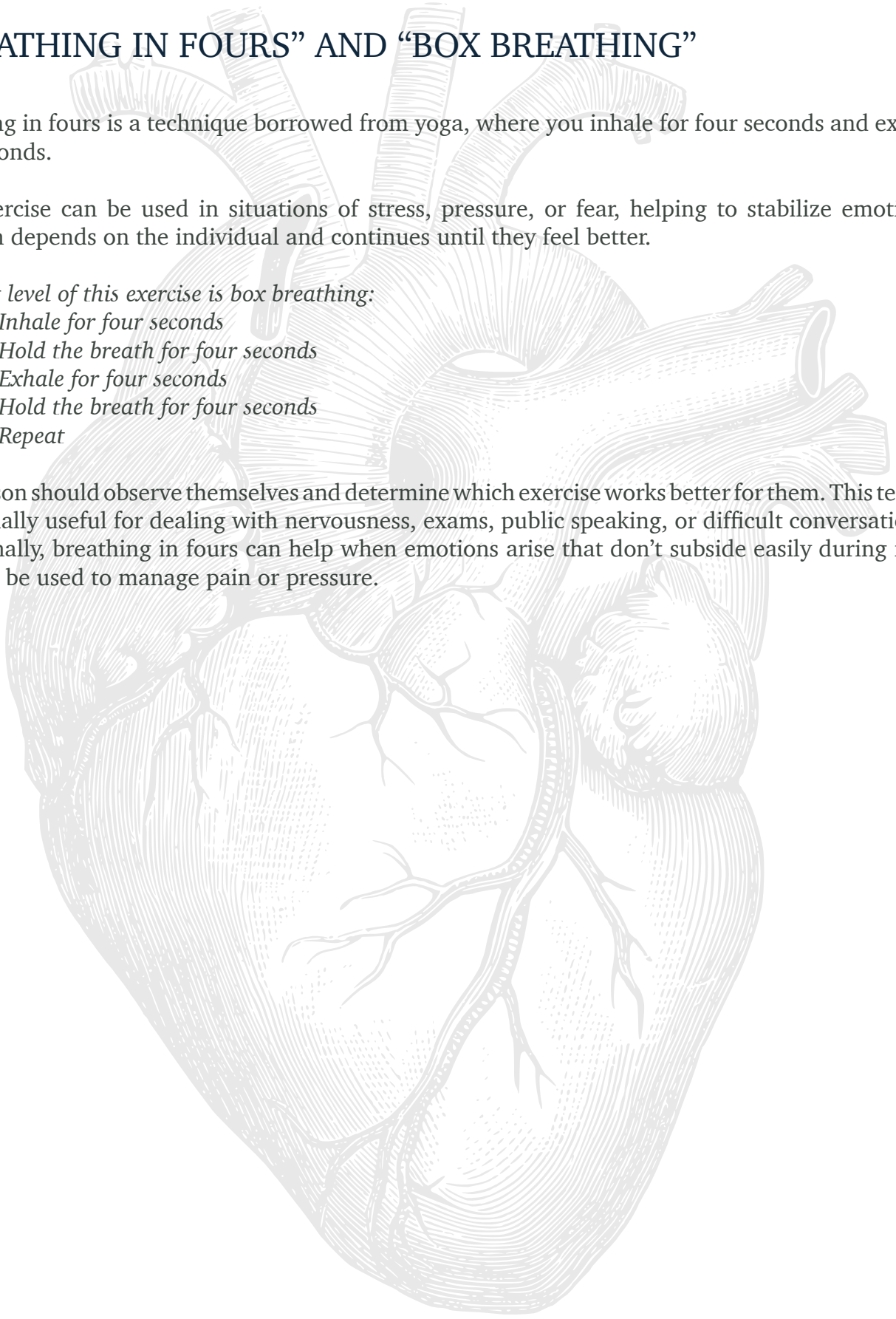
Breathing in fours is a technique borrowed from yoga, where you inhale for four seconds and exhale for four seconds.

This exercise can be used in situations of stress, pressure, or fear, helping to stabilize emotions. Its duration depends on the individual and continues until they feel better.

The next level of this exercise is box breathing:

**Inhale for four seconds*
**Hold the breath for four seconds*
**Exhale for four seconds*
**Hold the breath for four seconds*
**Repeat*

The person should observe themselves and determine which exercise works better for them. This technique is especially useful for dealing with nervousness, exams, public speaking, or difficult conversations. Additionally, breathing in fours can help when emotions arise that don’t subside easily during focus. It can also be used to manage pain or pressure.



DRAWING EMOTIONS IN YOUR BODY

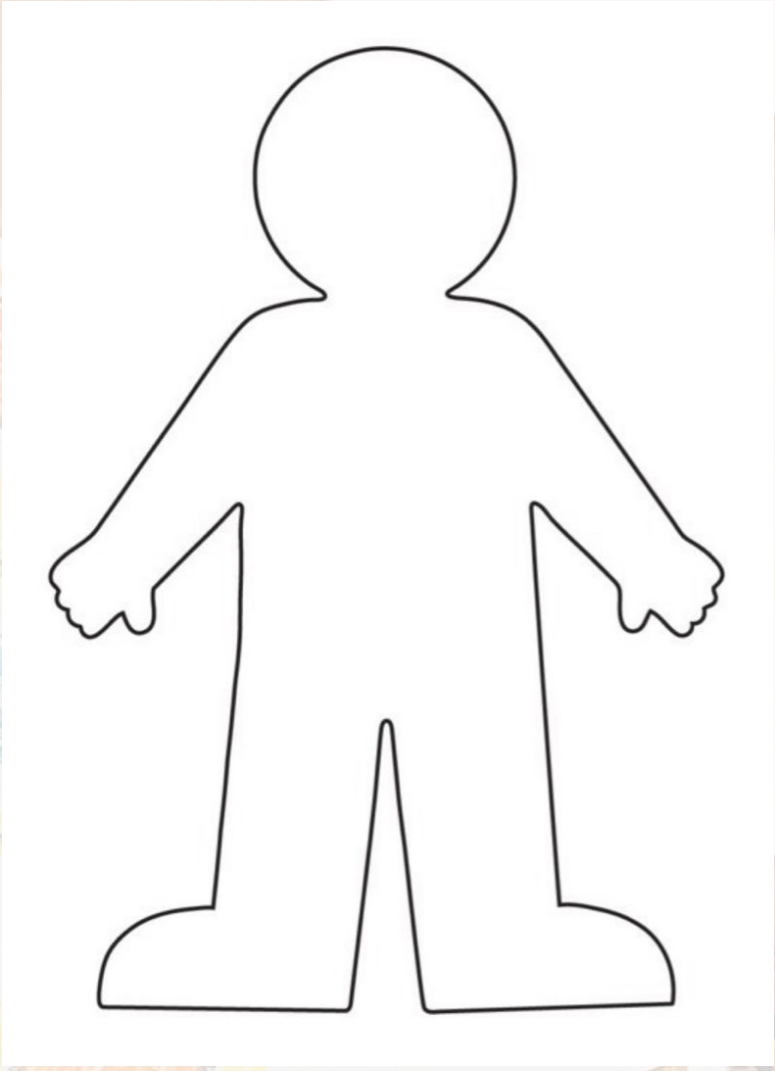
Give each participant a simple outline (silhouette) of a human body. Invite them to choose four basic emotions (for example: joy, sadness, anger, and fear) and represent each one inside the body outline.

Ask them to think about:

*Where in the body they feel each emotion
*What colour it might be
*What shape or size it has

Encourage creativity — there are no right or wrong answers. Emotions can be drawn in any way that feels meaningful to them. When they are finished, invite participants to share their drawings with the group and talk about what they noticed — where the emotions showed up in their body and how they experienced them.

example for drawing (on 1 page):



BODY SCANNING

Sit or lie down on the floor — whichever is more comfortable for you — but stay close enough to hear the instructions. Close your eyes and focus only on yourself. If you hear sounds, noises, or whispers... try to ignore them so you can better hear yourself, specifically your breathing.
Take one big inhale through your nose and one big exhale through your mouth. Repeat this two more times.

Now we're going to do something called a body scan. It's an exercise where we scan our bodies (an inward look) to become aware of the sensations in different parts of our bodies. We observe what's happening beneath our skin — the things that are not visible to the eyes. Whatever you feel, try not to change or fix it; just notice how it is. You don't need to answer the questions I'll ask out loud — just notice it for yourself, and we'll share later.

Make yourself comfortable.
We'll start with the right foot. Direct your attention to your toes. Notice if you feel pressure, warmth, or cold. Feel the parts of your foot that are touching the floor. Then, shift your focus to the left foot. Notice how it feels there. See if there's any difference between the left and right foot.
Move your attention to your calves. How do you feel when they are in contact with the ground or the surface you're sitting or lying on?

Now, feel your thighs. Notice how your body leans on the floor or the chair. Observe how it feels to lean on something. Shift your focus to your abdomen. Check how it feels — is it tense, relaxed, or maybe hungry?
Observe your chest as well. Can you feel your breath moving through this part of your body? Are you relaxed or tense here?

We'll slowly move to the shoulders. Try to feel the weight of your shoulders — are they as light as a feather or as heavy as a tank? If your shoulders feel tense, try to lower and relax them a bit.

Let's give some attention to our arms as well. How does your right arm feel, from the shoulder down to the fingers? And how about your left arm?
And finally, let's check in with our head. Focus on your head and how you feel in it. Are there any thoughts or feelings present?

Slowly, slowly open your eyes, as if you're just waking up, and direct your focus and gaze in front of you. Stay in this position for the next 10 seconds and just breathe.
How was this exercise for you? Could you feel the difference in your body — between the tense and relaxed parts?

THE RIVER OF THOUGHTS

The facilitator explains how stress often brings worries and negative thoughts that distract and exhaust us.

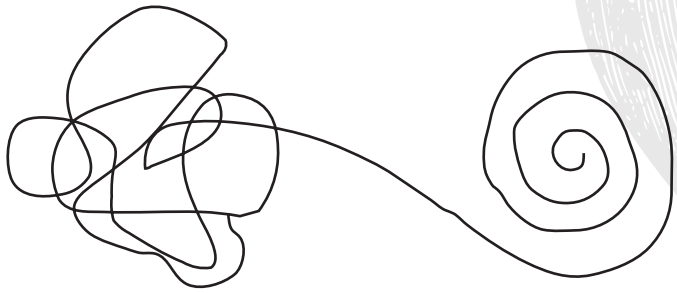
The facilitator introduces the following exercise:
"Get comfortable... Place your feet on the floor and rest your back against the chair... Close your eyes if you feel comfortable... Or focus on a point on the floor. Pay attention to your breath... Inhale and exhale... Notice how the air enters through your nose... And leaves through your mouth... Follow your breath a little longer... (short pause)."

"Imagine sitting by a river. The river is in nature, clean, flowing in one direction (short pause). As you focus on the clear river, occasionally a twig or a leaf floats by (short pause). Then it drifts away downstream... If a thought enters your mind, place it on the leaf or twig and let it float away (short pause). Return your focus to the clear river, and each time a new thought appears, place it on a leaf or twig and send it down the stream."

The facilitator then asks the group about their experience:

* *How do you feel right now?*
* *What was the experience like for you?*
* *Did you find anything difficult or easy?*
* *Were you able to "place" thoughts on a leaf and let them float away?*

The facilitator encourages participants to use this exercise whenever worries or negative thoughts arise, helping them to calm down and focus on the present moment.



MIND FUL ***MINDFULL***

THE FIVE SENSES EXERCISE

The purpose of this exercise is to gently shift attention away from overwhelming thoughts or emotions and back toward the immediate sensory experience of the here and now. To quickly bring awareness to the present moment, follow these steps:

Notice five things you can see.
Notice four things you can hear.
Notice three things you can feel.
Notice two things you can smell.
Notice one thing you can taste.

Afterward, the facilitator asks participants how they feel and explains that this is a quick and simple way to refocus during moments of anxiety, worry, or emotional overwhelm.

SHOWING HOW YOU FEEL THROUGH BODY POSTURE

Invite participants to notice how they feel in this moment and express it using only their body. They can adjust their posture, position, or overall shape until it feels like it matches their internal state. Encourage them to keep it simple and authentic. After a few moments, invite them to notice what they experience in that position, and then slowly return to neutral.

MOVING THROUGH EMOTIONS WITH MUSIC

Invite participants to stand in a space where they can move freely. Explain that they will explore different emotions through movement, using music as support.

The facilitator begins to play music and gradually names different emotions, one at a time (for example: joy, anger, fear, sadness, calm). As each emotion is named, participants are invited to express it through movement in their own way. There is no correct way to move — the focus is on allowing the body to respond naturally to each emotion.

Encourage participants to notice how different emotions feel in the body and how movement changes with each one. They can explore intensity, speed, space, or stillness, depending on what feels appropriate.

After the movement part, invite participants to take a few minutes to draw or visually represent their experience. This can include shapes, colours, lines, or anything that reflects what they felt during the exercise. Once they have finished, invite them to share their experience in pairs. They can talk about what they noticed, which emotions felt easier or more difficult to express, and how their body responded.

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WORKING WITH THE BODY IN A GROUP



BENEFITS OF BODY-BASED GROUP WORK

Working with the body in a group setting creates conditions for experiential and relational learning that differ from approaches based primarily on verbal communication. ***Learning unfolds through direct engagement, shared activity, and interaction within the group***

Embodied approaches can support ***participation and accessibility*** from the beginning, as they do not rely on verbal expression. Participants engage through movement and action, which can reduce hesitation and support involvement across different levels of confidence, language ability, and communication styles.

They also support ***regulation and presence.*** Movement can help reduce tension, organise attention, and support a more grounded and engaged state. This creates conditions in which participants can be more available for learning and interaction.

Working through the body can strengthen ***connection and sense of belonging.*** Shared physical activity — moving together, being in proximity, and engaging in common tasks — can support group cohesion and relational awareness.

At the same time, these approaches develop ***non-verbal communication and cooperation.*** Participants become more aware of cues such as movement, rhythm, distance and timing, which supports sensitivity to others and more fluid interaction within the group.

Research on body-based and movement-oriented group work supports these observations, highlighting the role of movement, shared activity, and non-verbal interaction in shaping participation, regulation and connection in groups.

RELATIONAL GROUND OF GROUP WORK

SENSE OF BELONGING / THE NEED TO BELONG

The theory of the need to belong, developed by Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary (1995), is based on the belongingness hypothesis, which states that ***humans have a fundamental motivation to establish and maintain lasting, positive, and meaningful interpersonal relationships.*** Belonging is not understood as an additional or desirable aspect of life, but as a basic psychological need.

According to this theory, not all forms of social contact satisfy this need. Two conditions must be met. First, individuals need frequent, positive, and relatively stable interactions with others. Second, these interactions must take place within ongoing relationships characterised by mutual care and an expectation of continuity. Short-term, random, or purely instrumental contacts are not sufficient. ***What supports belonging are relationships that involve continuity, emotional significance, and reciprocity.***

The authors review a wide range of empirical findings showing that people readily form social bonds and have difficulty letting go of them once they are established. Experiences such as rejection, loss of relationships, isolation, and loneliness are consistently associated with negative emotional outcomes. This sensitivity to the absence or disruption of relationships supports the understanding of belonging as a fundamental human need.

A lack of stable social connections is associated with reduced well-being, difficulties in adaptation, and negative effects on mental and physical health. In this sense, belonging is not only a subjective feeling, but a motivational condition that shapes emotional processes, cognition, and behaviour. Many forms of social behaviour can be understood as attempts to establish, maintain, or restore a sense of belonging.

Belonging is defined as a relational condition rather than an individual state. It exists through participation in stable, positive and socially recognised relationships. This makes the concept directly relevant for group work, where inclusion, acceptance, and continuity of relationships form the basis for participation and engagement.

ATTACHMENT THEORY IN GROUP CONTEXT

In attachment theory (Bowlby, Ainsworth), a key concept is that of the secure base, defined as a relationship in which a person feels sufficiently safe to explore the environment and return for support when needed.

In group work, ***the youth worker can function as a secure base through consistency, predictability and emotional availability.*** When young people experience the group as a safe environment, they are more likely to participate, explore, and engage in activities.

Group contexts also allow for the development of secondary attachment relationships. Through interaction with peers, ***young people can develop trust, cooperation and a sense of belonging.*** This is particularly relevant for those who do not have stable primary relationships, as the group can provide experiences of acceptance and relational continuity.

Attachment is closely linked to emotional regulation. Secure relationships support the development of regulatory capacity, while insecure or disorganised attachment may be associated with difficulties in regulation and behaviour. In group work, this can be observed through patterns such as withdrawal, hyperactivation, need for control, or avoidance of closeness. These patterns can be understood as strategies of regulation.

Group work also provides space for corrective relational experiences. Through repeated experiences of reliable and safe relationships with both facilitators and peers, young people may gradually change their expectations about relationships, including the availability of others, the possibility of acceptance, and the experience of closeness.

In this sense, group work functions as a relational context in which patterns of attachment, experiences of safety, and ways of regulation are shaped through interaction with others.

CO-REGULATION AND THE NERVOUS SYSTEM IN GROUPS

From a polyvagal perspective, the functioning of the nervous system is closely linked to the perception of safety and threat. The nervous system continuously evaluates the environment through processes such as ***NEUTOCEPTION (the automatic detection of cues of safety or threat),*** shaping levels of activation and influencing behaviour, attention and emotional responses. This provides a framework for understanding regulation as a physiological and relational process.

In group contexts, regulation is not only an individual process, but also a relational one, shaped through co-regulation. ***Co-regulation*** refers to the process through which individuals influence each other's physiological and emotional states.

The nervous system continuously responds to social cues such as facial expression, tone of voice, posture, rhythm and movement. These cues signal either safety or threat and shape the body's level of activation.

When an individual is in contact with someone who is calm and regulated, their own nervous system tends to shift toward a more settled state. Conversely, heightened activation in others can increase tension within the group. This process is automatic and does not require conscious effort.

This can be observed across developmental and biological contexts. Infants rely entirely on co-regulation: a baby's breathing, heart rate, and level of arousal stabilise through being held, rocked and soothed by a caregiver. Without this external regulation, the infant is unable to return to a balanced state. Similar patterns can be observed in animals. When faced with threat, many species move closer together. Proximity, shared movement and coordinated attention support a collective sense of safety and reduce individual vulnerability. In human contexts, comparable dynamics emerge in situations of uncertainty or stress. People tend to gather, speak to one another, or remain in proximity. The presence of others provides signals of safety that support physiological regulation.

This reflects the concept of social connection as a regulatory process. Humans are biologically oriented toward others, and the presence, responsiveness, and availability of others directly influence internal states. ***Social connection is therefore not only a psychological or social phenomenon, but also a physiological one.***

In group work, these processes become particularly relevant. Shared activities such as moving together, following a common rhythm, or coordinating attention facilitate synchronisation between participants. Breathing patterns, muscle tone, and levels of activation may begin to align, leading to a more regulated group state.

For children and young people, whose capacity for self-regulation is still developing, this relational dimension is especially important. The group functions as a regulatory environment in which individuals are supported by the presence and state of others. Repeated experiences of co-regulation contribute to the development of self-regulation. Over time, individuals internalise patterns of safety and learn how to return to a more balanced state.

From the perspective of interpersonal neurobiology (Siegel), ***the mind is both embodied and relational and the brain develops through interaction with others.*** *Emotional regulation, attention and behaviour are continuously shaped by relational experience.* Social baseline theory (coan) further suggests that the human brain is adapted to function in the presence of others, where the presence of others reduces perceived threat and the physiological cost of responding to stress.

At an embodied level, processes of mirroring and synchronisation contribute to how individuals influence each other within a group. Research on the mirror neuron system and social synchrony shows that people automatically and unconsciously mirror the movements, expressions and emotional states of others.

Through shared movement, rhythm, and coordinated activity, participants begin to align in tempo, posture and levels of activation, supporting connection, non-verbal communication and a shared group state.

Together, these perspectives show that what happens in a group is shaped through interaction, shared experience and the presence of others. Body-based approaches offer a direct way to explore this, using movement, rhythm and non-verbal interaction as entry points.

EXPLORING RELATIONSHIPS AND INTERACTION THROUGH THE BODY

Working with the body in a group does not require complex methods or prior experience. ***It can begin from very simple principles: movement, attention and presence.*** By using the body as a starting point, facilitators can create activities that are accessible, flexible and easy to adapt to different groups.

The process is less about doing things "correctly" and ***more about creating conditions where participants can explore, notice, and respond — to themselves, the space, and others.*** *Simple changes in movement, attention, or structure can already open different kinds of experiences.*

This section offers basic entry points and examples that can support facilitators in starting to work in this way, and in developing their own ideas and activities.

The role of the facilitator is to structure the process, provide clear and simple instructions, and create a safe and predictable environment. The facilitator introduces activities gradually, adjusts the pace responds to the needs, energy and dynamics of the group, supporting participation without pressure and allowing space for individual differences.

EXERCISES

Before introducing interaction with others, it is useful to begin with exploring space. This allows participants to arrive, orient themselves and become aware of their bodies in movement without the pressure of contact or communication.

*Starting with **space** creates a simple and accessible entry point — participants can focus on themselves, their movement, and the environment, while gradually becoming aware of others.*

*These exercises support the development of **synchronisation, shared attention and group cohesion.** They also introduce basic **relational patterns such as leading, following and mutual responsiveness.***

WALKING AND DISCOVERING THE SPACE

The facilitator invites participants to walk freely around the room without talking. The focus is on exploring the space — looking around, noticing details, and becoming aware of where they are.

Participants are encouraged to actively discover the environment: to notice things they haven't seen before, pay attention to small details, and even look into less obvious or "hidden" corners of the space.

They move at a natural pace, observing the size of the room, the light, the distance between objects, and their own position within it.

After some time, the facilitator can invite participants to notice how they move — how their feet touch the ground, how their body shifts, and how they orient themselves while walking.

1. Exploring Movement in Space

The facilitator gradually introduces variations in movement while participants continue walking. Participants are invited to explore:

** different speeds (slower, faster),*
** different directions (changing direction, turning),*
** different pathways (straight lines, curved or winding paths),*
** and variations such as briefly walking backwards.*

Throughout the exercise, participants are asked to remain aware of others in the space — adjusting their movement to avoid collisions and to share the space with the group.

The facilitator encourages participants to stay present and responsive, allowing movement to be guided by sensing rather than thinking. ***The focus remains on exploring how the body moves in space, how space is used, and how others are present within it.***

2. Positioning in Space

Facilitator invites participants to walk freely around the room without talking, continuing from previous movement exercises. After a short time, they are invited to gradually slow down and choose a place in the space where they feel drawn to stay.

Participants are encouraged to notice where they position themselves — whether they move toward the centre, stay closer to the walls, or choose more hidden or open areas.

Once everyone has settled, the facilitator pauses the group and invites a brief reflection through simple questions:

Where did you choose to be?
Was it easy or uncomfortable to be seen?
Did you prefer being close to others or more on your own?

The focus is on noticing personal tendencies in relation to space, visibility, and presence in the group, without right or wrong answers.

3. Establishing Contact

When beginning to work with a group through the body, it is helpful to start with simple, open-ended exercises that do not demand performance or specific outcomes.

These activities invite participants to explore movement, sensation, and presence in a gentle way, allowing space for curiosity rather than pressure.
Such an approach supports relaxation and helps participants feel more at ease in their bodies and in the group.

ARRIVING TO THE SPACE, TO ONESELF HERE AND NOW, TO THE GROUP

The facilitator invites participants to arrive gradually — first to themselves, then to the space and finally to the group.Participants begin by standing and slowly shifting weight from one leg to the other, bringing attention to internal sensations (body, breath) and external perception (space around them). They are invited to close their eyes and gently move the head from left to right, researching what they notice/ sense, noticing what is present without trying to change anything.

From there, the facilitator invites slow, collective walking in the space. Participants continue to focus on their breath and bodily sensations, keeping their attention inward while moving. They are encouraged to take a breath and notice how they feel in the present moment. Gradually, attention expands to include the space — perceiving it, discovering it and orienting within it.

In the next phase, participants begin to include others in their awareness. The facilitator invites them to perceive other participants as if they were a "sponge" — taking in information without judgment. Participants observe others by gently bringing attention to different parts of the body (feet, legs, belly, pelvis, chest, face), without interpretation, simply perceiving and meeting.

1. Meeting Through Different Body Parts

The facilitator invites participants to work in pairs and explore connections through different parts of the body, starting with minimal and indirect contact.

Participants stand facing each other and are invited to "greet" one another through their feet. They can shift weight, make small movements, and respond to each other as if having a simple non-verbal conversation through this body part. The facilitator encourages curiosity and observation of how movement and attention influence the interaction.

After some time, the facilitator invites participants to explore connection through other body parts, such as hands or palms. They can experiment with gentle contact, proximity, or mirroring movements, noticing how the quality of interaction changes.

Gradually, eye contact is introduced. First, participants are invited to briefly meet each other's gaze, and then to sustain eye contact for a few seconds longer.

The facilitator encourages them to notice internal reactions — how it feels to see and to be seen — without the need to respond or perform. The exercise progresses step by step, allowing participants to build comfort, presence, and trust in a gradual and playful way.

2. Developing Group Dynamics and Connection

Once participants are more comfortable moving in the space and with initial contact, activities can gradually shift toward group awareness and shared coordination. Through simple movement tasks, participants begin to notice each other more, respond non-verbally, and experience how connection can emerge without speaking.

CHANGING DIRECTION TOGETHER

The facilitator invites participants to walk freely around the room.
Participants are given a simple task: whenever they notice someone else changing direction, they also change their direction. There is no leader and no signal — only observation and response.
Over time, the facilitator encourages participants to soften their focus and widen their awareness, noticing not just one person but the group as a whole.
Gradually, the group begins to move more fluidly together, with less delay and more cohesion, without verbal coordination.

1. Finding a Shared Rhythm

The facilitator invites participants to explore rhythm together through simple actions. Participants can begin by walking in the space and gradually tuning into a shared tempo. The facilitator may suggest adding elements such as clapping, stepping, or simple repetitive movements.

The group is invited to notice when a common rhythm begins to emerge and to support it by staying with it.
Music can be added to make the activity more dynamic and engaging — faster rhythms to activate energy, slower rhythms to support calmness and focus. The facilitator encourages participants to notice how shared rhythm influences their sense of connection and group cohesion.

2. Leading and Following

The facilitator invites participants to work in pairs.
One participant begins as the leader and initiates simple movements. The other participant follows by mirroring the leader's movements as closely as possible, paying attention to rhythm, direction, and pace. Movements can be small and simple, focusing on clarity and responsiveness.
After some time, participants switch roles.
The facilitator can then invite pairs to make the movement more fluid, allowing the leader to guide not only direction but also rhythm and quality of movement. If appropriate, music can be added to support flow and make the activity more dynamic and enjoyable.
For participants who feel comfortable, movement can become more free and expressive. For those who feel shy, the facilitator can frame the activity more playfully — using exaggerated, slow-motion, or humorous movements.
As a variation, the exercise can also be done with the whole group: one participant leads while the rest of the group follows. Leadership can then shift, either by invitation or organically, encouraging group awareness and responsiveness.

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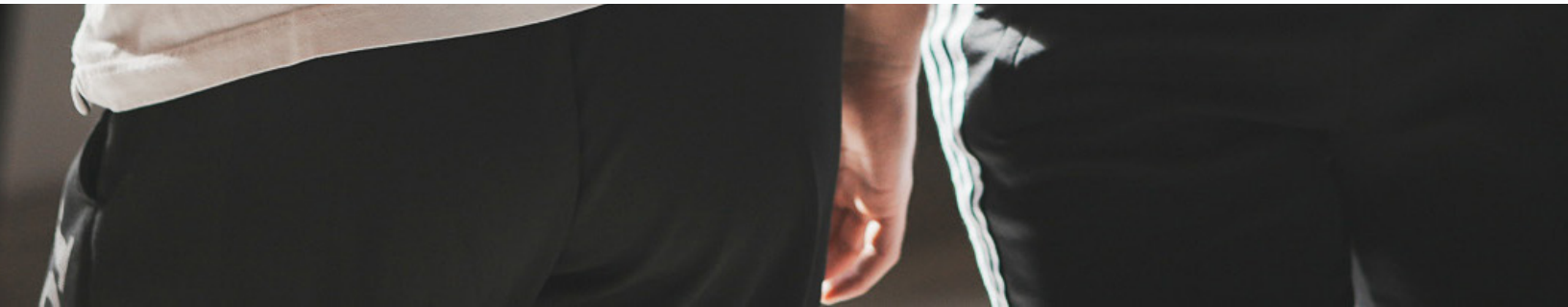
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IMPROVISATION, CREATIVITY AND PLAY IN BODY-BASED YOUTH WORK



CREATIVITY, IMPROVISATION AND PLAY

INTRODUCTION

When youth workers engage the body as a tool for learning, expression and relationship-building, creative processes often emerge naturally. The body its not simply a tool; it is a living, sensing, expressive system that continuously responds to internal states, othersand the environment.

As soon as movement, sensation, gesture, voice, or physical presence are invited, young people begin to explore, adapt, and experiment — processes that are inherently creative.

Body-based methods shift learning from abstract explanation to lived experience. In this shift, young people are not only receiving information, but actively shaping meaning through action. Improvisation, play and creative expression arise as ways of navigating uncertainty, testing boundaries, and finding personal and collective responses in the moment. To understand what unfolds in these processes — and how they can be used intentionally and ethically in youth work — it is important to ground them within a broader theoretical understanding of creativity and play.

Creativity and play are central to experiential learning. Playfulness creates a state of openness, curiosity, and intrinsic motivation, in which learning becomes an activity valued for its own sake rather than for external rewards or outcomes.

Drawing on thinkers such as Fromm, Rogers, and Csikszentmihalyi, creative orientation can be understood as a mode of being characterized by:

- *openness to experience and wonder,*
- *a natural state of concentration and presence,*
- *flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity,*
- *the ability to engage with conflict as a source of growth.*

Creative and body-based activities naturally evoke this orientation. Through play, movement, improvisation, and artistic expression, young people step out of habitual roles and routines, opening space for exploration and new possibilities of self-experience.

Improvisation also develops the capacity to remain present within uncertainty, ambiguity, and unpredictability — an important skill in both creative processes and everyday life situations.

CREATIVE PROCESS AS INNER DIALOG

(integration of mind, body and emotions)

The creative-artistic process is also a deeper inward journey — into one's own inner contents, through the discovery of the unconscious and the repressed.

Through art, a person comes into more direct contact with unconscious material and is able to communicate with it; in this way, one can respond to it or recognize it more holistically (Arieti, 1976). The theory of psychosynthesis (Parfitt, 1996) describes this as the synthesis of mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects into an integrated and effective whole — a process that can bring greater inner clarity, distance, and perspective.

When different parts are integrated into the self, they become easier to understand and regulate. Psychosynthesis also emphasizes the communication and integration of the different "selves" within an individual. Through a more holistic experience of oneself, we become more capable of accepting and appreciating everything we carry within us.

A similar perspective can be found in Gestalt therapy, which focuses on present-moment awareness and the integration of fragmented or suppressed aspects of the self. In creative-expressive work, art may serve as a form of inner dialogue through which unfinished experiences, emotions and symbolic material can emerge, be explored, and gradually integrated. (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951; Zinker, 1977).

However, when using creative expression in youth work activities, our goal is not therapeutic, but to empower and support young people through the principles of creative processes. It is nevertheless important to be aware that these processes may naturally bring up deeper emotions or personal experiences, even when this is not intended. A seemingly simple exercise may evoke a deeply personal or emotionally significant experience for a participant and integration. Facilitators should therefore be prepared to hold a safe and supportive space when this happens, while staying within the boundaries of their role and competence.

SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION AND MEANING-MAKING

Creative processes often communicate through symbols, metaphors, images, movement, and non-verbal forms of expression. Experiences that may be difficult to articulate directly can emerge indirectly through artistic and bodily expression. In this way, the artwork, movement, gesture, or embodied image becomes a symbolic container for emotions, memories, inner conflicts, wishes, or aspects of identity.

Symbolic expression creates both connection and distance: participants are emotionally engaged in the experience while simultaneously observing it from the outside. This "as-if" space allows difficult or unconscious material to be explored more safely, flexibly, and creatively. *Through imagination, storytelling, movement, and artistic creation, young people can experiment with meanings, roles, and perspectives, reorganizing experience in new ways.*

For youth work, symbolic and creative processes offer alternative pathways of communication beyond purely verbal dialogue. They support self-expression, emotional processing, reflection, and the development of personal and collective meaning.

CREATIVE PROCESS - Imaginaition, interaction, reflection and integration

Schuller (2008) summarizes and analyzes three fundamental components of every creative process and creative-therapeutic process - which elements can also be found in youth work, not as therapy, but as empowerment of youth: imagination, (inter)action and reflection. These dimensions of imagination, interaction, reflection, and integration are not strictly linear phases. They continuously overlap and influence one another throughout the creative process.

IMAGINATION

Imagination can be understood as the mind's capacity to generate images, symbols, narratives, and inner realities, and to shape meaning through them (Levine, 1999, as cited in Schuller, 2008).

Within creative and arts-based processes, ***imagination*** is not limited to cognitive activity but is ***deeply embodied—emerging through sensation, movement, and interaction with materials and space.***

We distinguish three domains of imagination: dreaming, daydreaming or free association (including trance states), and artistic creation. Among these, artistic expression offers the greatest potential for active engagement and conscious interaction with imagination, allowing individuals to shape and explore their inner imagery in a tangible way.

Entering an imaginative process can be understood as stepping into a "transitional space"— a temporary shift away from ordinary modes of thinking, feeling, and acting.
Knill (2005, as cited in Schuller, 2008) describes this as a process of decentering, where the individual momentarily distances themselves from everyday concerns. This shift enables a reorganization of perception and opens possibilities for new meanings, perspectives, and responses. This state is closely related to the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), where a person becomes fully immersed in an activity, with a softened sense of time and self-consciousness.

For youth work, imagination provides a safe and flexible space where young people can experiment with identities, emotions, and perspectives without immediate real-life consequences. It supports both personal integration and shared meaning-making within the group context.

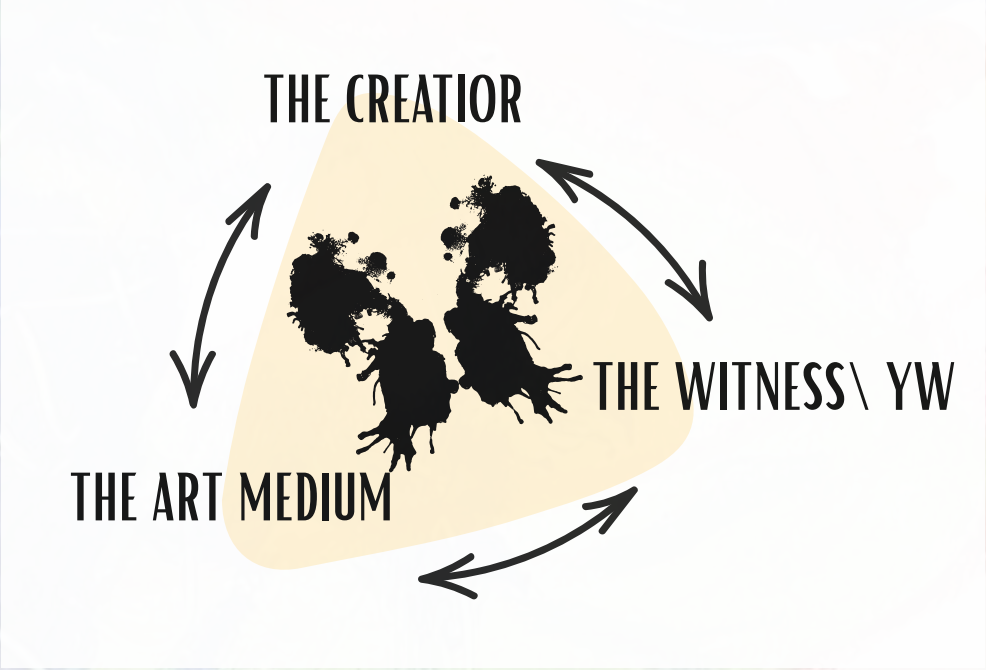
ACTION AND INTERACTION

In this phase, imagination becomes concrete through bodily action, movement, image-making, sculpting, or theatrical forms. These can also be combined with other art mediums, such as visual art or voice. The interaction between the individual, the medium (body, space, material), and others creates multiple layers of dialogue.

Schuller (2008) describes this as a triangular relationship between creator, the artistic medium, and a witness or another person engaging with the process. In a youth work context, this third position may be taken by a youth worker, facilitator, or another participant.

In group contexts, the group itself becomes an additional relational dimension, creating a broader relational field - symbolized as four-part or square relational field (see visual model below, practical example exercise Clay play or Image theater).

The creative medium functions as a "third element" in the relationship. Instead of communicating only through direct verbal interaction, experiences, emotions, ***and inner conflicts can be expressed indirectly through movement, images, objects, or symbolic action.*** This often creates a safer and less threatening space for exploration and communication.



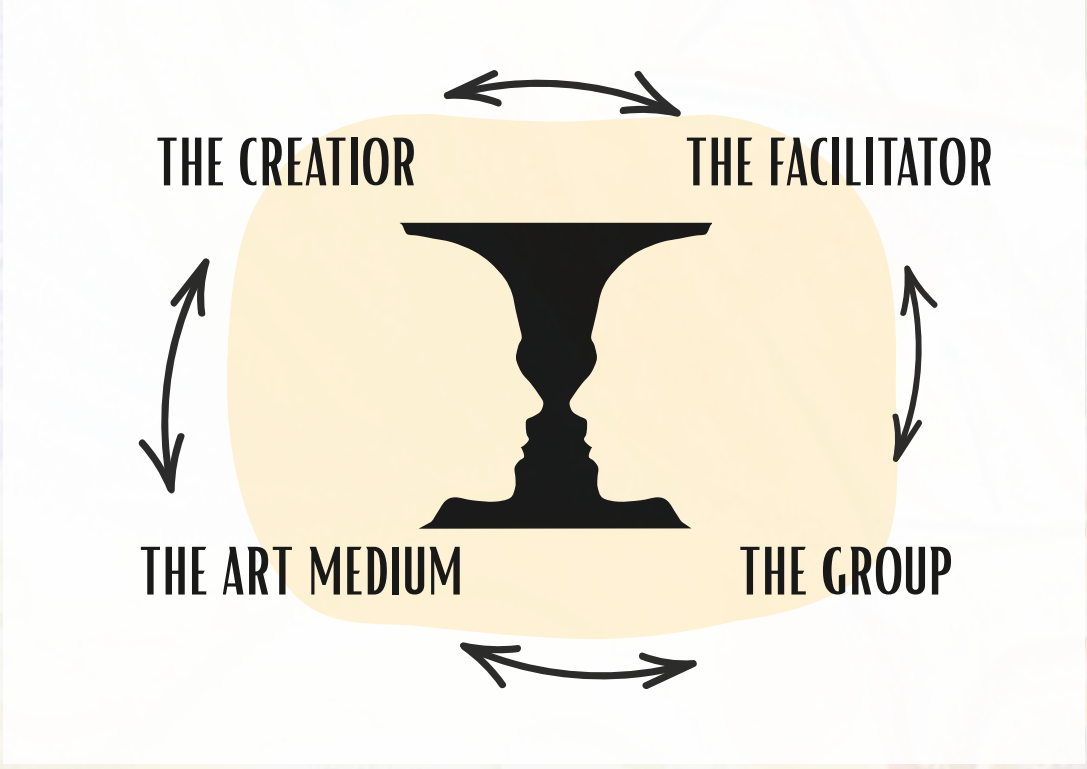
***For example, a young person may express anger, confusion, or vulnerability through movement, a body statue, or drawing rather than speaking about it directly.*

Instead of confronting the young person directly, the youth worker can engage with the creative process together with them by asking questions such as:

"What do you notice in this image?", "How does this movement feel?", or "If this image could speak, what would it say?"

The presence of the artistic medium allows attention to shift flexibly between the relationship with oneself, the creative process, the youth worker, and the group, depending on the needs of the individual and the situation. *Some participants may connect most deeply through the creative medium itself, while others gain insight primarily through dialogue, witnessing, or group interaction. In this way, creative processes allow each person to find their own point of connection and engagement.*

For youth workers, this indirect and embodied form of communication and witnessing can reveal layers of experience that may not emerge through verbal conversation alone.



REFLECTION, INTEGRATION AND TRANSFER

Creative processes do not end with expression itself. ***Reflection and integration are essential parts of embodied and artistic work, allowing experience to gradually become conscious, meaningful, and connected to everyday life.***

Through reflection, participants begin to make sense of the symbolic language that emerged during the creative process — through images, movement, gestures, roles, sensations, emotions, or interactions.

Reflection may happen verbally, through dialogue with others, journaling, or group sharing, but it can also unfold non-verbally through continued embodied awareness, artistic expression, or moments of insight that arise directly within the process itself.

Creative work often ***generates spontaneous "aha" moments,*** where participants suddenly recognize patterns, emotions, inner conflicts, or new perspectives without necessarily analyzing them intellectually.

The creative process can therefore become a space where difficult experiences, tensions, or relational dynamics are explored indirectly and safely within an imaginative and symbolic "as-if" space. *Through movement, artistic expression, role-play, or symbolic interaction, participants may gradually reorganize their perceptions and discover alternative ways of understanding themselves and their situations.* Experiences that initially emerge symbolically may later become more consciously integrated into personal understanding and everyday action.

An important aspect of this phase is ***transfer into daily life.*** Insights gained within creative and embodied processes become meaningful when they begin to influence relationships, communication, self-awareness, and concrete ways of acting beyond the workshop or activity itself. Schuller (2008) describes this process as verification — the conscious testing, embodying, and integration of new understandings and experiences within real-life situations.

The symbolic space of creativity offers a unique balance of safety and experimentation. Because experiences are explored indirectly and imaginatively, participants often feel freer to take emotional, relational, or expressive risks. At the same time, these experiences remain emotionally real and can have a meaningful impact beyond the creative setting itself. *As the boundary between symbolic exploration and everyday life becomes more permeable, participants may gradually develop greater self-awareness, coherence, resilience, and capacity for action.*

For youth work, this phase is especially important because it connects creativity with empowerment and lived experience. The value of creative and embodied work lies not only in expression itself, but in its potential to support young people in developing new ways of relating to themselves, others, and the world around them.

CLAY AND ARTIST (IMAGE THEATRE PRACTICE)

Participants work in pairs. One person is the clay, the other the artist.

The artist shapes the clay without touching them, using gestures, mirroring, invisible strings, breath, movement, gaze, or other non-verbal forms of communication. The sculpture might understand your moves in her\his way. Try to find ways, understand how the sculpture is answering and understanding your moves. ***How is your communication?***

For the artist, be aware that the clay reacts in its own way. Try to find ways to communicate better how you want to sculpt the clay. Because there is no physical touch, the clay maintains greater autonomy over their body and can remain aware of personal comfort and boundaries throughout the process.
After some time, participants switch roles.

1.Exhibition

The group chooses the name of the exhibition they want to see. You are making a sculpture for the exhibition named: " … "
It can be helpful to choose a theme that reflects what feels alive in the group at that moment.
*If needed or wished to bring out certain topics, the facilitator may offer suggestions such as: "Between Fear and Courage", "Hidden Parts", "Belonging", "Power and Support", "Finding My Place", "Connection", "Boundaries", "Invisible Rules ", "Dreams in Motion", "The Gallery of Unfinished Stories", "Sculptures of the Future ".

The artist places the clays in the space and completes the sculpture with one final detail:
fixing the gaze of the sculpture and whispering a word, sentence, or sound connected to the piece.

When all sculptures are complete, the artists are invited to walk through the exhibition.
When they meet the gaze of a sculpture, the sculpture responds with its word, sound, or sentence.

2. Reflection

After visiting the exhibition, participants gather in a circle (or trios - depending on the time) and reflect on the sculptures and the experience.

Possible reflection questions:

What images, themes, or emotions appeared repeatedly in the sculptures?
Which sculptures attracted your attention most strongly and why?
Did any sculpture reflect something familiar from everyday life or society?
How did it feel to embody someone else's artistic vision while still remaining connected to your own body and choices?

Can you relate this experience to communication, leadership, trust, or collaboration in everyday life?
How was it to communicate without touch and mostly without words?
How did you experience being "the clay" and being "the artist"?
How did it feel when your movement or intention was interpreted differently than expected?

This exercise illustrates several dimensions of the creative process described earlier in this chapter: imagination, embodied interaction, symbolic expression, non-verbal dialogue, and reflection through experience.

It also highlights how creative processes are not fully controllable, but emerge relationally through responsiveness, adaptation, and co-creation.

CLAY PLAY

1. Playful Entry with Clay (30 min)

Give everyone a piece of clay
Guided exploration: roll, press, stretch, stack ("biscuits tower")
Notice differences: weight, temperature, texture — pass pieces around
This is outcome-free: just to build intimacy with the material and open curiosity.

2. Solo creation for 40 min

There is an invitation for a solo creation with hands and clay.
The guidelines: : »In a moment, you'll begin shaping your clay in silence. I'll offer you some guiding questions to hold in the back of your mind. They're not tasks to complete, but invitations you can listen to as your hands move.. No pressure to finish or be "artistic" — the clay holds whatever comes.... Encourage hands-on listening: "Let the clay show you — don't overplan." Give yourself permission to explore, not to finish or to make something 'beautiful.'«

Possible FOCUSED QUESTIONS OF CREATIVE PROCESS (choose one or both)

One is about your current state or need:
"If my current state of being had a form, what would it look like?

The other is about qualities or inner resources:
"Which inner strength or quality can support me most right now?"

"What shape represents a safe inner space or support for me in this moment?

Guidelines from facilitator:
"You can let one of these guide you. Or, if it feels natural, you can let your piece carry both — the state you are in and the strength that supports you within it.
There is no right or wrong way. Simply notice what arises in your hands and follow it."

3. Sharing & Witnessing (50 min)

Return to a big circle with finished pieces. Silent gallery walk — everyone places their creation in the center, others walk around, look, feel the atmosphere. Popcorn-style words — for each piece, others name qualities/feelings it evokes. After people share about the peace, each creator (if wished) shares a short sentence:
"This represents…" or "I discovered…" (but keep it brief, so it stays light and open).

AUTHENTIC MOVEMENT

It's a bit more deeper exercise that helps for personal closing of the week, the processes that might have opened and need some closing.
More about the method: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Authentic_Movement
Intro and instructions:

First cycle (cc 20 min - can be longer)

Mover: 8 min of movement
Witness: observes in silence

Immediately after the movement, the witness draws what they experienced/saw (no focus on aesthetics, quick, like an imprint of the experience). Mover can rest in silence during this time or make some notes (-\+3min) .

Reflection - Questions that may help:

The mover shares first, if they wish. (- cc 5 min, if needed more)
If you'd like, share something about your experience.

What did you notice in your body when you started?
Was there a moment that stood out to you?
What emotions or images appeared?
How was it to finish the movement?

Witness sharing A short description (cc. 3 min)
The sharing is not analytical, but in the first person:

"I saw/felt…", not "you were…",
"While watching you, I noticed…" (stays in the first person)
The witness does not interpret the mover's experience, but shares their own impression

Second cycle (20 min)
They switch roles and repeat the same process

Closing together (5 min)
Silence, they place the drawings in front of them, a few words about the experience

***For more example of body based activity using creative process look also exercises in chapter Dialogue and Empowerment, or Image theater exercises (https://dramaresource.com/image-theatre/)*

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DIALOGUE AND EMPOWERMENT



DIALOGUE

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, in his foundational work Pedagogy of the Oppressed, offers a definition of dialogue that goes far beyond conversation. For Freire, dialogue is a fundamental act of humanization, an encounter between people in which they together name and seek to transform their shared reality.

This is an important distinction for youth work. Dialogue is not:

* teacher delivering information to students,
* facilitator telling young people what their problems are or how to fix them,
* a one-way flow of knowledge from expert to participant.

True dialogue, for Freire, is always horizontal. It happens between equals, each of whom brings their own knowledge, experience, and perspective. It requires:

Humility - no one person holds all the truth
Faith in people - a genuine belief in every young person's capacity to think, reflect, and act
Hope - the conviction that change is possible
Critical thinking - approaching reality as something that can be questioned and transformed

For youth workers, this means positioning yourself not as the authority who empowers young people, but as a fellow participant in a shared process of reflection and action.

PRAXIS

Closely connected to dialogue is Freire's concept of praxis: the inseparable unity of reflection and action. Freire argues that:

*__Action without reflection becomes empty -__ young people doing things without understanding why, or without connecting their actions to broader realities

*__Reflection without action__ becomes mere words -thinking and talking about change without ever moving toward it. Praxis means that every activity you facilitate should ideally hold both dimensions: an experience (action) and a space to think about what that experience revealed (reflection).

In practice, this is what a good reflection after a body exercise does - it transforms a physical experience into insight, and insight into the motivation to act differently. Similar emphasis are given also from other authors as we described also in the chapters experiential learning and creative process.

THE BODY AS THE MEDIUM OD DIALOGUE

If dialogue is the foundation, the body is the medium through which it becomes fully alive. We communicate constantly, through movement, gesture, posture, voice, and breath, often without words. Working with the body gives young people the opportunity to express what is difficult or impossible to say verbally, to relate to one another more directly, and to understand each other in new ways.

This is particularly valuable in youth work contexts where verbal language can be a barrier due to trauma, cultural or linguistic difference, limited confidence, or simply the fact that some experiences resist words. Body-based dialogue is inclusive. It does not privilege the articulate or the educated. It opens a shared space where every young person can participate and express their reality on equal terms.

It is also important to recognize that the body is never neutral. It carries social norms, expectations, roles, and power relations within it. How a young person holds themselves, how much space they take up, how they move in relation to others - all of this reflects their social experience. Recognizing this is where body work becomes not just expressive, but political.

This political dimension of the body is at the heart of the work of Augusto Boal, a Brazilian theatre director and activist who developed the ***Theatre of the Oppressed — a set of theatrical methods designed to use the body and performance as tools for social change and the empowerment of marginalized communities.***

Boal was deeply influenced by Freire, and his work can be understood as translating Freire's dialogical pedagogy into physical and theatrical practice. Where Freire worked with words and critical consciousness, Boal worked with bodies and images — but the aim was the same: to transform passive recipients into active subjects of their own reality.

For example: In Image Theatre, one of Boal's core techniques, participants use their bodies to create still images — tableaux — that represent a situation, emotion, relationship, or social reality. No words, no acting experience, and no special skills are required. Anyone can participate.

The images become the starting point for dialogue: What do you see? How does it feel to be in this position? What would need to change? In Freire's terms, Image Theatre is dialogue made physical — a way of naming the world through the body, and then collectively imagining how it might be different.

SENSIBILIZATION AND DEMECHANIZATION

Boal's concept of "demechanization" refers to processes through which individuals become more aware of habitual bodily, emotional, and social patterns and gradually rediscover alternative ways of perceiving, moving, and relating (Boal, 2002). In everyday life, our bodies become mechanized. We repeat the same gestures, adopt the same postures, and move through the world on autopilot. We unconsciously play out fixed social roles through how we walk, how we sit, how we take up (or give up) space. This is not simply a habit. As philosopher Pierre Bourdieu described through the concept of habitus; social norms, class, and culture are literally inscribed in the body - in our posture, our gait, our instinctive sense of what feels "natural" or "appropriate." We carry our social conditioning in our muscles and bones, often without realizing it.

Sensibilization practices work against this automatism.

Through simple exercises like noticing the ground beneath the feet, becoming aware of breath and tension, exploring how the body moves at different speeds or in different postures,participants begin to wake up to what their body is doing and why. This is not about relaxation or wellness. It is about developing body awareness as a form of critical consciousness.

They aim at restoring and broadening the body's capacity to feel, perceive, and respond to itself, to others, and to the world around it.

Some key areas of sensibilization practice include:

Sensory awareness. Exercises that sharpen attention to touch, sound, weight, temperature, and spatial awareness. These help young people arrive in the room, leave distractions behind, and become present to themselves and others.

Rhythm and movement. Working with rhythm as a collective experience. Moving together in rhythm builds a felt sense of connection and synchrony that transcends words. It is a direct, physical experience of being part of a group. It involves also the discovery and sensibilization of voice and inner rhythms and movements.

Expression of reality. Using the body to express personal and social realities. Once sensibilized, participants can begin to give physical form to their experiences, emotions, and the social dynamics they navigate daily.

The goal of sensibilization is ***demechanization:*** *loosening ingrained patterns to discover that the body can move, feel, and relate differently. A young person who has been conditioned to make themselves small discovers they can take up space. One who has learned to be passive discovers the experience of leading. These are small moments, but they carry real significance. A lived, felt sense that things are not fixed, that reality can be shaped.*

EMPOWERMENT IS COLLECTIVE

Working with the body in a group goes far beyond individual sensibilization. It opens a collective dimension that is essential to genuine empowerment.
Freire insists that dialogue, and therefore empowerment, is never a solitary act. It happens between people, in community, in relationships. Empowerment is not about the individual rising above their circumstances alone, but about people together gaining agency over the conditions of their shared lives. Not aiming at just producing individually resilient young people who can cope with difficult circumstances, but to build communities of people who understand those circumstances and can act on them together.

Boal says that when people share physical and expressive experiences in a group, something important occurs: identification, recognition, and resonance. They begin to see their own experiences reflected in others. They discover that what they thought was a private struggle is in fact shared. They feel, perhaps for the first time, that they are not alone. This collectivization of experience is deeply powerful. When a young person's reality is named and recognized by the group - given form in an image, a movement, a moment of shared breath - it shifts from being a personal burden to being a shared social reality. And shared social realities can be collectively questioned and acted upon.

Identification
Participants may identify with what others embody, they recognize themselves or their situation in others. In Image Theatre specifically, identification happens when a participant looks at a frozen image created by others and thinks: that is my reality too. That moment of recognition — quiet, often physical, sometimes arriving as a shock — is the entry point into genuine dialogue.

Recognition
In Boal's exercises, participants frequently discover that their experience is not unique, that others in the room carry similar realities in their bodies. This mutual recognition is not simply comforting. It is politically significant, because it reveals that what felt like a personal problem is in fact a social condition, something produced by structures, norms, and power relations rather than by individual failure.

Resonance
Resonance occurs when something expressed by one person, an image, a gesture, a movement, vibrates in the body of another. It is a felt, somatic response: not just intellectual understanding, but a bodily sense of yes, I know that. This is why body work is so powerful in this context. The body recognizes what the mind might rationalize away. A posture of submission, a gesture of exclusion, a frozen image of isolation, these land differently in the body than they do as words on a page.

Multiplicity of views
This is also where dialogue shows its full power. Dialogue, as Freire defines it, is the opposite of monologue. Rather than one voice defining reality for everyone, the group generates a multiplicity of views and perspectives - several ways of seeing the same situation, different experiences that together create a richer and more complete picture. In body theatre, this multiplicity is visible and tangible: the same image can be read differently by different people in the room, and that diversity of interpretation is not a problem to resolve but an invitation to deeper understanding.
Sharing experiences and making them collective makes us feel more connected, less alone in what we carry. And that sense of connection is not a side effect of the work. It is the work.

SENSIBILIZATION OF SENSES, RHYTHM AND MOVEMENT: PERUVIAN BALL GAME

This game sounds much more confusing than it is – in essence it involves a chain of exchanges of mimed balls. Each participant imagines they are in possession of a ball - football, tennis ball, ping-pong ball, beach ball, any kind of ball or balloon; they imagine what material their object is made out of, and they play with it, in a repetitive rhythm, in such a way that their whole body is involved in the playing and their voice is reproducing, rhythmically, the sound of their own particular type of ball or balloon.

The participants are given a couple of minutes to establish a regular, repetitive, rhythmic action and sound, which they practise while walking around the space.

After a few minutes, the facilitator says 'Find a partner'. At this point each partici-pant finds a partner and the two of them must continue playing with their own balls, facing each other, while at the same time carefully observing the smallest details of their opposite number's ball, its motion and its sound After a minute or so of simultaneous playing and observing, the facilitator says '1, 2, 3-exchange balls' and each partner must immediately take over the other person's ball, adopting that person's particular movements and sounds as exactly as they can. And off they go round the space, with this second ball.

After a similar interval, the facilitator again says 'Find a partner', the players find a different partner and then on 'Exchange balls' they swap balls for a second time. And off they go again, now with their third ball overall. And the whole sequence takes place once more on a fourth ball.

Finally the facilitator says 'Get your original ball back' and, from that moment on, all the participants must try to find the balls they started with, all the while continuing to play with the last ball they acquired. As soon as they have located their original ball, they go up to the person who is in possession of it at the time and say 'That's my ball out you go'. That person then goes and stands on the side and if he himself hasn't yet located his own ball, he searches for it from the sidelines - if he spots it, he goes up to the person who has it and informs her in the same manner. The game goes on until everyone has found their original ball!

If at the end of the game there are still some people who haven't found their ball, you can attempt to piece together the paths of the various balls by asking them who they first swapped with, and then asking those people who they swapped with, and so the eventual destination of the ball is established. This ball 'genealogy' is sometimes impossible to establish, but it can provide a useful illustration of the way actions and sounds have been modified, if each player in the history of a particular ball is asked to demonstrate how they played with it; then the three versions of one ball can be lined up side by side, to show the differences.

IMAGE THEATRE: THE IMAGE OF THE WORLD

In the circle the leader of the game calls out a topic like “house”. The participants imagine an image of a house made by their own body. Participants create, with their bodies, a shape, a statue, in response to an idea or theme. Participants are encouraged to respond quickly to the idea or theme, without ‘thinking too much’. When they are ready they turn their back to the center of the circle. When everybody is ready all the group at the same time shows with her_his body their image of “the house”.
Alternative: For some groups it can work better if the group is walking in the space and when the facilitator claps and shouts a topic, the participants stop and make an image.

It is good to start with simple and concrete propositions. Later go to more complex or abstract ideas like family, love, hope, etc. Holding the image, participants can also observe other images in the group for a few seconds.

If you wish to discuss some special topic, for example “support”, you stop on this image. Everybody in the image stays in the image and looks around who is in a similar image as they. Walking in silence and still in the image they find each other. When they form groups they discuss their images and understanding of the topic in the small group. Returning to the big group, each small group first shows their images. The rest of the group observes and discusses what they see. Emphasise on what they see physically - objectively (I see …) and what the images make them feel, think, in what situation they are - subjectively (It seems to me …). At the end the small group in the images adds their point of view.

The image of the world - Group images
Without arranging who and what one of the group comes on stage/in the middle of the circle and puts him_herself in a statue. The others one by one fill in the image. The image stays frozen. The group can create multiple images of the same topic.

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SAFETY AND ETHICS



UNDERSTANDING SAFETY IN GROUP WORK

Safety is a foundational condition for any form of learning, participation, and interaction in a group. When working through the body, this becomes even more relevant, as experiences are not only cognitive or verbal, but also physical, emotional, and relational. *Safety can be understood as a multidimensional concept that includes:*

- ***physical safety*** *– absence of danger to the body and health*
- ***emotional and psychological safety*** *– a sense that one can express thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment*
- ***social safety*** *– a sense of belonging and acceptance, alongside awareness of boundaries in relationships*

Without all three dimensions, participants are not able to fully participate, explore, and engage in creative or relational processes.

Safety as a Basic Human Need (Maslow)

Maslow's hierarchy of needs describes human needs as structured in levels, where more basic needs must be met before higher levels of development can occur. After physiological needs, safety represents the second level. Safety needs include physical security, stability, predictability, and protection from threat. When these needs are not met, individuals focus their energy on restoring safety, which limits their ability to learn, develop, and engage in higher-level processes. In group work, this means that without a sense of safety, participants are less able to engage, explore, or take part in activities. Safety is therefore a precondition for participation and learning.

Psychological Safety (Amy Edmondson)

Amy Edmondson defines psychological safety as a shared belief within a group that it is safe to take interpersonal risks. This means that a person can speak, ask questions, express disagreement, or make mistakes without fear of punishment, humiliation, or rejection. Although originally developed in organisational contexts, this concept is highly relevant in education and youth work. Psychological safety does not mean the absence of challenge or conflict, but the presence of an environment in which these can occur without threatening the individual. This perspective highlights the relational dimension of safety. Safety is not only about physical conditions, but about the quality of relationships and group dynamics. When psychological safety is present, participation, learning, and creativity increase. When it is absent, participants may withdraw, become passive, or avoid engagement.

Perceived Control and Safety (Locus of Control – Rotter)

Rotter's theory of ***locus of control d***escribes how individuals interpret the causes of events in their lives. A key distinction is made between internal and external locus of control. Individuals with an ***internal locus of control*** perceive outcomes as influenced by their own actions and decisions, while those with an external locus of control attribute outcomes to external factors such as luck, fate, or other people. In the context of safety, this theory highlights the ***importance of perceived control.*** When individuals feel that they have some influence over what is happening, they experience greater predictability and reduced uncertainty, which supports a sense of safety. Conversely, when individuals feel that they have no control over a situation, they may experience helplessness, anxiety, and increased insecurity. In group work, creating conditions where participants have choice, agency, and clarity supports a stronger sense of safety.

BODY, MEMORY AND TRAUMA (TRAUMA-INFORMED PERSPECTIVE)

From a trauma-informed perspective, the body stores experiences, including those that were overwhelming or difficult to process at the time. This means that reactions are not always conscious or rational — the body can respond based on past experiences, even when the current situation is objectively safe.

Working through the body can activate these responses, as it involves sensation, movement, breathing, and contact with others. Even simple exercises, such as focusing attention on the body, breathing, or touch, can trigger discomfort, tension, or strong emotional reactions in some participants.

For example, increased body awareness may bring attention to uncomfortable sensations. Breathing exercises can evoke a sense of loss of control, and physical proximity or touch may be particularly sensitive for individuals with experiences of violated boundaries.
For this reason, it is essential to recognise that activities can be triggering, even when they appear simple.

Facilitators need to provide clear instructions and offer choice, allowing participants to adapt or opt out of activities. It is important to avoid pressure, respect individual boundaries, and observe participant's responses in order to adjust the intensity of the process.

In this context, ***safety does not mean avoiding all discomfort, but creating conditions in which participants feel safe enough to notice, regulate, and express what emerges.***

THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR AND WORKING WITHIN A SAFE SCOPE

Working through the body can activate sensations, emotions, or memories, even in simple activities. For this reason, it is essential to remain aware of the context in which the work takes place.

The role of the facilitator is to create and maintain conditions that support safety, participation, and regulation. This requires a clear awareness of limits. Body-based work in group settings should remain within a manageable and supportive level of experience, where participants can stay present and in contact with what is happening.

In practice, this means:

- *focusing on present-moment experience rather than personal history*
- *avoiding pressure, intensity, or pushing participants beyond their capacity*
- *not encouraging sharing of deep or sensitive personal content*
- *not interpreting or analysing participants' reactions*
- *adjusting the process if strong reactions appear*

When signs of discomfort or activation arise, the facilitator should:

- *slow down and reduce intensity*
- *offer simpler or more grounding options (e.g. breath, movement, orientation in space)*
- *create space rather than deepen the experience*
- *support participants in regaining a sense of stability*

Maintaining these boundaries is essential for ensuring that the process remains safe, appropriate, and aligned with the purpose of the work.

SAFETY AS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY IN GROUP WORK

Although safety is often understood as something that the facilitator provides, in group settings it is always co-created. It emerges through the interaction between participants, the structure of the activities, and the overall group culture.

Safety is not a fixed condition that can be established once at the beginning, but an ongoing process that needs to be supported and adjusted throughout the work.

Because experiences are embodied, participants may respond differently to the same activity. What feels comfortable for one person may feel overwhelming or unsafe for another.

For this reason, safety needs to be approached as flexible and responsive. It requires attention to group dynamics, clear communication, and the possibility for participants to influence how they engage.

This is supported through:

- clear structure and predictability
- choice and agency
- awareness of personal and relational boundaries
- respectful and non-judgmental interaction

Within this framework, group agreements are one of the key tools for supporting safety in practice.

GROUP AGREEMENTS FOR ENSURING SAFETY (FACILITATOR GUIDELINES)

Group agreements are shared principles that guide how participants relate to themselves, each other, and the process, creating a sense of safety for participation. They should be clearly explained, mutually understood, and consistently supported, as they provide predictability, clarity, and a sense of control.

Physical Safety

- Give clear instructions for all movements and use of space
- Remind participants to move with awareness of others
- Encourage participants to stop if something feels unsafe or painful
- Regularly offer the option to take a break

Emotional and Psychological Safety

- Emphasise that participation is always voluntary
- Clearly state that no activity is mandatory, especially in body-based or sensitive exercises
- Explicitly offer options to adapt, pause, or observe
- Provide alternatives so participants can engage according to their comfort level
- Normalise saying “no” without explanation
- Make it clear that refusal is allowed and respected
- Reinforce that there is no right or wrong way to participate
- Reduce performance pressure and comparison
- Invite participants to notice and respect their own limits
- Encourage awareness of sensations, emotions, and personal capacity

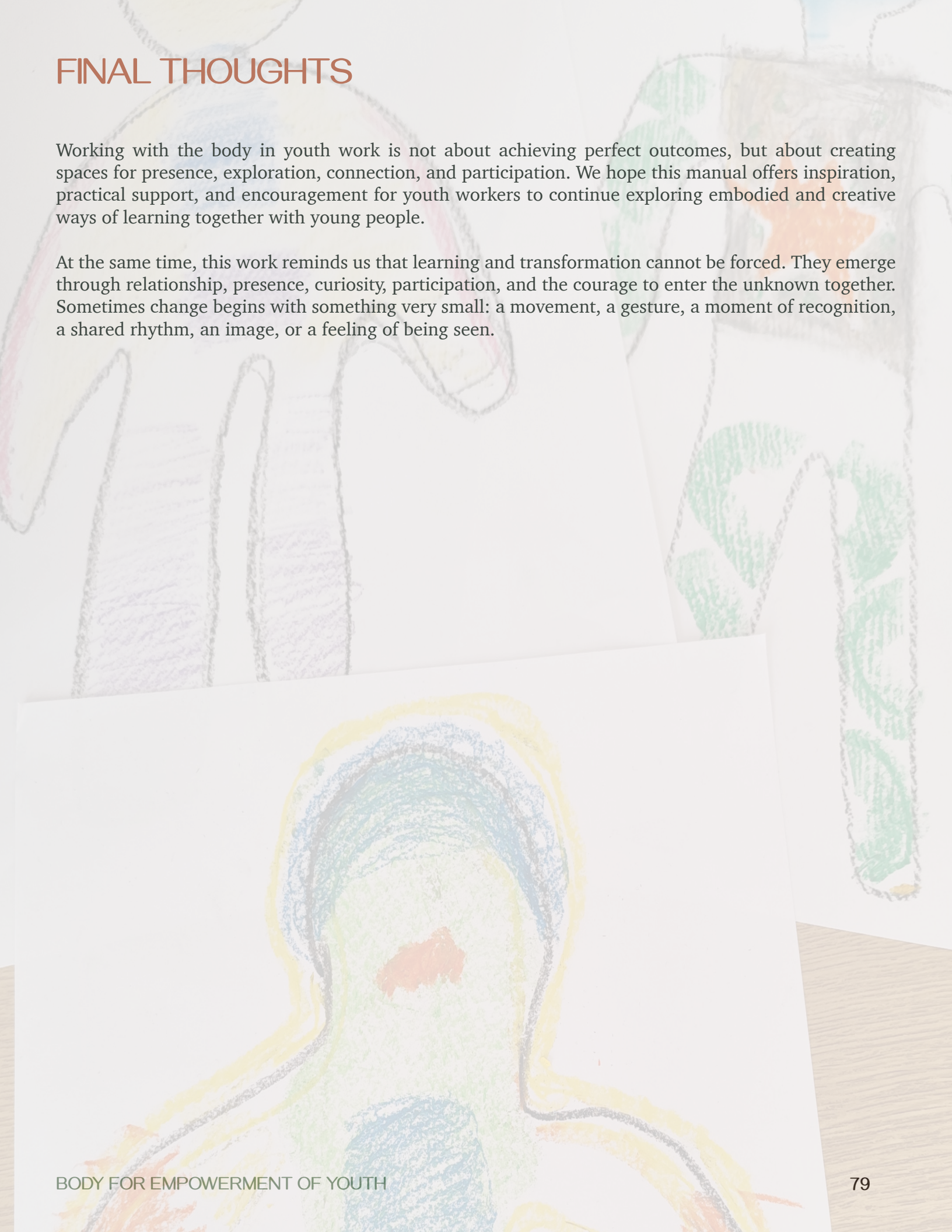
Social Safety

- Clearly set expectations about respecting personal boundaries
- Define boundaries in terms of space, movement, and interaction
- Always introduce and model consent, especially in contact or partner work
- Explain and demonstrate consent before any activity involving proximity or touch
- Address any disrespectful behaviour immediately
- Maintain a safe group atmosphere through timely intervention
- Encourage listening and giving space to others
- Prevent interruption, domination, or pressure
- Establish and remind the group about confidentiality
- Ensure that personal sharing remains within the group

FINAL THOUGHTS

Working with the body in youth work is not about achieving perfect outcomes, but about creating spaces for presence, exploration, connection, and participation. We hope this manual offers inspiration, practical support, and encouragement for youth workers to continue exploring embodied and creative ways of learning together with young people.

At the same time, this work reminds us that learning and transformation cannot be forced. They emerge through relationship, presence, curiosity, participation, and the courage to enter the unknown together. Sometimes change begins with something very small: a movement, a gesture, a moment of recognition, a shared rhythm, an image, or a feeling of being seen.



ADDITIONAL BODY BASED PRACTICES AND EXERCISES

This section brings together additional body-based practices, resources and educational materials that complement the themes explored throughout this manual. The collected content includes selected open manuals and practical tools. We hope these additional resources and exercises will serve you as inspiration, practical support and further exploration.

COMPLETE PRACTICAL MANUALS AND TOOLKITS

1. ***MORE THAN SPORTS***
Manual KA2
Organisations: Amazonas, Empoderar

The More than Sport program is applicable in working with students in higher grades of elementary schools, high school students, and youth. It consists of 10 workshops where sports and physical activities are used as tools for personal development and social learning. The program covers the following areas of learning: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, interpersonal skills, social awareness.

2. ***SPARK***
Toolkit KA2 E+ project
Associations: Karl Vella Foundation, Društvo Moave, FoRC (Friends of Romanian Children)

A practical educational toolkit that combines arts-based and body-based methodologies to support emotional expression, resilience, and experiential learning in youth work. It offers activities focused on art, drama, movement, and non-verbal communication, particularly within trauma-informed and inclusive learning contexts.

3. ***SOMATIC PSYCHOTHERAPY TOOLBOOK***
25 Worksheets and Exercises to Treat Trauma & Stress
Manuela Mischke-Reeds

A practical somatic resource offering body-based exercises, worksheets and therapeutic tools for working with trauma, stress, and nervous system regulation. It integrates body awareness, grounding, mindfulness and movement-based practices to support emotional processing, self-regulation, and embodied awareness.

TRAINING-COURSE MATERIALS AND COLLECTIONS OF EXERCISES

1. ***LAYERS OF EXISTENCE***
   Toolkit from training course for youth workers, 2025, Latvia
   Coordinating organisation: Zaptes Ruki

A practical collection of body-based and experiential methods developed through the Layers of Existence training course. The toolkit explores embodiment, body awareness, breath, emotions, identity, relationships, communication, and connection with others. It includes simple exercises for grounding, movement, body awareness, trust and connection, communication, perspective-taking, voice, and improvisation, with reflection questions and practical guidance for facilitators. The activities are designed for youth workers, facilitators, and beginners and can be adapted to different group sizes, contexts, and needs.

2. ***BODY & SOUL***
   Toolkit based on EXPANDING ROUTES PROJECT
   Organisations: Anshei Maase, Egyesek Youth Association, Semadar Learning Center, EstYes, Smokinya Foundation, Synergy Flow, SynCro – Synergy

A practice-based toolkit for youth workers offering experiential and body-based activities that combine movement, sensory awareness and reflection. The booklet supports group cohesion, team building and embodied learning processes within non-formal education settings.

3. ***ECHOES AND BODIES***
   Toolkit from training course for youth workers, 2025, Latvia
   Organisation: Zaptes Ruki

The manual is a collection of experiential, body-based and nature-based methods developed within E+ training contexts focused on somatics, contact improvisation, ecopsychology and Nonviolent Communication. It offers a structured set of practical tools for youth work, combining movement practices, trust-building exercises, communication games and reflective group processes.

4. ***PIA-Play, Improvisation and Art Part 1***
   Learning material from 2 E+ training course for youth workers, 2025 and 2026, Slovenia
   Coordinating organisation: Association of Nurturing earth and spirit

Gathered workshops and theory on the topic of play, improvisation and art as non-formal education tools. It includes somatic movement and theory, theatre games, body improvisations, art as an expressive medium, games, communication exercises and group facilitation tools to support presence, consent and relational awareness.

PART 2
Workshops designed by participants.

5. ***MOVE FOR WELL BEING OF YOUTH***
Learning material from E+ training course for youth workers, 2022, Slovenia
Coordinating organisation: Association of Nurturing earth and spirit

Gathered workshops and theory on the topic mental health, self-regulation, body and somatics, Theater of the oppressed, role play, nature, river of life and others.

6. ***MOVEMENT, COMMUNITY, AND NATURE FOR EMPOWERMENT FOR YOUTH***
Learning material from E+ training course for youth workers, 2023, Slovenia
Coordinating organisation: Association of Nurturing earth and spirit

Gathered workshop with methods/tools of youth work using Theater of the oppressed, different body and somatic tools, nature, authentic relating and others.

7. ***TOWARDS HOLISTIC WELL-BEING OF YOUTH***
Learning material from E+ training course for youth workers, 2021, Slovenia
Coordinating organisation: Association of Nurturing earth and spirit

Workshops, tools and theory on the topic holistic mental health and well-being of youth - which also use body based methods and experiential learning through creative media. Body and biology of stress, NVC, values, working with inner conflict through physical theater and theater of the oppressed (rainbow of desires, cops in the head).

8. ***BODY FOR EMPOWERMENT***
Sharing tools notes, 2025, Slovenia
Association of Nurturing earth and spirit

Getting to know each other through the body, physical theatre and games, contemporary dance practices and body awareness, supporting self and others through body-touch activities, Gestalt games and exercises, emotional regulation and co-regulation through somatic work, offering and receiving support, consent and boundaries, reflection questions.

9. ***PHYSICAL AND IMAGE THEATER GAMES, THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED***
Summary of the workshops on theater of the Oppressed (principles, image theater, intro to rainbow of desire)

10. ***FASCIA OF HUMANITY***
Toolkit from training course for youth workers, 2024, Slovenia
Organisation: Moave

A practical methods collection developed through an Erasmus+ training course integrating somatics, ecopsychology and contact improvisation. Using fascia as both a biological and metaphorical concept, it explores embodied awareness, resilience, connection and collective support through movement, reflection, touch and experiential learning practices.

11. *SPACE INSIDE*

Toolkit from training course for youth workers, August 2023, Latvia
Coordinating organisation: Zaptes Ruki

Discover how embodied emotional intelligence can improve one's ability to respond resiliently. A collection of tools for exploring ourselves through somatic and experiential approaches, including dance, improvisational theatre, contact improvisation, empathic communication methods, and body-awareness exercises.

12. *COME AS YOU ARE*

Learning material from E+ training course for youth workers, 2024, Slovenia
Coordinating organisation: Association of Nurturing earth and spirit

Gathered workshop material on topics of personal growth, embodiment, creativity, connection to nature and group cohesion using holistic and somatic practices. Embodied movement and contact improvisation, forest walks, solo wanders, nature-based rituals, art & creative expression, NVC, the way of council, authentic movement.

13. *TRUE ESSENCE*

Methods collection of E+ training course for youth workers, Slovenia, 2023
Coordinating organisation: Metta Association

Booklet offers a wide range of body-based, movement-oriented and somatic activities designed to support group connection, self-awareness, emotional expression, and embodied learning. It integrates approaches such as Feldenkrais, contact improvisation, voice work, nature-based practices and reflective group processes, providing youth workers with practical tools to facilitate experiential and embodied group experiences.

14. *WHISPERS OF NATURE*

Learning material from E+ training course for youth workers, 2024, Slovenia
Coordinating organisation: Association of Nurturing earth and spirit

A collection of experiential exercises, methods, and reflections for working with young people through the body, nature and relationships.

15. *PSSSST*

Toolkit from training course for youth workers, 2024, Slovenia
Organisation: Moave

The resource includes activities and methods focused on communication, self-expression, emotional awareness, participation and social inclusion, encouraging reflection, dialogue and personal development within youth work settings.

16. NATURE WITHIN ME

Learning handbook from E+ youth exchange, 2022, Slovenia
Coordinating organisation: Metta Association.
Partner: Association of nurturing earth and spirit

A practical experiential learning handbook developed within an Erasmus+ youth exchange, combining body-based practices, movement, trust-building activities, reflection, nature connection, and creative group processes. It offers tools that support self-awareness, emotional expression, group cohesion, and embodied learning through somatic, ecological, and non-formal education approaches.

ADDITIONAL AND THEORETICAL LITERATURE

You can find the games of Theatre of The Oppressed and more literature here:

Boal, A. (1979). Theatre of the Oppressed. Pluto Press.

Boal, A. (2002). Games for Actors and Non-actors. Routledge.

Fritz, B. (2012). InExActArt - The Autopoietic Theatre of Augusto Boal. A Handbook of Theatre of the Oppressed Practice

Translated also in slovenian.