



Vol' Go! Handbook

Mental health sensitive approach
to youth work and inclusive
volunteering management

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1. Introduction

In the Volunteer&GO! (Vol'Go!) -Erasmus+ project, the best practices and methodologies of inclusive volunteering in partner countries (Cyprus, Finland, Portugal and Slovenia) have been mapped out and collected through an international desk and field research report (PR1), a Guide for inclusive youth volunteering management has been written (PR2) and this handbook (PR3), opens the idea of a mental health sensitive approach in youth work and inclusive volunteering activities.

Vol'Go! -project highlights young people's own voice, as they are experts by experience in terms of what kind of actions lead to sensitive encountering of youngsters, who have different challenges like mental health problems in their life. Young people attending inclusive volunteering and peer activities have participated in the developing of the handbook and planning of concrete steps, that lead to lowering the threshold for participation in accessible volunteering, also on an international level. One important goal of the project was to open the concept of mental health sensitivity and break down barriers that youngsters experience on their path of inclusion.

As a society, we strive for inclusion and non-discrimination, and inclusion is one way in increasing meaningful participation possibilities. Sensitive encountering and acknowledging the skills and autonomy individually, despite of their challenges in certain areas of life, creates a sense of significance and an experience of influencing opportunities. This increases well-being and personal growth. Often, the need for support in some area of life is perceived as an obstacle to participation. This is absolutely not the case.

On the contrary, young people have enormous potential and power even if they are in the current moment not able to full-time participate in working or studying life. The professionals' important task is to sensitively help young people identify and discover their own resources and skills, and to regulate their ability to cope, so that participation in voluntary activities and inclusion is possible despite different individual vulnerabilities and challenges.

Inclusive volunteering includes the idea of equality and everyone's active role as an important and unique member of the community. In terms of preventing marginalization and discrimination, the experience of having meaningful life content and being accepted in a community as oneself, plays a very significant role. When it comes to a young person's self-esteem and finding their own role in society, we are dealing with sensitive areas of humanity. Therefore, a sensitive approach to encountering the mental health of young people must be recognized as an important way of working and as a positive and effective tool in rehabilitation.

The content of this handbook can be used by both young inclusive volunteers and professionals organizing activities for young people. It opens the basis for a mental health sensitive approach and interaction, which is a useful dialogue skill that can be used by everyone. Mental health sensitivity can be applied when encountering any person, group of people, and within any frame of reference, although this handbook focuses on young people with mental health challenges. When understanding and assimilating the concept of mental health sensitivity, each one of us can, not only be a better companion for other people, but also understand ourselves better.



The concept of mental health

When describing methods of mental health sensitivity, it is first necessary to open up what is meant by the term mental health in general. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) “mental health is state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. And it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development.” (World Health Organization, 2022)

Every person has mental health. It is not a permanent feature that some people master, and others don't. It is a humane factor that varies in one's life depending on many things. All of us must deal with the fact that sometimes we have more strength than other times, like it happens with physical health. Mental health is an asset that varies for each person according to their current life situation and circumstances. Some have more resilience than others, and the amount of resilience also varies depending on acute stress factors. Some mental disorders can be treated, while others can become chronic.

Mental wellbeing and positive mental health

Mental health care has traditionally been based on treating mental problems. Peer support has also been offered mainly when talking about shared problems. Over the past few years, alongside the traditional problem-oriented treatment culture, a resource-oriented approach emphasizing positive mental health has emerged. Inclusivity and participant-orientation are very effective ways of supporting mental wellbeing, and positive factors like common interests of the participants can be in focus of peer activities instead of their common problems.

Encouraging people through their strengths and skills and helping them identify the positive things in their lives, support mental health more efficiently, when compared to references that focus on just perceiving problems. In our societies the way of thinking is often linked to favoring of neurotypical living experiences, which leads to idealization of certain ways of thinking and acting, leaving the individuals with different needs and coping skills excluded.

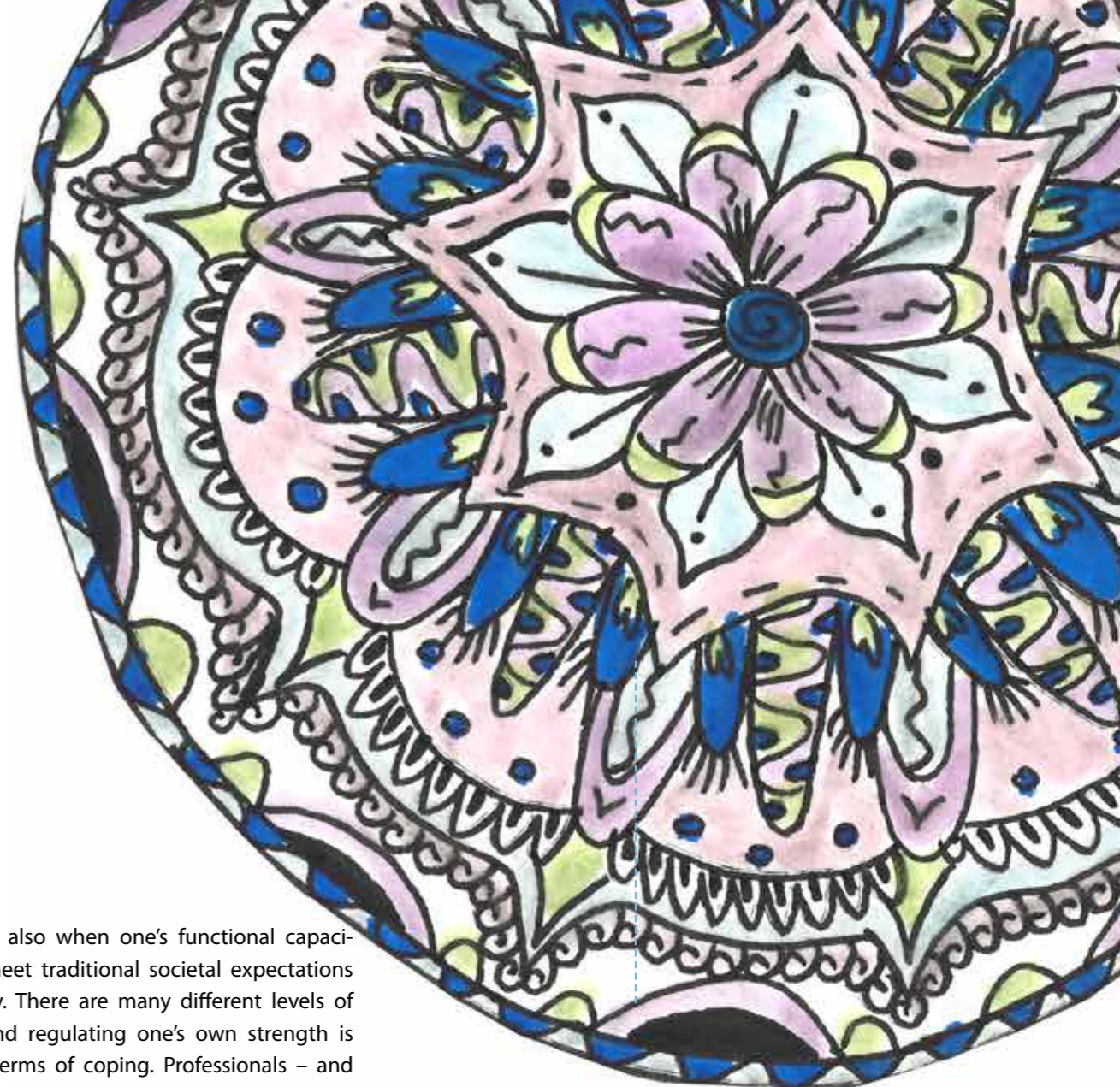
When a youngster is asked what they are good at instead of what difficulties they have, their thoughts inevitably turn to positive sectors in their life. When offered the opportunity for both low threshold participation in volunteering activities, and individual support, people can discover their abilities to act and influence their environment, even if they are in an otherwise challenging or difficult life situation. Increasing the experience of autonomy in one area of life, encourages autonomous activity in other areas of life as well. Challenges and the need for mental health support should not prevent young people from living a meaningful life and from functioning within their own capacity. Between full ability to work or study and total marginalization, there need to be different ways and possibilities to participate

and influence, also when one's functional capacity does not meet traditional societal expectations of productivity. There are many different levels of self-efficacy and regulating one's own strength is important in terms of coping. Professionals – and maybe even more importantly young peers mentoring each other – can help youngsters to discover and recognize their capacity and the limits of endurance.

The concept of positive mental health moves the focus away from the illness-centered approach in mental health care and the disregard of each person's individuality and identity, due to their disorder and life situation. When the problems are acute, they need to be treated and during the acute phase it can feel like the whole life revolves only around them, but in long-term, taking care of mental health is much more than just perceiving and concentrating on different problems and solving them. An important task of youth workers and peer mentors is to remind the young person experiencing a difficult life phase, that the situation is not permanent. There is always hope, and there are people who can offer professional and peer support. All feelings are allowed and they don't have to be handled and felt alone at home in isolation from the rest of the world. Empathy towards oneself and others grows when one becomes accepted as themselves, in a mental health sensitive environment.

The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare defines that positive mental health consists of various levels of emotional (feelings), psychological (positive actions), social (relationships with others and society), physical (physical health and fitness) and spiritual (the sense that life has a meaning) wellbeing. (Finnish institute for health and welfare, 2022)

The positive approach in mental health care emphasizes the perspective of hope, no matter how difficult the situation currently is. The future is ahead, and it can be better than the previous times. Concentrating on one's skills and talents and the positive factors of mental health instead of the difficulties and problems, has a great impact on one's wellbeing and self-image. What you focus on increases in your mind, so focusing on positive things also leads to an increase in positive mental health.



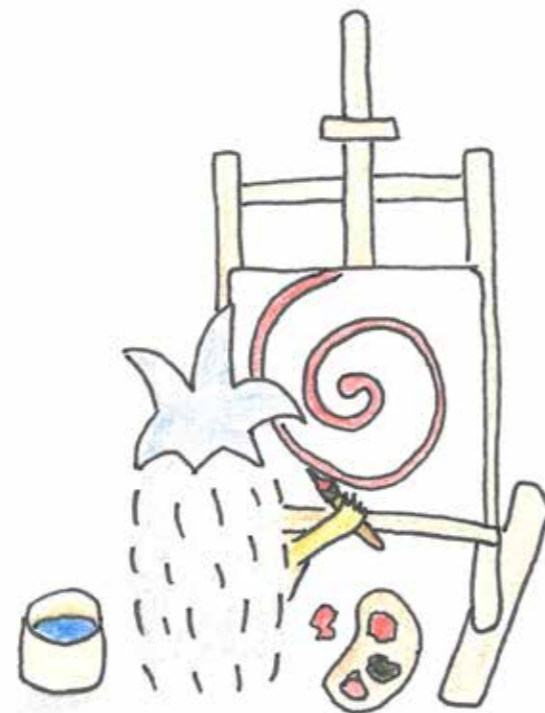
Mental health sensitivity

Through accepting the idea that we all need sensitivity in our encounters, we can support others in equal way. Each of us benefits from internalizing a mental health sensitive way of acting, in all our interactions. There is no general way or script for how to sensitively approach someone who suffers from mental health problems. The environment of community places, the atmosphere, and the way of encountering, however, can be secured to be supportive and sensitive to mental health. Accessibility is not only a physical aspect. It also includes the idea of a safer space and an authentic presence of another person.

Sensitivity towards others is partly guided by instinct and intuition, but it is also a skill and method of working that can be developed and improved. A mental health sensitive approach means to not assuming anything about others, but asking, listening, encouraging, and respecting everyone as they are. The need for support is always individual and the individual themselves is the best expert of their own life experiences and needs. Sensitivity means the ability to be fully present and reach another's feelings and experiences and then adapt one's own actions individually in relation to that information. The mental health sensitive approach gives participants also useful tools to develop their mental health coping skills. Recognizing feelings and one's own limits is important for the future and the nurturing of mental well-being. Communication styles and recognition of how and why we interact the way we do, and what consequences our actions have, are also important mental health skills. A positive, supportive, encouraging and gentle attitude towards oneself and oth-

ers increases sensitivity in all interactions. Supporting the youth to feel autonomy when it comes to making decisions concerning their own wishes and values, increases their experience of self-reliance and positive mental health.

The concept of mental health sensitivity refers to willingness and ability of respecting others, regardless of their background or experiences. It means flexibility to the needs of other people, empathy and sincere interest in their feelings and thoughts. It also includes the requirement of confidentiality in the community place, so people can share their peer thoughts and feelings. Without trust there is no sensitivity.



Peer support increases mental health sensitivity

Inclusive volunteering and peer activities are a very efficient way of increasing young person's dialogue skills, feeling of autonomy, self-acceptance, experiences of personal success, meaningful life content and mental health sensitivity. When concentrating on mental health sensitivity, creating a safe space and safe atmosphere is very important. When including youngsters' ideas and experiences already in the planning process of the peer and volunteering activities, the program can be developed to truly meet the needs and interests of the youth.

The coordinating partner of Vol'Go! is Sosped Foundation. Sosped is short for social pedagogy, which is a branch of science that offers general support for social growth concerning everyone. On the other hand, social pedagogy offers special educational social work, which concerns those who need special support due to various difficulties related to exclusion from education or work, mental health challenges, substance abuse problems, difficult family circumstances, disabilities, etc. The aim of all Sosped's activities is to support people's social participation, integration into society, and to prevent and alleviate exclusion. The ability to use different mental health and coping skills increases the flexibility of the mind and helps one to cope also with possible later life crises. Sosped has several culture houses around Finland, where young adults currently having different mental health problems or otherwise a difficult life period, are inclusively volunteering as peer tutors and organizing cultural activities



to other young people participating culture house activities. The culture house model is used also by many other NGO's due to the effects of its positive and empowering approach.

In the culture house model, young people are trained to volunteer as peer group leaders. The model doesn't concentrate on finding similar problems between the young peer participants, but the common and shared skills and interests. Professionals are supporting the peer tutors, who plan and lead the groups around different cultural themes for other young people, who are recovering in the culture house. The community is a discrimination-free zone, based on equality, activity and autonomy of the youngsters, peer support, and inclusive volunteering. Inclusive volunteering is a tool in the recovery process for the young peers, and volunteering as a cultural activity leading peer tutor and taking an active role in one's own life also increases the youngsters feeling of self-capacity and efficacy.

In the culture house model, the social skills of young peers are strengthened in various individual roles as part of the community. The support and mental health sensitivity skills of culture house community workers and young inclusive volunteers, and peer support among young people and their increasing opportunities to influence, contribute to increasing life control and paying attention to one's own well-being and interests. That broadens the perspective of hope in life, which again supports the recovering process. In the culture houses, young peers inclusive volunteering are the basis of the entire community as they plan, organize, and lead different cultural groups and activities to other young participants. In a culture house, young adults at risk of exclusion get to be experts and influencers. Culture house model is one example of a mental health sensitive community and positive effects of inclusive volunteering possibilities. The steps of how to create an inclusive community place like a culture house, are represented in Vol'Go!'s Guide for Inclusive Volunteering.

Young peers' experiences of mental health sensitivity

When developing Vol'Go's handbook about the mental health sensitive approach as an essential tool to be used in inclusive volunteering programs for youth, and in youth work in general, we asked the youngsters currently participating in inclusive volunteering and peer activities what mental health sensitivity means to them. According to their experience and with their own words, a sensitive encounter with mental health and youth inclusive volunteering, also on international level, is realized when the following things are considered:

- Open dialogue and a safe space, a community where every individual is respected as themselves.
- Certain structures, such as schedules and the principles of a safer space and discrimination free zone, bring security.
- Freedom to speak about different topics and values, but with respect towards others. All opinions are equal as long as they are expressed respectfully and don't hurt anyone present.
- Peer support and knowing that other participants also have need for support and maybe similar problems or understanding how it feels when one has mental health issues.
- The use of gender-neutral pronouns and avoid-

ing assumptions is sensitivity.

- Permission to change as a person and change one's opinion, which promotes and enables individual growth and development.
- To have a right to reserve time for one's own well-being also as a member of a community.
- It is good to agree on certain common practices that are agreed with the inclusive volunteers as well. These rules are important to prevent situations where someone is triggered because of for example a delicate subject of discussion etc.
- Plain language communication and transparency of processes are important.
- In peer activities, it creates a feeling of security and sensitivity, if one can bring a support person or mentor volunteer with them, if necessary, for example due to too much excitement and anxiety.
- Mental health sensitive atmosphere creates trust and equal opportunities to influence and participate for everyone in every situation.

And when volunteering abroad:

- Mental health rehabilitators who participate in inclusive volunteering programs need a named contact person, someone who can be reached during volunteering abroad, and also outside of traditional office hours. There must be clear instructions on who can be caught in relation to what matters and when. That decreases anxiety.
- When going abroad to participate in an inclusive volunteering exchange, one should have time and support to familiarize themselves with the destination country's culture and ways of working.
- Language skills for the coordinator of the inclusive activities in the country of origin, as also for the coordinator in the country of destination and the volunteer, are important so that there are no unnecessary misunderstandings.
- Letting young volunteers know where they get help and support in case of mental health getting worse during the volunteering period abroad.



Safer space guidelines

A safe space is an inclusive place that is intended to offer participants a sense of physical and mental safety. To create a safe space, there are certain guidelines to follow. The following safer space guidelines are from equality.fi, which is a data base maintained by the Ministry of Justice in Finland. Equality.fi page contains information and tools for everyone who is interested in promotion of equality and non-discrimination. (Equality.fi, n.d.)

- Respect everyone's physical and mental personal space. One cannot know where another person's boundaries lie without asking them. Make sure you ask before touching anyone. Listen to others and adapt your behavior if someone indicates that your behavior makes them feel uncomfortable.

- Respect everyone, don't assume things. Don't make assumptions about other people's sexuality, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, values, socio-economic background, ability, or health. Respect pronouns and names. Be aware of your own privileges.
- No body discrimination. Don't comment on another person's body. Also do not comment on other people's eating and meal sizes.
- Respect the opinions, beliefs, experiences, and differing viewpoints of others. Don't mock, ridicule, disparage, sideline, or humiliate anyone with your words, behavior, or actions.
- Assume responsibility for your own actions and behavior. Remember that your actions affect other people, regardless of your good intentions.
- Give space. Do your best to ensure that everyone gets to participate in discussions. Don't disregard other people's opinions; give others the chance to speak. Respect the privacy of others and treat sensitive topics respectfully.
- Intervene in harassment if you witness it and ask the person who was harassed whether they would like help or support.



Encouraging the youth to Volunteer and Go!

How is mental health sensitivity concretely implemented in the inclusive volunteering programs for young people? This handbook provides an overview of a mental health sensitive approach, and best practices for mental health

sensitive support of youth inclusive volunteer exchanges. There are many things to consider when planning volunteering abroad, to make the participation safe and empowering for the young inclusive volunteers. This chapter presents practical plans and measures to ensure the implementation of mental health sensitive approach during youth volunteer exchanges. For more detailed information on how to create and manage an inclusive volunteering program, read the Volunteer&GO! – Guide for inclusive volunteering (PR2).

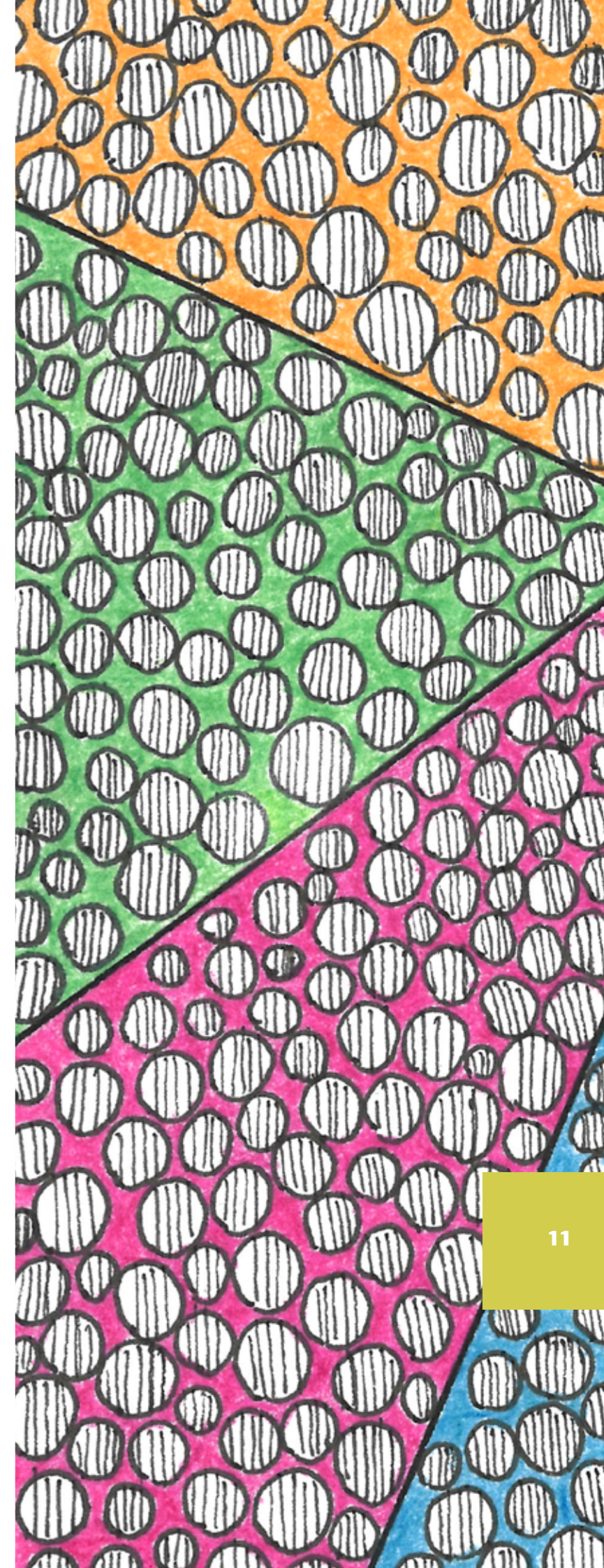
When planning a mental health sensitive and inclusive exchange program for young people, the professionals must do some research and create safe networks and contacts before or as part of creating the volunteering program. The volunteer gives their time to the organizing body, and the role of the volunteer does not include responsibility for the quality of the activity other than for their own contribution. There can be a lot of differences in cultures and operating methods from country to country, and the professionals organizing the activities are responsible for supporting the safety and well-being of the volunteers during their volunteering period. Following the steps and instructions described in this chapter, will help organizing international and mental health sensitive inclusive volunteering activities.



Suitability of the volunteering task

It is recommendable that a young person first participates in voluntary activities in their own country, so that the burden of the activity and the limits of one's own coping skills and strength become clear and known. That is a good way to avoid overload and to ensure endurance and mental well-being during the voluntary exchange. It is appropriate for the coordinators of inclusive volunteering activities to consider on a case-by-case basis whether a young person will be sent on the trip alone at all, or whether a more experienced mentor volunteer or employee will accompany them. Sometimes encouraging a young person to try a new way of participation through inclusive volunteering is what the youngster needs, but sometimes it is better to encourage the young person to postpone participation in the exchange, e.g. while waiting for the improvement of their mental health and endurance, or the accumulation of age.

When organizing an activity for minors, it is always the responsibility of the volunteer organizer to find out the laws of their own country and destination country, which set their own frame of reference for organizing activities for children. In inclusive and sensitive approach, the professionals should support the youth to consider different options and recognize their own limits and resources.





Researching and recognizing risks

Traveling always involves the risk of unexpected situations and the need for flexibility. It is the organizing professional's responsibility to ensure that the volunteer can participate in the inclusive activity in such a way that they gain resources instead of losing them. Inside and outside the EU there are different rules and laws, which applies to e.g. for traveling in or outside the Schengen countries. Various agreements between countries affect matters like whether an identity card is suitable as a travel document or whether a passport is needed, whether a visa is needed, and whether an English copy of medicine prescriptions printed at a pharmacy is enough or a paid Schengen

certificate is needed for the possible medicines to be transported. Any restrictions and recommendations related to the current world situation and regarding the circumstances in the destination country, must also be clearly reviewed with the volunteer.

Before booking the flights, check carefully which countries the volunteer is traveling through, as sometimes the transfer connection may be through a country with different regulations than the destination country. Remember that taking care of the volunteer's wellbeing and coping, benefits all parties and saves resources. For example, the cheapest flight option is not always the most profitable, if the transfer times are long and the traveling requires long waiting hours at airports, for if already the traveling phase consumes too much of the volunteer's energy, anxiety and fatigue arise in an already exciting situation, and inclusiveness and sensitive consideration of mental health will not be realized.

Communication

Clarity in dialogue with young volunteers and partner networks organizing the inclusive volunteering program is the basis for the trust that the mental health sensitive approach requires. The professionals coordinating the supported volunteering activity need to communicate in plain language and be clear about what is expected from the volunteer and what kind of support is available to them before, during and after the volunteering program.

Before committing to the program, the young volunteer should be told clearly about everything regarding the traveling requirements, without assuming they have any background knowledge. The coordinating youth worker must also explain which expenses are covered during the volunteering period, and whether the volunteer is required to use

their own resources during the trip. Be clear about how and who obtains tickets, what travel documents and what type of insurance are needed, how to make traveler declarations, how meals and accommodation are arranged, what to take in consideration in the culture of the destination country, and who is the contact person that will help with any matter while staying abroad.



Networks

The networks of NGO's and other entities formed in the partner countries, that share interest in volunteering and inclusiveness of young people as well as in their mental health wellbeing, are an important platform for co-operation, when the concrete participation in an inclusive voluntary task begins to be mapped. The practices related to the support and the need of it, the division of responsibilities of the sending and receiving organization, and the details of the volunteering task and contact persons, are always agreed with professionals from both countries and the young volunteer together. It is the most important thing to note that when planning the traveling for and with inclusive volunteers, the need for support during the whole traveling time should be taken into account. The volunteer's responsibility should be just to ensure that they have the visas and travel documents they need in addition to their luggage, and then enjoy their inclusive volunteering period.

Depending on the country, the instructions, rules and laws differ from each other. Vol'Go!'s partners have listed the main practices of their own countries that affect the organizing and participation of young people in voluntary work in each country. Many inclusive volunteering programs are developed in projects which are tied to a specific period and end after a couple of years of development work. The field of inclusive volunteering and positive mental health is also developing all the time. In order for this handbook to last over time, up-to-date and country specific practices and policies are listed on Vol'Go!'s website. On the webpage there are summaries of specific procedures and instructions of partner countries Cyprus, Finland, Portugal and Slovenia to familiarize with. The webpages will be updated during and after the project so that the instructions remain

up-to-date and accessible. On the Vol'Go!'s webpage there is also information about young people's volunteering opportunities and organizations that offer the participation possibilities in our partner countries. You can contact Sosped Foundation, if you are interested in sharing an article about youth inclusive volunteering and/or mental health sensitivity, good practices, links and contacts on our website, www.volgo.eu.



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