



**Healthy
Communities**

Modul 7

Mental Health



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the European Union**

Partners involved:



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www.eurocultura.it

Italy



www.gesundheitbb.de

Germany



www.stowarzyszeniestop.pl

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www.caritas-wien.at

Austria

About the Project

With our **HEALTHY COMMUNITIES** project, we illustrate the contribution that adult education can strengthen the health skills of all citizens (including and especially groups with fewer opportunities), counteracting marginalization, and strengthening participation and commitment. One shortcoming of current health skills development programs is that they do not reach all population groups.

The project team has chosen to focus on the local community, in particular through the connection to the living environment in the community, which has so far only been elementary developed.

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Module 7 – Mental Health

1. Emotional First Aid – Materials for Health Guides

Emotional first aid. What it is and how to provide it effectively?

Emotional first aid is the ability to respond constructively when you or someone around you experiences an emotional or psychological crisis. An emotional crisis is temporary. Mostly we manage to get out of it ourselves. However, there are people who, as a result of certain events, need the help of other people to return to optimal functioning. Emotional support provided to them at an early stage often determines their return to well-being.

Emotional first aid in a crisis includes various interventions that we can undertake in response to changes in behavior observed in people, perceived as warning signals of emotional or mental problems.

It is the equivalent of medical first aid, which is worth using in situations of difficulties or emotional trauma.

The most important goals of emotional first aid are:

- noticing the person's needs, understanding the difficulties they are experiencing and realizing the seriousness of the situation by collecting available facts;
- help in alleviating unpleasant emotional states;
- assistance in identifying resources and sources of support as well as selecting the most appropriate forms of assistance and, if necessary, engaging other people or services.

Three areas to consider in the emotional first aid process:

1. Facts – what is happening/happened...
2. Identifying emotions without judging their value
3. Response – intervention in response to reported needs

Crisis and stress

A person in crisis experiences stress. Stress, in turn, affects brain functioning. When we live under stress for a long time, in a sense we are not ourselves, e.g. we do not think rationally - then certain structures of the human brain function differently, contributing to difficulties in coping with problems. These biological changes cause the way of perceiving reality and reacting to it to be significantly narrowed, which may manifest itself in extreme cases of anxiety or depression.

How does a person in crisis function?

If a person in crisis does not receive proper help and does not feel relief, the crisis may cause changes and even functional disorders in many areas. It is worth remembering and trying to understand this, because it often happens that we provide emotional help to people who experience prolonged states of difficulty, loneliness and emotional crises. Being aware of these changes as the consequences of

long-term difficulties will make it easier for us to accept the person's behavior and reactions, and thus help more effectively.

What can we expect?

In the area of feelings - the following may dominate: sadness, fear, anger, grief, rage, despair, doubt, helplessness, loneliness, sense of guilt, shame, sense of threat, doubt.

In the area of thoughts - content often appears expressing cognitive confusion, difficulties in clearly formulating judgments and rationally controlling the situation, e.g.: It's over; Hopelessness; This is an injustice; I can't stand it any longer; I think I'm going crazy; There must be some way out; What else can happen to me? I'm useless; It was my fault; What will others think?; There is no way out. The ability to realistically assess reality may be reduced in favor of thoughts of resignation, as well as the ability to concentrate and remember.

In the area of behavior - they are often uncoordinated and sometimes self-destructive. People in crisis may abuse medications or alcohol, withdraw from contact with other people, are often unable to perform everyday activities, and give up pleasure.

In the body area - experiencing an emotional crisis also affects the functioning of the body, which may manifest itself in sleep problems (insomnia or excessive sleepiness), eating problems (loss or increase in appetite), lack of strength, tension, frequent infections

Many people dealing with psychological and emotional help emphasize that very often the key factor that supports the provision of effective help is attentiveness to the sense of loneliness of the person to whom we provide help. Loneliness is a feeling often experienced in the modern world, and the subjective feeling of loneliness may also be felt by people who apparently function well in the social environment.

It is worth taking this aspect into account when contacting the person we are helping. This will help us professionally understand and overcome difficulties presented at the level of feelings and thoughts as well as non-standard behaviors of the person we work with. At the same time, we can also observe that when we genuinely accompany a person, the feeling of loneliness subsides - along with it, the difficulties described above in the area of emotions, behaviors and thoughts, and even physiology, also decrease.

What skills can help you in the process of providing emotional first aid?

1. Active listening

Active listening is an essential step in providing emotional help and a very important element of building contact. If neglected or carried out incorrectly, it may result in the person not being open to cooperation.

- Start by “noticing” someone who may need help. Make sure you're not wrong and you're reading the signals correctly. Ask if she would like to talk? Has something difficult happened to her? Let them know that you notice something is happening. Show your willingness to support
- Respect the person's right not to accept help, but also show that you are there and ready to provide it.
- Be silent, don't be afraid of silence, give the person time to develop their expression and get used to contact with you.

- Don't interrupt or ask too many questions.
- Don't judge or console by saying nothing happened.
- Confirm that you are listening by nodding and paraphrasing.

2. Attentiveness to the person's needs

It strengthens the sense of security and support in dealing with difficult emotions. Paying attention to needs helps to provide support to make the person feel better, to stabilize his condition and to gradually overcome the crisis.

It helps you determine what is most important now, organize the steps that need to be taken and set priorities. It helps reduce anxiety, brings relief and awakens the belief that everything can be controlled.

- ask what is most important to this person at the moment?
- what does he need?
- what is the most difficult?
- determine which needs can actually be met, when, by whom, this will help anchor the person in the sense of being able to make a change in their situation

3. Constructing interventions

Preparing an intervention means creating a short-term plan and action strategy. Its aim is to mobilize a person in crisis to act using their own resources and methods of dealing with difficult situations. When designing an intervention, take into account:

- Talking about the person's resources, strengths and ways of coping with difficulties that still work,
- Try to determine specific actions that can help you overcome a difficult moment, including particularly practical help in finding solutions, institutions, information that can be used and prevent further possible effects of negative events
- Make sure to jointly determine the most helpful solutions in a given situation, including the solutions proposed and selected by the supported person.
- Stay connected. Check at least once after the conversation to see if the person needs further help.
- If you notice long-lasting symptoms of difficult experiences, direct the person to seek professional support.

If you want to provide emotional help - also take care of your needs, comfort and well-being, because one of the key conditions for effectively providing psychological help is the good mental and emotional condition of the person who provides it.

- Features such as peace, self-control, acceptance, kindness, caring, rational thinking, focus and energy will help you. If they are missing, it will be difficult to take care of the other person and you may expose yourself to too much burden.
- It is important to honestly assess your ability to help right now, in this particular crisis situation.

- It is necessary to take into account your own personal and family problems, which, under the influence of additional burdens, may cause severe stress and unexpected psychosomatic reactions.

Finally, it is also worth marking the boundaries, i.e. defining what emotional first aid is not and who needs more advanced support.

- is not psychotherapy
- is not entering into a deep discussion about a given situation
- is not putting pressure on a person to talk in detail about their feelings and reactions to a given event
- is not advice and giving specific solutions, but rather indicating many possible solutions and motivating the person to actively use their own resources
- this is not help reserved only for professionals

People who urgently need more advanced support - when the situation is beyond you...

- People with serious, life-threatening injuries that require medical attention.
- People whose mental condition is so poor that they are unable to take care of themselves, their children or other dependents.
- People who may harm themselves.
- People who may harm others.

2. Stress – Materials for Health Guides

Stress

Stress is the body's reaction to a stimulus - a stressor. Stress occurs when we perceive the demands of the stressor as greater than our capabilities and triggers the activation of our body.

According to H. Seyle, we experience two types of stress:

1. **eustress** – positive stress, understood in terms of the body's health-promoting response to stressors; Eustress motivates and stimulates development, change and achieving goals
2. **distress** - destructive stress that deprives us of resources, exhausts us, that can lead to illnesses and mental crises

Stress is a phenomenon that accompanies us every day. Sometimes we are not aware of its existence, other times it affects us so strongly that it makes everyday functioning difficult. We know that it is impossible to eliminate stress from life, but there are methods of dealing with it and organizing everyday life in a way that isolates us from stressors as much as possible.

It is important to distinguish between stress and stressor. A stressor is just a stimulus, and we can choose how we respond to this stimulus. It is easy to observe in the world around us that people react differently to similar or the same situations. Of course, this reaction depends on several factors, but there are some that we can influence: awareness and competence regarding constructive reactions to stressful stimuli. It is worth taking these factors into account and developing both self-awareness and competences regarding constructive ways of dealing with stress and building personal well-being.

The second important issue is the so-called closing the cycle of stress reactions. Just getting out of a stressful situation does not have to mean ending the body's stress response or dealing with the stress.

Constructive passage of the stress reaction cycle is based on the conscious passage of three stages:

- experience of the state of mobilization,
- using energy in an active way,
- transition to a state of security.

“In most situations in the modern, post-industrial West, the stress itself will kill us sooner than the stressor – unless we do something. Something to complete the stress response cycle. While you deal with everyday stressors, your body deals with stress...” (Dr. Emily Nagoski, Amelia Nagoski)

An example of how we can consciously work on reducing stress reactions is contact with an emotional trigger. Triggers usually start from earlier experiences in our lives that were difficult for us and were not resolved positively. They come to the fore in our emotions when we experience situations that are similar or somehow related to those from the past. Our reactions then tend to be excessive, sometimes inappropriate to the situation and cause us great discomfort.

If you want to consciously improve your comfort when contacting a trigger, it is worth taking the following steps:

1. think and answer the question: what really touches you in the situation you are experiencing? Becoming aware of where our reaction is coming from allows us to gain a better understanding of the situation
2. "stop" by consciously normalizing your breathing and contact with your own senses - this helps you return from the past to the Here and Now. An emotional trigger often deprives us of clarity of thinking, and contact with the body helps to calm down
3. think about what you can change in your reactions and check whether this change brings the effect you want
4. if you feel that your actions are not bringing the results you need, seek help from a specialist.

Sometimes it happens that the stress we experience drags on over time. This condition often exhausts us greatly and, as a result, permanently makes it difficult to function in various spheres of life. Practitioners of the solution-focused approach¹ encourage us to refer to personal resources that have often helped us survive difficult situations. You can do this as follows:

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solution-focused_brief_therapy [10.03.2025]

Think of a specific situation when you experienced extended stress earlier in your life. Remember what happened to you then and what helped you cope with this situation or condition.

- what happened (briefly!)?
- how did your body/head/emotions take care of you (give you a signal that this was extended stress)?
- what did you do to deal with this situation? What worked?
- what helped you? What gave you strength, what/who did you draw support from?
- what do you take from this experience to the situation you are in now?
- what else do you need, what and who can help you?

Let's also remember about breathing techniques, which can significantly help us reduce stress reactions. It is worth including exercises that develop conscious breathing into your habits. Below is a suggestion of one of them.

Exercise

Conscious breathing (duration approx. 5 min.)

1. find a moment for yourself, e.g. take a break from work or do this exercise in the evening,
2. relax, you can stand, sit, or close your eyes if it helps you focus on the exercise,
3. focus all your attention on your breathing - become aware of how you take a breath, how your chest undulates, how the air flows through your nose, what is happening to your head, neck, belly, pelvis and other parts of the body. Simply maintain awareness of the breath in your body as you inhale and exhale.
4. breathe consciously but naturally, without manipulating your breathing. During the exercise, try to feel what parts of your body are involved in the breathing process? When concentrating your attention, look for - where in your body do you feel the most calm? What came to you mentally, emotionally and physically while doing this practice? What thoughts, feelings, body sensations? What helped you feel calm or relieve the tension caused by stress.

If, after applying this exercise several times, you feel that you calm down, experience relief or calm your thoughts, try to introduce it into your daily habits.

3. Intervention Template

Emotional First Aid - 3 steps of intervention

STEP 1. Ask for a short description of the difficult situation:

- what facts took place or are taking place?

STEP 2. Spend time talking about the emotions that accompany the person in this situation:

- help to define them and do not judge, even if the person judges themselves; emphasize that they have the right to feel exactly what they feel. Remember that emotions are beyond our control
- also ask how the person's body reacts to the situation they find themselves in. Determine together whether medical assistance is needed.

STEP 3. Ask what the person's needs in the current situation are - what change they need:

- these can cover many areas, not just emotional support
- if the person finds it difficult to define them, you can help them clarify them by asking questions
- then think together which of them the person can satisfy themselves, how they can help themselves. This is a very important moment when providing emotional help because it shows the person that they still have the ability to influence their own life
- also determine what help you can provide
- next, determine whether and what external support the person needs - who can help, what can they do?
- make a list and determine the steps for subsequent actions and contacts with people and institutions
- schedule your next meeting if necessary.

Annexes

Active Cards on mental health



**WHO CHANGED YOUR
LIFE DRAMATICALLY
FOR THE BETTER?
HOW?**

**WHAT ACTIVITY MAKES
YOUR HEART BEAT
FASTER AND MAKES YOU
FEEL HAPPY?**



**WHAT HELPS YOU
TAKE CARE OF YOUR
ENERGY EVERY DAY
- IN MIND, BODY AND
SPIRIT?**

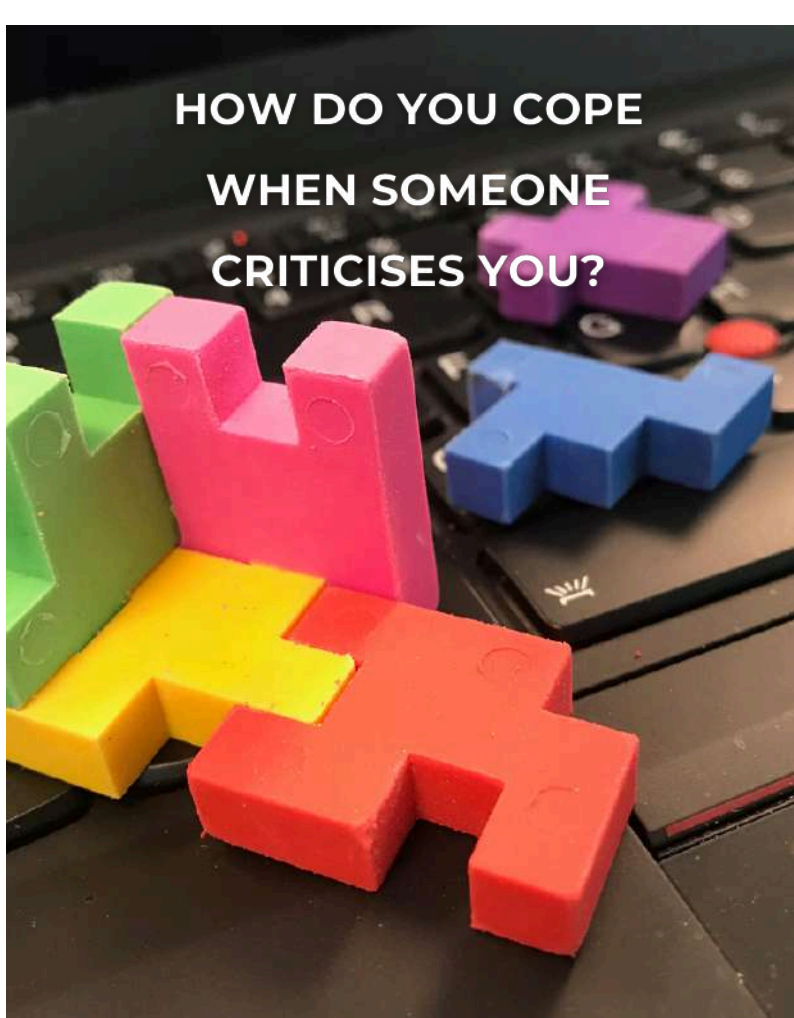
**WHAT OR WHO
WOULD YOU LIKE TO
INVITE AND WELCOME
INTO YOUR LIFE?**



**WHAT DO OTHER THINK YOU
ARE REALLY GOOD AT
(COWORKER, BOSS, FRIENDS)?**



**HOW DO YOU COPE
WHEN SOMEONE
CRITICISES YOU?**

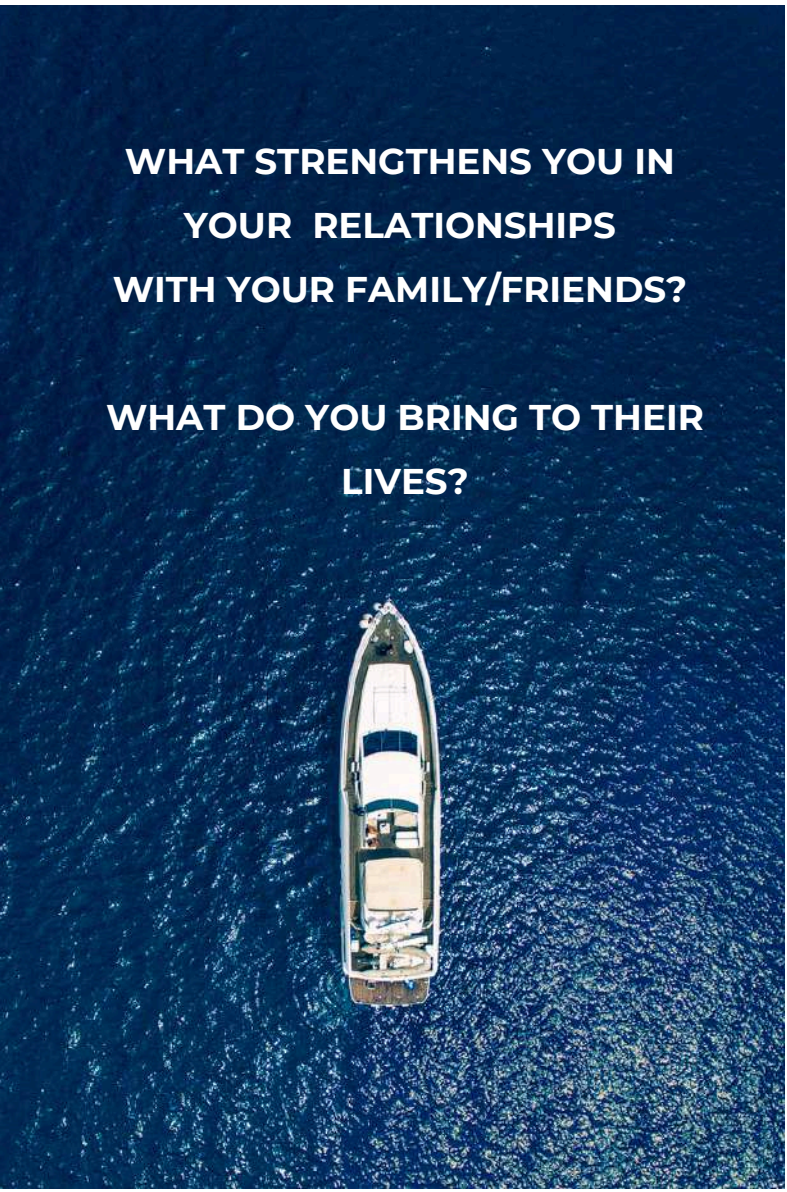


**WHAT OR WHO HELPS YOU COPE
WITH STRESSFUL SITUATIONS?**



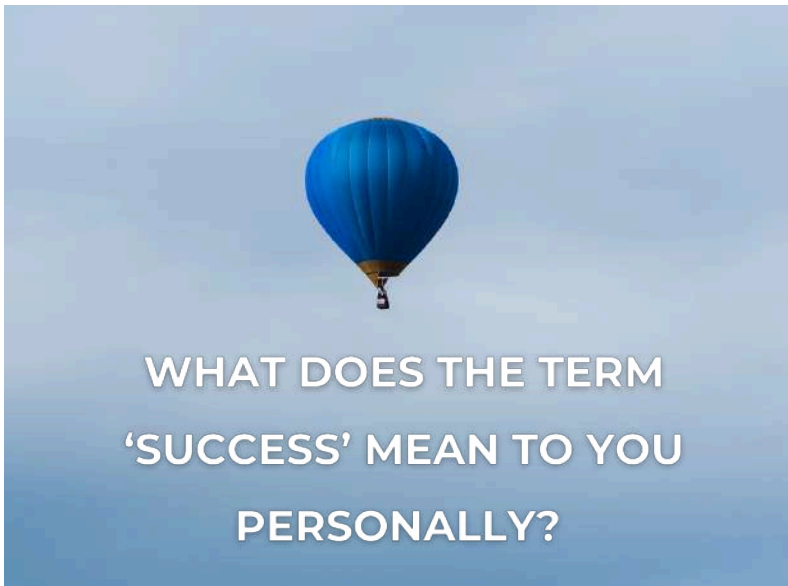


HOW DO YOU TAKE CARE OF YOUR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

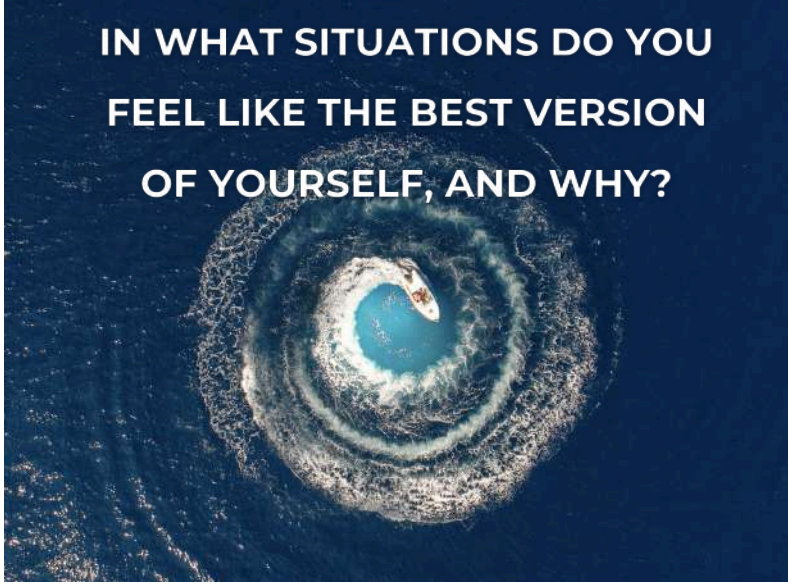


**WHAT STRENGTHENS YOU IN
YOUR RELATIONSHIPS
WITH YOUR FAMILY/FRIENDS?**

**WHAT DO YOU BRING TO THEIR
LIVES?**



**WHAT DOES THE TERM
'SUCCESS' MEAN TO YOU
PERSONALLY?**



**IN WHAT SITUATIONS DO YOU
FEEL LIKE THE BEST VERSION
OF YOURSELF, AND WHY?**



**WHAT ARE YOUR
CONSTRUCTIVE WAYS OF
RESPONDING TO SITUATIONS
THAT FORCE YOU TO LEAVE
YOUR COMFORT ZONE?**

**WHAT DOES 'BEING AT YOUR
BEST' MEAN TO YOU?
WHAT ARE YOU LIKE THEN?**

**WHAT ROLES OR TASKS SUIT
YOU WELL AND YOU FEEL
GOOD DOING THEM ?**

**WHAT RESOURCES DO YOU
HAVE THAT HELP YOU FACE
CHALLENGES?**



**IF YOU HAD MORE TIME FOR
YOURSELF, HOW WOULD YOU
USE IT?**

**WHAT HELPS YOU MAKE GOOD
DECISIONS?**



**WHAT DO PEOPLE
PARTICULARLY VALUE ABOUT
YOU?**

**WHAT DOES 'BEING AT YOUR
BEST' MEAN TO YOU?**

WHAT ARE YOU LIKE THEN?



**IN WHAT AREAS OF YOUR
LIFE DO YOU FEEL INNER
BALANCE?**

**WHERE ARE YOU IN YOUR
LIFE TODAY?
AT WHAT STAGE?
WHAT DO YOU LIKE HERE?**



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www.healthycommunities.eu

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