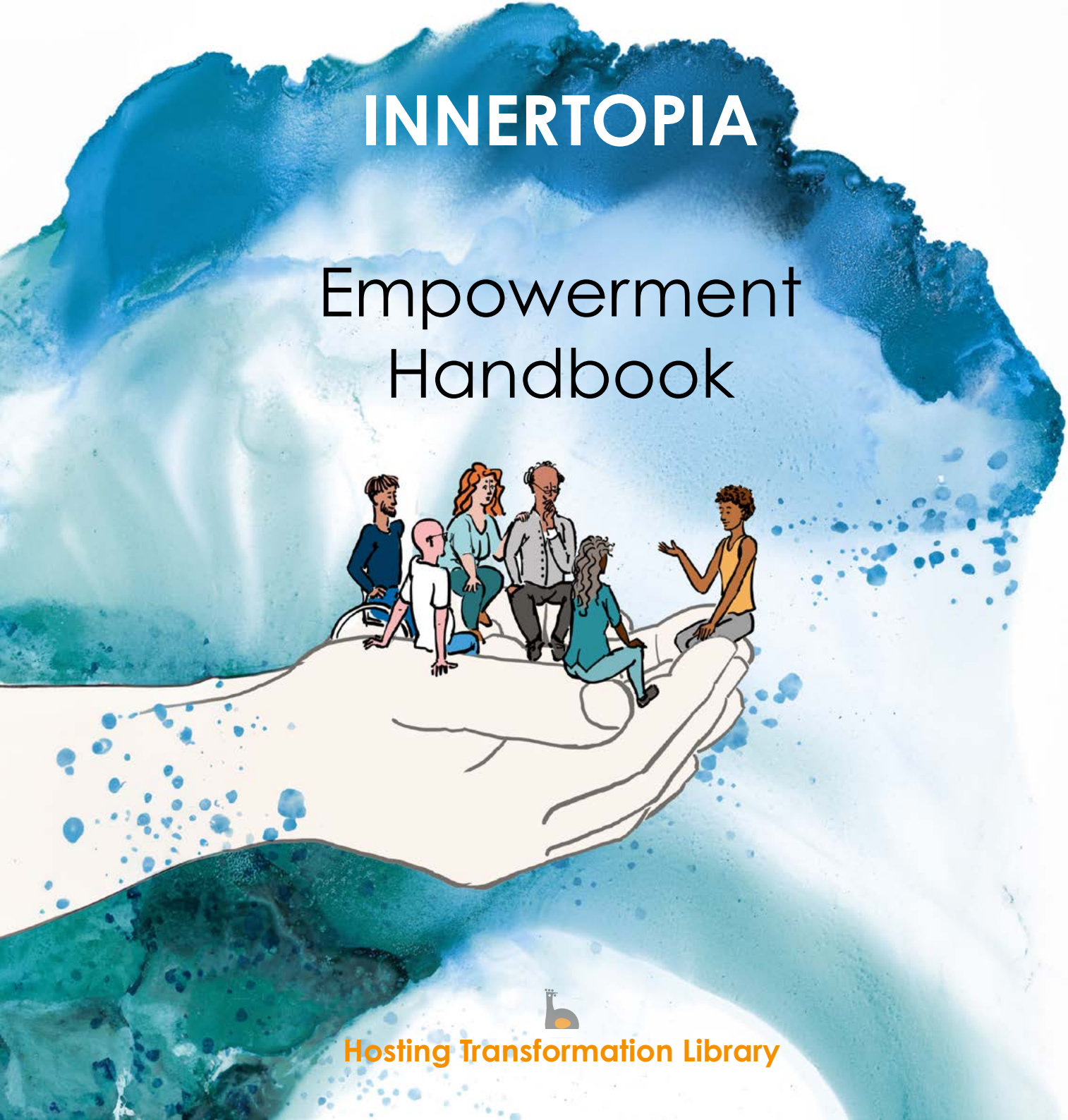
INNERTOPIA

Empowerment Handbook



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The role of this book

You have attended guide training, either face-to-face or online; and now you intend to guide a group through the *Innertopia Empowerment* program, either face-to-face or online. This handbook is intended as your first source of support.

If your training was online but you will work face-to-face, some adjustments to the methods will be necessary; and the same applies if you will work online but your training was face-to-face. We include some notes in the section on Adaptation to your needs.

Remember that this is not professional coaching. We are inviting and enabling you to become a peer guide. You are a member of the group that you are guiding, doing your best to support them to support each other (including you!) through the process. We wish you every success, and look forward to hearing about your experience.

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Erasmus+

This booklet evolved out of the small scale partnership “Barefoot coaching” that was funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

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Part A
A practical guide

Support for you as a group guide

Access to advice

If you need advice, your first go-to people are the leaders of the workshop where you trained as a guide. Other channels are planned, so keep a look-out for information about, for example, a possible online *Innertopia Empowerment* forum, or regular online meetings of a CoP (Community of Practice).

Your group log

It's a good idea to download a new copy of this log each time you start with a new group. This is where you keep a handy summary:

- Names and contact details of your participants
- Planned meetings: date, time, place, focus
  If you invite members to take responsibility for (co-)focalising a meeting, you can also note the name of the focaliser.
- Attendance at each meeting
- Notes on any task you or any participant have undertaken on behalf of the group from one meeting to the next
- Any other notes you find useful

You can **share the first page of the log** with all group members, assuming they agree to share their coordinates. You can share by making a copy of that page and sending electronically; or by printing and distributing.

You also **use the log to aggregate the results** of the three review meetings. These notes will form the basis for your progress reports.

Register with the *Innertopia Empowerment* reporting system!

You use some of your log data to contribute to national and international exchange and guide support.

When you register a new group, you will receive an email containing the GroupID of the group. Please note this in your Logbook – you will need it for later reporting and feedback. And save the email, because it also contains a link that enables you to submit a final report.

When you register your group and, eventually, its results, we learn as a community.

- We are helped to continue to improve the program
- After the first two groups have completed the program, you can apply for certification
- You are helped to recruit new groups, since you can point to past performance…
- …and to identify areas where you could further improve your own work

We encourage you to enter each new group *as it starts* into the online reporting system; and then to add your group reports about how the participants rate the exercises: either as you go, section by section, or after the final meeting. There are three review sessions proposed in the booklet, at the end of each of the sections Clarity, Confidence, and Make it Real.

Additionally, at the final meeting you will probably be inviting your participants to evaluate their experience (see Standard Program below). You will no

doubt want to enter their responses into your log, for your own records; if you then copy it into the online reporting system, you will do us a favour - and get access to data from other groups.

Qualify as an *Innertopia Empowerment* guide

If you have done the training and would like to become a certified *Innertopia Empowerment* guide, you need to guide to a successful conclusion two groups that you register with the reporting system. You can then apply for certification. You will be asked to sign a commitment to a small set of quality standards.

This handbook, and a toolbox

This little peer-support handbook is intended primarily as a reminder of what you did during your guide training. Access it online to also get any updates resulting from workshop feedback.

If you feel a need or a wish to add to your own set of methods and exercises, try consulting the free Hosting Empowerment online toolbox.

Your ‘why’ message

Why do this program?

Sooner or later, someone will ask you: 'Why should I do this program?'
What will you say? Your message will depend on your audience, and you know them best.

For example, to paraphrase a doctor working with patients with obesity:

> "For patients who suffer from internalised stigma. This program can help you regain your self-esteem, develop new life plans or simply find yourself and think about your future."

Or, a participant wrote:

> "The intention of this program is to support you in becoming more fully who you are. There's nothing better for this world than for all of us to get clear about who we really are, find confidence in that, and then bring our voices into the great chorus of the world."

What is YOUR message?

To craft a more specific message about the program, it may help to think about some common needs that most of your intended audience share. For example, they may have similar feelings about self-worth and value, experience of stigma, (lack of) clarity regarding future plans and how to act on them, or a deeper understanding of themselves.

If you are having trouble forming an impression of these things it can be helpful to carry out an exercise called an "empathy map" (you can find plenty of examples online). If you have no clear ideas, even with the prompting questions on the map, invite some of your intended participants to do it with you!

Why do a specific exercise?

You may need to help your participants to understand the "why" of an exercise. This is for example often the key for neurodivergent people to feel motivated to engage in practising, but can be useful for all groups; especially when the exercise is new and/or 'sensitive' and involves risk or vulnerability.

You will find your own rationale, but a good start is to read the text that accompanies many exercises, called 'Benefits'.

Your preparations

The most important thing you can do before starting with your first group is to go through the booklet and try out every one of the exercises for yourself. From what you know about your audience, you might choose to emphasise some exercises more than others. Pick one from each chapter to try out in the group.

The second is to look critically at the standard program (below) and compare with the norms and established routines - if any - for the group you will be working with.

Numbers, duration and location

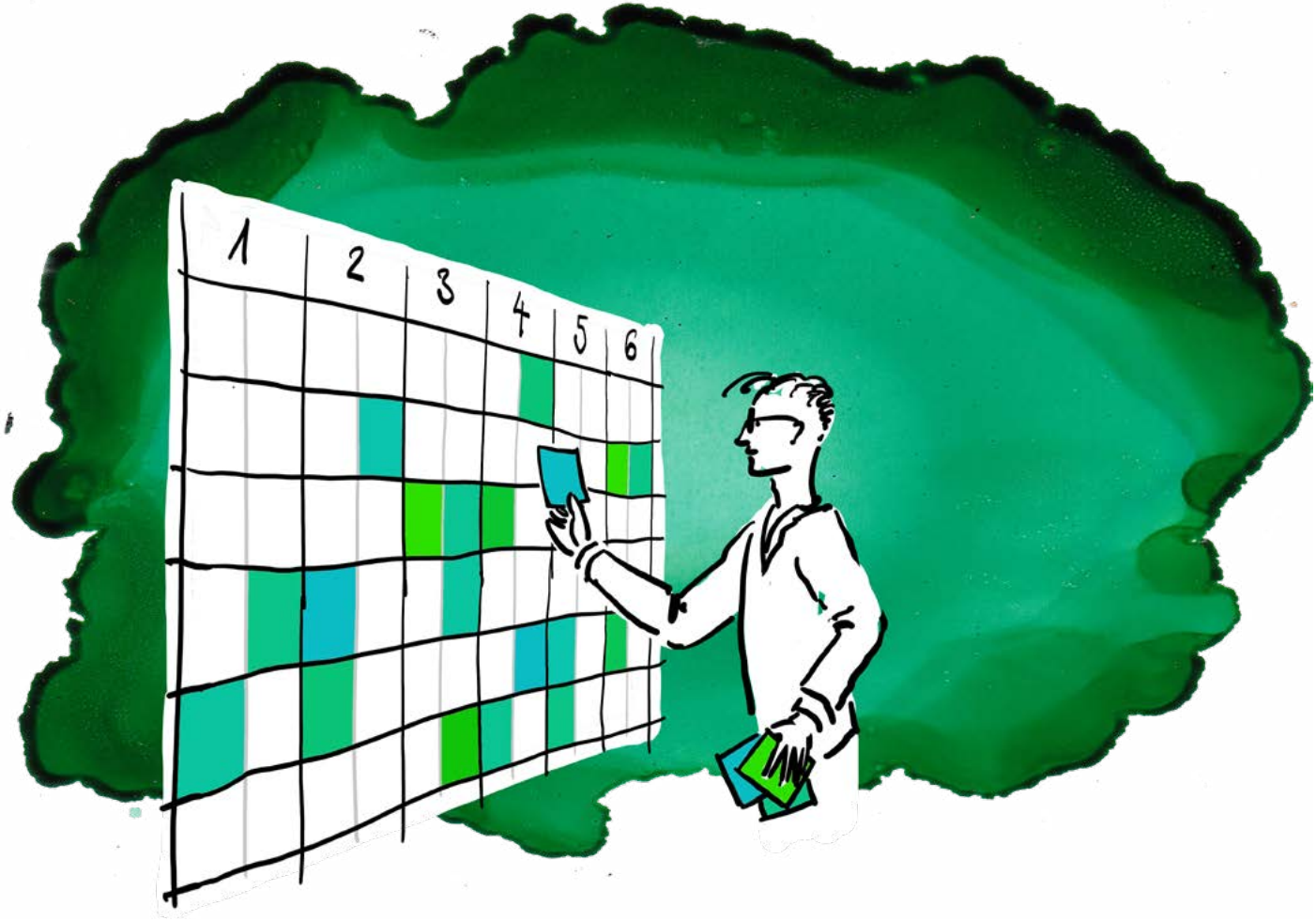
How many people are in your group? There is no viable minimum, though with fewer than 5 you may not get enough people for each meeting. 6-8 is a good number, especially if you are inexperienced. With some practice, you can probably successfully handle up to 12 or even 16. Over 12, you might think about engaging a partner guide to run the group with you.

General quality guidelines are:

- Your sessions with the group should total at least 9 hours
- You should start with at least 6 participants
- The minimum age of participants is 16
- During your sessions you will use the exercises of the *Innertopia - Live your Power* booklet, including at least one exercise from each of the three sections: Clarity - Confidence - Make it real

The ideal venue for a face-to-face meeting is familiar to most people accustomed to peer (mutual support) groups: movable chairs placed in a circle. 'Classroom' and 'cinema' style furnishing is to be avoided if possible, especially if the seats are fixed in place.

Adapting the program to your needs



We offer a standard program suggestion (below): and there are several opportunities and needs for adaptation. In particular:

- Adapting the length and number of sessions, to fit with the routines of your participants
- Adapting your style to any special needs of your participants
- Adapting specific guiding exercises, depending on online or face-to-face sessions

Hence this is an invitation to use your experience, creativity and imagination, and experiment!

This is a standard program

The face-to-face group program is envisaged as a set of regular (e.g. weekly) meetings, in the style of an evening class. The basic model has five meetings of about 2 hours each, with an optional sixth, summarised below.

If your group will be meeting online, the same basic structure can be used. You may need to schedule each session over two weeks instead of one, to give participants enough time.

For more details see Annexe A.

Session 1.
Introductions to each other, if it's a new group, and to the program.
Registration of participants.
Introduction to 'Clarity' and an example of an exercise; discussion.
Introduction to tasks to be undertaken by the next meeting.

Session 2.
'Clarity' exercise reports and discussion.
Introduction to 'Confidence' and an example of an exercise; discussion.
Introduction to tasks to be undertaken by the next meeting.

Session 3.
'Confidence' exercise reports and discussion.
Introduction to 'Make It Real' and an example of an exercise; discussion.
Introduction to tasks to be undertaken by the next meeting.

Session 4.
'Make It Real' exercise reports and discussion.
Review of the 3 'Reflect & Review' pages.
Identify key exercises to do, or to do again, by the next meeting.

Session 5.
Evaluation; discussion.
Do we know other people who might benefit from this program?
Offers, if available, to train as an *Innertopia Empowerment* guide.
Close

- Alternatively, plan a 6th meeting to pick up on identified opportunities (or just to celebrate!).

Existing meeting schedule

Maybe you will choose to work with a group that already has a standard meeting schedule. Will you be able to 'take over' a series of the planned meetings for *Innertopia Empowerment* work? Or will you need to fit in with other agenda items? If the latter, you might think about increasing the number of sessions and reducing the content of each, in order not to be too rushed. . This could, in most countries, fit fairly well into one term: spring or autumn.

'Lunch' meetings?

In some cultures it's acceptable and feasible to schedule meetings during a lunch break in the workplace, which could be something to consider if you plan to work with a group at a workplace or school/university/hospital. However, don't expect to have more than 45 minutes of effective meeting time, and plan accordingly.

Evening class.

The standard face-to-face program is based on an 'evening-class' model. It can also work for some groups (pensioners, unemployed, some students) if scheduled for day time on weekdays.

Weekend events.

What if weekdays simply don't work for your group? You might consider offering a 3-4 hour session at weekends, for instance 3 weekends; either every week, every second week, or monthly.

Slower paced.

In some cases it may be worthwhile to offer a weekly meeting of 1 hour (11 or 12 sessions) or a biweekly schedule of 2 hour meetings (meeting every other week). This could be beneficial for people with busy schedules and/or people who need slightly more time to process the outcomes of all the exercises.

Guiding principles, whether online or offline

The general principles are the same, no matter the medium. But the ways of working with them, as a guide, may differ.

Safe enough space

A general principle: it's worth spending time on building community and trust right at the beginning. Remember the basics:

- Listen more than you speak
- Questions are more empowering than answers
- Ask for consent before proceeding (and try to hear what is not being said)

A lot depends on the design of the first session - see below, Your first session.

Learning, not teaching

Just to be clear: a guide is not a teacher. Even though you are a few steps ahead, you are (hopefully!) on the same path as the participants, a journey of discovery where you all learn together.

Dealing with ‚edge emotions‘

Any successful invitation to transformative change brings an emotional response, whether positive, negative, or mixed. These emotions ‘on the edge’ of change call upon the guide to keep a clear head and heart.

It might mean that participants hesitate to commit, have many clarifying or seemingly critical questions for you about “what to expect”; you might feel yourself getting pulled into taking responsibility for their decision to join. Or pulled in to reassuring them that this is the RIGHT choice for them. Answer when you can, but keep giving them back the responsibility to make their own choices. Make sure they understand that you are OK with their decision, whether yes or no.

Rule no. 1: remember that a participant’s edge emotions, no matter how expressed, are not about you, but are a signal that something important is happening.

Program design

Structure is important

Structure is an element in creating both flow and trust; the participants need to feel confident that the course is well designed and managed, and it helps if they recognise a familiar structure from one session to the next. This is reflected in the program proposed in Annexe A. In general, an online program benefits from more detailed planning than is necessary face-to-face.

Structure also creates confidence for the guide. Still, there is a need for balance at the point of delivery: the guide equally needs to feel confident in deviating from the detailed plans when necessary - when overmuch structure could impede creativity and disable transformative learning.

In short: maximum structure while planning, for optimal flexibility when delivering.

Engaging the senses

Remember to respect the body!

Whether online or face-to-face, it’s best to take a break after 60-80 minutes. In a face-to-face session the breaks can - and some of them should be - up to half an hour because they are valuable occasions for participants to talk to each other. With on-line breaks 10 minutes is generally enough, and even 5 minutes can be enough to stretch, give the body a change. Bodily movement should also be included in some way in each session.

Assessment: a learning loop

After each section of the booklet you are asked to walk the participants through a process of saying how they responded to each of the exercises in that section; and to reflect on their own responses. During the reflection, help participants to focus on sharing the experience of the PROCESS more than the actual answers elicited when they did the exercises. If people want to share answers, that is fine, but no-one should feel obliged to do so.

At the end of the program you are also requested to have the participants respond to questions about the program as a whole.

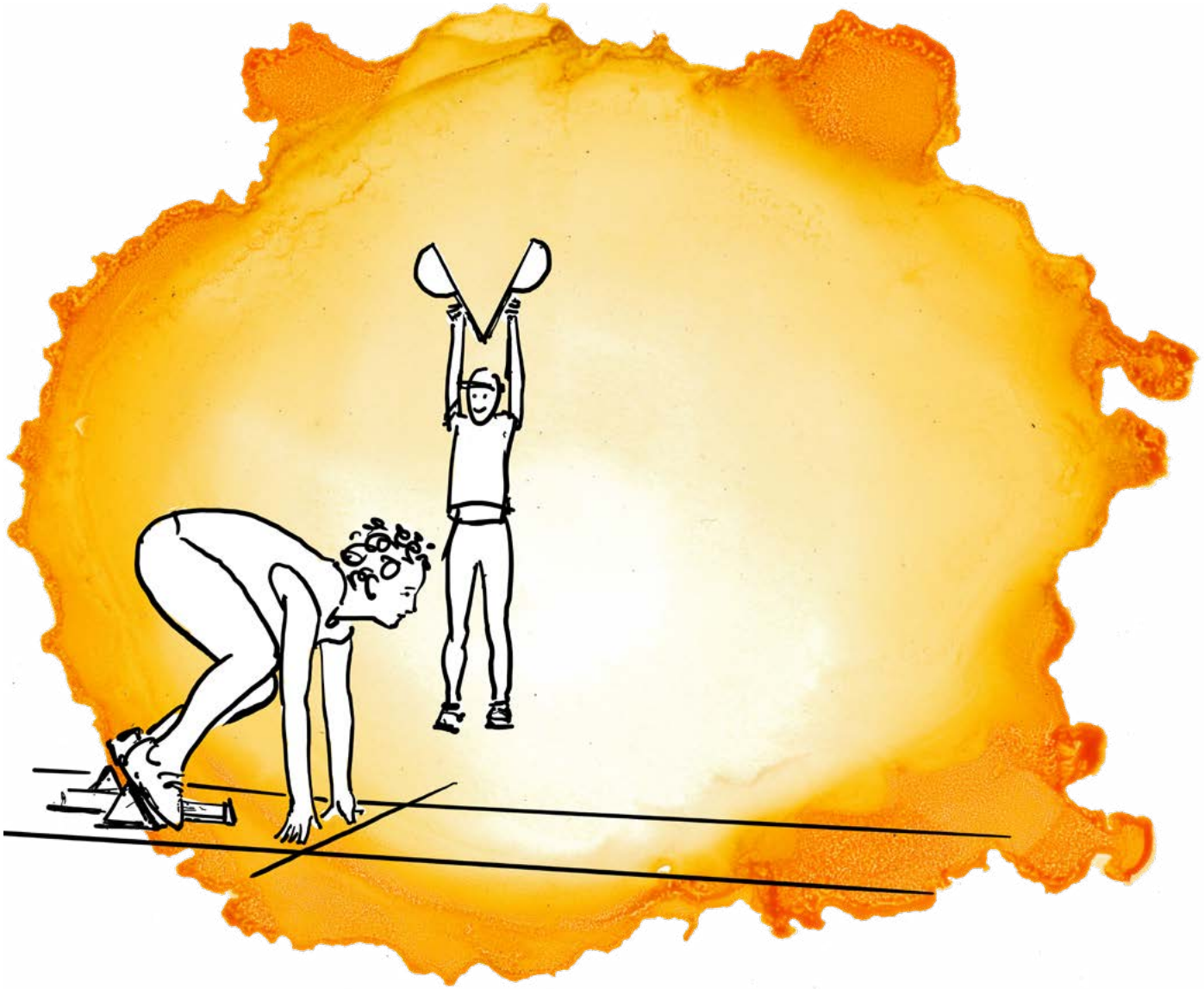
These activities give valuable information to you, as a guide, and to us. But even more important is their benefit to the participants: it is a key pedagogical principle that reflecting on what you have learnt is a way to go one level deeper with your learning. It's also a way to promote an ongoing good habit: to take the time to stop and reflect.

Online: Choosing and using software

The first important principle is to use software with which you yourself feel comfortable. Don't experiment on your participants: find other ways to gain confidence. If that's not possible, make sure you have with you a co-facilitator or technical support person who does have the necessary expertise.

Beyond that, selecting software is a process that starts with analysing the needs of the event and the participants, and setting them in relation to available technology. Some guidelines are offered in the publication *Online Alchemy* (see More Information, in Annexe C).

Potentially important moments



The right frame of mind

You can prepare for a session by reminding yourself how you want the group to function - what kind of culture you want to establish and express. Here are some specifics, for you to try out.

YES
Do allow and invite people to speak spontaneously
Try (without coercion) to support each person to say at least a few words
Set the standard of speaking non-aggressively and distinguishing between facts, feelings, and values
Make it very clear that what is said in the group, stays in the group

NO
Don't ask each person to speak in turn around the circle
Don't allow aggression to pass without comment
Don't coax someone to speak who prefers to remain silent

Your first session

Introductions are the first major opportunity to establish trust and a culture of mutual support, especially if this is either a new group, or an existing group with a history of conflict.

Set the scene by introducing yourself and allowing yourself to express how you feel.

Set a framework for the program such as: When, how long, how often should we meet? If there are options, that's good. But also don't be afraid to set clear boundaries. If you already know you can only spare 2 hours for 6 Saturdays, don't suggest that the group can set their own schedule. See also the section on Group Dynamics.

You may consider asking some questions that make it clear that you care about the participants, such as

- Is there anything I should know about you before we start?
- Do you need anything to get ready for the program?
- What do you need to feel comfortable in this process?

Exercises for body awareness

Exercises for body awareness can be useful for openings. 'Pass the ball' and 'Extend yourself' are examples of using physical movement to create one-on-one relationships; see Group Dynamics below.

There are also some very simple ones, like inviting participants to follow your movements in stretching or bending - or to follow each other's movements. Getting a little more ambitious, a quick body scan can be offered as a kind of guided visualisation - see example below.

Do please be aware that body work and visualisation could be challenging for people with a history of trauma or for people who are neurodivergent. Keep it short and simple, and make sure your 'instructions' are clearly framed as invitations.

> *Example*
> Don't say 'close your eyes', say 'feel free to close your eyes if you wish'

In other words, make it clear that the participants can modify the exercise, or opt out of it, if that is what they need to feel safe. This is indeed a general rule for empowerment, not only in regard to body exercises.

Even when following this rule, do watch for any signs of discomfort. If you have the impression that an exercise is not very comfortable for some participants, you can always invite them to share their uncomfortable feelings after the exercise; or just ask if they are OK.

> *Example of body scan instructions*
> Stand (or sit, if standing is a problem) in a comfortable position. If you are comfortable with closing your eyes do so, if you prefer to leave them open, just lower your gaze and breathe normally.
> Scan your body from top to toe: you can touch, press, squeeze the body parts you are focusing on, but it is not necessary to do so. Just do it to the extent you are comfortable with. Head… neck…. shoulders … chest… arms… hands… hip… legs (including knees)... and feet. When you are ready just shake your arms and legs, move your neck and then take a deep breath and let it out.

Depending on the group, you can lead this exercise by calling out the body parts to focus on, or alternatively, tell about the process and then let the participants follow the sequence at their own pace.

Review meetings

Review sessions are included in the booklet at the end of each of the three chapters, i.e. on pp 21, 37, 54. You can choose to include these sessions as you go along, reminding participants that this is an important part of the learning experience and an opportunity to practise reflecting on experience - see above, Assessment: a learning loop.

However, if necessary, you can do all the review sessions at the final meeting, including evaluation of the whole program. This gives participants more time to complete the exercises in the booklet but, on the other hand, misses the opportunity to experience reflection as a recurring process.

About problem solving

When a participant clearly expresses a problem - for instance, 'My family would ridicule me if I tried this exercise', or 'I have no private space where I can concentrate on these exercises' - it's tempting for the guide and often for the other participants to rush in with solutions. However this is seldom truly helpful. Indeed, one of the first principles of empowerment is 'Don't take the problem away'.

How much structure?

Not trying to solve a problem is not the same as abandoning the participant to solve the problem by themselves. It can be a good principle to ask VERY open ended questions, precisely because they leave so much choice and don't risk judgement or narrowing of their options.

However, humans have a wide variety of needs when it comes to clarity, openness and structure when solving their own problems. Some need very open ended questions and suggestions, becoming quite resistant to anything even resembling advice or suggested directions. Others need quite a bit of prodding to clarify the issue, scaffolding to come up with options, and sometimes even clear choices between several suggested options to explore, try or tweak. The differences around this can even be intense within one person, depending on the subject matter! Learning to read the clues that signal support needs at any given moment is a big part of learning to listen and respond effectively.

What do you do instead of offering solutions?

The idea is to support the person to find their own solution. A first step can be simply to agree with them that this is indeed a problem, and to listen to what more they have to say about it. You may want to ask questions like 'So do you think this is completely hopeless?', or 'If you can't do that, is there perhaps something else you could do instead?'.

One tactic can be to ask the person: 'If I came to you and said I had this problem, what would you say to me?' (It works surprisingly often!).

Sometimes it can be helpful to comically exaggerate. It can help to use a bit of humour or a wink if you do this! Make sure the person knows you are still firmly on their side: 'That sounds TERRIBLE!' They may be uncomfortable with this, and protest that really it's not so bad, there are solutions…

Basically: keep asking questions for as long as you can, and listening to the answers.

A good rule of thumb, before verging towards the more structured, scaffolded path is to ASK
"Do you need me to be more specific with that question /to clarify my question?"
"Do you need me to narrow it down?"
"Would you like some resources to explore related to this problem?"
"Would you like some examples?"
"Would you like some suggestions for what you could try, so you can construct your own plan for what to do?"

Whenever you DO become more specific in your questions and suggestions, make sure you keep signalling that you are perfectly fine with them taking this in another direction, not taking up your suggestions, or disagreeing with you completely when you offer a viewpoint.

Your style

Metaphors for a guide

A guide ***can be*** a companion, a fellow-traveller on the self-empowerment journey, a mirror, a role model, a travel agent, a neutral listener, an explorer. As a guide you may find yourself moving in and out of all those roles. And maybe one or two feel most comfortable for you? Feel your way into *your* way of guiding, building on your own strengths.

It can be good to remember that a guide ***is not*** a teacher, a superior, a parent, a professional coach, in league with the boss, a judge, a counsellor or a consultant. If you find yourself slipping into any of those roles - it's easily done! - then give yourself credit for having noticed, and slip back into your guide role.

Metaphors to guide you

Metaphors carry a lot of information. Watch out for metaphors the participants use. You can, for instance, refer to them when you ask questions.

> *Example*
> "When you talk about planting seeds, what seeds are you planting (in your career, company, etc.)? Who is the gardener? What do the plants need to grow vigorously? How can you nurture them?"

Summary of keys to your role

- DON'T take the problem away! - see more about this in Role of an Empowering Guide, below
- The main message is to stay as curious and non-judgemental as you can.
- Keep in mind the key points in an empowerment process, see below:
  - Caring, safe (enough) space
  - Keep focus, Offer choice, Help formulate intention
- Timing and pacing, ways to adapt the practice or exercise to be safer/ more accessible (see above)
- Focus on objectives and resources, not problems
- Welcome and use resistance (as a source of energy and with an important signalling function)
- Help participants to use positive language (say what you want instead of what you don't want)

Typical steps of a peer support process

In relation to the Empowerment Spiral, below:

- Measuring success, before and after: see *Intention* and *Feedback*
- Setting an *Intention* or ambition
- Setting a frame (timing, expectations, clarity about the roles of all involved etc.): see in particular *Focus*
- Harvesting (visual harvesting, notes, highlighting successes): see *Feedback*

Useful skills

No, this is not a professional coach role. And indeed, many guides do excellent work based entirely on their life experience and empathy. On the other hand, if you're already a professional coach, or wish to become one, you will find a lot here that is both familiar and useful. Practising the skills and methods taught in the guide training and outlined here is a simple entry point into the world of coaching. Enjoy!

Common pitfalls and what to do about them

Don't focus on who is absent instead of those who are present

It is so easy to waste time and energy at the beginning of a meeting discussing who else might or might not be coming, reasons for absence, etc. Remind the group that the important thing is that 'WE are here', and gently move on. If an absent person had undertaken work on behalf of the group, comment that their contribution will be welcome whenever it comes. And move on.

Don't regard someone who arrives late as 'wrong'

A person arriving late can be an asset; or can be disruptive - if you allow it.
If the latecomer launches into an explanation, tell them that no explanation is needed, you assume there was a good reason, and they are welcome now. Mostly, latecomers *do* have a good reason.

There are the exceptions, who tend to habitually arrive late in order (mostly unconsciously) to get a lot of attention as they tell their story. But if latecomers are not given space to tell their story, this behaviour generally ceases. There's no need to frame it negatively: you can for instance suggest that everyone will love to hear their story during the break.

There are exceptions. Someone who has had a truly traumatic experience on their way to the meeting may not be able to concentrate until they've had a chance to talk about it. This may equally apply to someone who arrives in time. Keep an eye open: genuine distress is usually fairly obvious, and you can ask whether they would like to talk about their experience in the group, or with you or another individual privately.

If a latecomer has missed a whole topic or exercise, it can be an excellent idea to invite the group to summarise for this person what they have missed. It not only brings the latecomer up to date but also reinforces the learning of the others.

Don't be too focused on what YOU want to get done

It's excellent to have focus and a clear idea of what to do - but not to the extent that you miss signals from the group that they/some of them are not yet ready.

One 'preventive' technique can be used each time you offer an exercise. When you've introduced it, ask first 'Is it clear what I'm inviting you to do?'. And once it's clear, ask the next question: 'Would you like to do it?'. The participants may not immediately understand that if they say 'no', you'll consult them about what to do instead. But they may test you, just to find out. So be sure you're ready to handle the consequences! Think through what the alternatives might be to the exercise you are proposing. Possibly, more information or Q&A?

Don't try to impose your idea of what participants should do between meetings

After each chapter is introduced, and 'tasted', we suggest that each participant should look through that

chapter and pick one or more exercises to do before the next meeting. It's easy to get over-ambitious on their behalf. Try to hold back, and only intervene to ask a question, for instance 'Would it be possible for you to tackle more than one exercise this week, do you think?'. And make it clear that whatever the response, it's fine with you.

Don't be afraid to admit that you don't know

It's a relief to know (isn't it?) that as a guide, you're not expected to have all the answers. You *are* supposed to be able to find your way around the *Innertopia Live Your Power* booklet. But that's about it. You don't have to solve people's problems (see above). And you don't need to be able to answer their questions: the best thing you can do is to enable your participants, individually or together, to find their own answers. *Questions are more powerful, and more empowering, than answers.*

If you forget to run (one of) the review exercises,,,

If you arrive at the last meeting and find that you missed one of the review exercises, no problem: do them together. If you still miss out, try phoning your participants after the final meeting and asking for their feedback. They'll probably be very glad to hear from you!

Part B
A theoretical background

An Empowerment Spiral

Information, knowledge, action

The relation between information, knowledge and action is not simple. We constantly screen out information offered to us by media, other people, and even our own experience. If it doesn't "fit", we reject it.

Why be surprised when some new scandal breaks showing that scientists have manipulated the "facts" to suit what they wanted to find? You and I do it all the time. Admittedly a scientific education is supposed to teach how *not* to do that, but it generally misses out one very important factor: not only our minds but also our beliefs and feelings are involved in the conversion of facts to knowledge.

What I know is great, and what I don't know is no problem because I can find out. The problems come with what I believe, or think I know.

Most information campaigns and many educational programs are designed along the "scientific" (i e mind-focused) model:

It all seems very logical. But we also know very well that it's a poor model of reality. We inform and inform, for example about the risks of smoking. If the scientific model were an accurate picture of reality, there would hardly be a smoker left in the world today.

In practice almost the opposite seems to be true. Each of us is bombarded with gigantic amounts of information every day, maybe hundreds of thousands as much as we can actually absorb. Somehow, each of us decides what to hear and what to activate.

A circular relation

One way to understand what goes on is to view information and action as two elements in a circular or even spiral relationship. The third element is attention, or caring. It works like this:

- I take in information about things I care about. If you decide to buy a mountain bike, you see nothing but mountain bikes where you saw none before.
- I care about things I believe I can affect by my own actions.

Conversely, things I believe I can't influence are things I care little about; therefore I take in little information about them.

There are of course exceptions. I might be passionately interested in cars even though I see no possibility of owning one. Some people take in information about things they believe they *can't influence*, often in a limited subject area, without actually absorbing it, but rather spewing it out again over anyone who will listen. You may know someone who seems to delight in telling you that the world is about to come to an end, or the moral fibre of the country is in total collapse? Still, most of us in most contexts behave in accordance with the circular diagram.

Bad conscience

Sometimes we allow ourselves to care about something despite believing there is nothing we can do about it. This is when we acquire a bad conscience: we take in information but because of our beliefs (whether correct or incorrect) are quite unable to activate it.

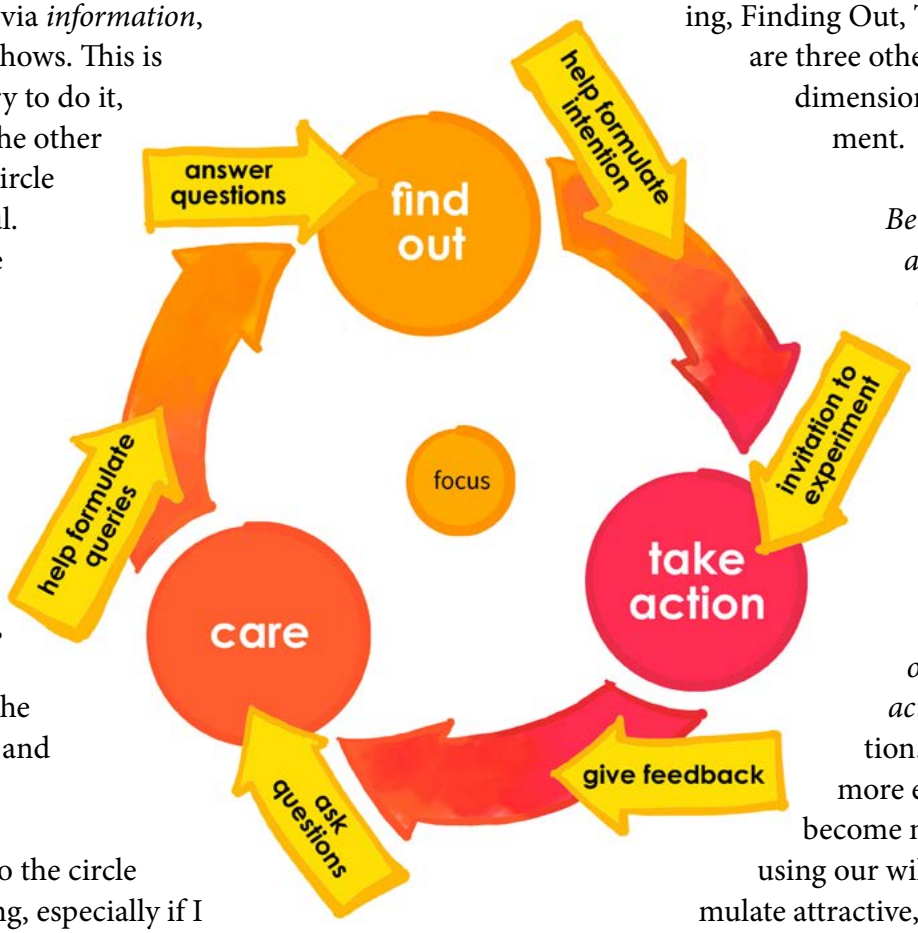
Many people feel they should use the car less (but then I'd never get all my work done…) or should send money to Amnesty (but there are so many other things I need the money for…) or should spend more time with their parents (but then I'd be neglecting the children…), and so on.

This is a really interesting condition. On the minus side, it takes a lot of time and energy to maintain a bad conscience. On the plus side, it opens up a possibility for change.

Breaking into the circle

If you want to bring about change, for yourself, for other people, or for an organisation, you need to break into the circle. The circular relationship can be very rigid and quite difficult to break into. Or… more correctly, it's extremely difficult to break into the circle only via *information*, as the description shows. This is where most of us try to do it, most of the time. The other two points on the circle can be more fruitful. I can break into the circle at the point of action, which seems quite the reverse of all conventional wisdom on influencing people's behaviour. First comes the changed behaviour, then the thirst for information, then the change in attitudes and beliefs.

I can also break into the circle at the point of caring, especially if I have personal interaction with people. This is why – as the best salespeople know – the most important skill in selling is to be able to listen. In a guiding situation, this means above all *listening for meaning*. What is important to this person?



The circle becomes a spiral

Once the circle has been breached, it can in the best case become an upward spiral – an empowerment spiral:

Between the three pillars of the spiral (Caring, Finding Out, Taking action) are three other important dimensions of empowerment.

Between Caring and Finding out come questions. Learning to formulate good questions is a basic element of empowerment.

Between Finding out and Taking action comes intention. As we become more empowered, we become more skilful in using our will-power to formulate attractive, feasible intentions; and to formulate our own criteria for success.

Between Taking action and Caring comes feedback. Seeing the results of my actions – whether 'suc-

cessful' or not – is a prerequisite for expanding my scope of caring – and thus moving up the spiral. And *in the centre of the spiral* – actually as the first point – is the question of focus: what is our dialogue or our action actually about? What is it we are trying to be or do?

Intervention

In a classic behaviour-change model (information -> knowledge etc.) there is only one intervention point; with the empowerment model there are six.

The six intervention points

Intervention at the ‚Caring' point is about asking questions - and listening to the answers. Methods/ media can vary, from one-on-one to web-based audit. The point is to elicit concerns and values. By asking and listening, you make it clear that you yourself care, both about the issue and the person /people.

Questions. Your questions help respondents to clarify their own concerns, and thus to formulate their own questions, which is the next stage. You can also offer direct help in formulating questions of relevance to each person: What is interesting? What is important? What do I *need* to know in order to take action?

Intervention at the ‚Finding out' point is about answering questions: providing information for which there is already a demand. To help trigger the next stage (Intention), information can be supplied partly in the form of invitations to experiment - an important concept in empowerment. It is easier to formulate an intention and act on it in a spirit of experimentation than to make a once-and-for-all decision.

Intention. There are several methods to arrive at feasible intentions, which can be offered as support. Some of the common questions are variations on: What do you most want to change? How will you know when you have succeeded? What will be different in your life?

Intervention at the ‚Taking action' point is (of course) supportive of the action, which can take many forms; one important form is to help further clarify and perhaps quantify criteria for success: how will you know or decide that this particular action was successful? In this way you prepare for the next stage, Feedback, by clarifying what to ^record/measure/look for.

Feedback. The guide can contribute to a well-functioning reporting, analysis /synthesis and feedback system.

Focus. At any point it can be useful to recall the reasons for the work: what is it we are trying to be or to do?

Spirals can have more than one direction

One reason empowerment is so important today is that there are many forces combining to create downward spirals.

At a time in history when humankind, especially affluent humankind, has powers of choice formerly only dreamed of by kings and emperors, more and more people experience themselves as powerless.

Isn't it strange?

The great filmmaker Tarkovsky once said that all great art is empowering. This is clearly not a criterion popular with mass media, especially the front page headline articles, news show items, and click-baitey online articles. Their menu of failures and disasters, usually clinically free of context, is guaranteed to help most people experience helplessness and frustration.

The rapid changes and shifting balances of power in the world have also created a situation where there is -for most people- a widening gap between what we believe about the way the world is, and what is actually happening. Consequently, each of us is able to take in less and less of the information that might help us make sense of life and the world, creating a *disempowerment* spiral.

Consider again the contention (above, *Spirals can have more than one direction*) that this is a time in history when humankind, especially affluent humankind, has powers of choice formerly only dreamed of by kings and emperors. There is more information at our fingertips now than ever before, and many talented experts, guides and teachers are available to help us understand things better.

Is that how you experience your life? Can you take in that statement and make it part of your frame of reference for understanding the world?

Group dynamics

I, We, and It

In any group, three major topics are always on the agenda in the minds of the members. We can call them I, We and It. You can find a mini tutorial on that topic here.

I is about who I am and how I feel right now. It is also about I–thou (one-on-one) relationships within the group.
We is about our behaviour towards each other, for example our meeting culture, decision processes, quality aspirations… everything to do with our common relations.
It is about what we do together, our collective task or focus.

'It' is often what appears to be on the agenda, while I and We are hidden under the surface. It is common to try to be super-effective from the beginning, discouraging any deviation from It. Under the surface, I and We lie in wait. Those unexpressed topics can pop up and drain time and energy from the work of the group, which may remain forever stuck at an ineffective „beginner" stage.

If, instead, we consciously allow ***I*** and ***We*** topics to surface, we might find that the group initially spends a lot of time on these topics, and less on ***It***. But over time the balance will shift and the group will develop into an effective group where people enjoy meeting, manifest creativity and feel that they can bring up topics of importance to them.

A group with a positive dynamic is learning how to satisfy these needs. We learn how to satisfy both our individual needs, our needs as a group, and our need to accomplish *It*. This dynamic helps to ensure that people keep coming, and feel comfortably responsible for their contributions to the group.

One-on-one connections

Regarding the **I-thou relationships** within the group, Martin Buber makes the claim that a successful group dynamic builds initially on positive one-on-one connections within the group. As a guide, you can promote such connections by your choice of methods.

Example: Habitual use of the 'Throw the Ball' method for eliciting comments from each person establishes and strengthens such relationships.

- Whoever starts, is invited to throw an imaginary ball to another group member of their choice. They learn to 'read' body language to determine who wants the ball; each time, a one-on-one relationship is established or reinforced.
- At the same time, each group member becomes - consciously or unconsciously - skilled at indicating whether he or she actu-

ally *wants* the ball, which is another form of one-on-one communication.

Sharing responsibility

The choice of methods can also build a strong 'We', or ethos of shared responsibility and mutual support.

Example: Habitual use of Fleck's Synergy Method as a framework for meetings satisfies all the above criteria for a positive group dynamic, not least at the point of agenda-setting.

In brief: the role of an empowering guide

The role of an empowering guide is to help people to

- Clarify the context for their action
- Focus on what is or might be possible: solutions rather than problems
- Define their own goals, explore what is possible, find opportunities
- Formulate their intention to change – and the help they need
- See the results of changes they make

Guiding could be said to be the art of asking useful questions, as the questions we ask shape the answers we will find (see our list of some empowering questions below).

But it also entails not being too attached to the answer. Being a good guide requires quite a LOT of non-attachment to the exact outcome, direction and speed of the process. You need to let go of the idea that YOU (your ideas, perspectives and judgements) are vital for success. Instead you are just a tool, someone who helps the participants realise they are **creative, resourceful and whole,** through the methods you use to facilitate their process. Learn to trust the process! And trust your group. As a guide, you are a midwife of individual and group knowledge /wisdom.

This is in one way challenging but in another it's a relief. As a guide, you don't need to have all the answers! In order to get into this frame of mind, it helps to be engaged in your own journey of self-empowerment. This is how you begin to understand the needs of others.

It's also a journey. So don't be annoyed with yourself if you DO catch yourself being judgemental, giving unsolicited advice or feeling VERY attached to a certain outcome at some point. Just notice it, practise an empowerment mindset, and try to let go, and trust the process again.

1. Safe space

Your first task with a person or group is to build and hold a safe space in which the person or people you are guiding feel able to ask for and give mutual support. Your major tools are:

- Trust in the wisdom of the process
- A willingness and ability to respectfully interrupt aggression or negative criticism, and turn the energy behind it to constructive use
- Ability to 'park' your own concerns and beliefs, particularly your judgements

'Parking' is perhaps the most vital part of the process. And it's not easy to let go of our own concerns and beliefs – even just for the duration of the group session! Our way of looking at the world is often our safety net, and for someone

to question it (even if just by intensely exploring their own, differing views) can be quite threatening or aggravating. We can feel overcome by the need to MAKE them see things OUR WAY – because that will make *us* feel safe. Practice noticing when you find judgments rising inside you, and parking them safely.

Be mindful, too, that you may have "skin in the game" if you are working with people you are connected with outside of the group meetings. Then, it is even MORE important to get skilled at "parking" and NOT using any of the information shared within the meetings outside of those gatherings.

2. Listen and respond

The second task concerns how you listen, and how you respond to what you hear:

- Listen attentively and with respect.
- Let the speaker see that you hear and understand them, without expressing an opinion; a simple 'thank you' is often enough.
- If it seems they are stuck in a problem, don't try to solve it! – ask whether they in fact see any possibility for action; see 'Don't take the problem away', above.
- If appropriate, recall for them the power of their own hopes, vision, positive experiences and identified strengths.

To do this successfully, you need to be on the alert for your own problems and fears. Recognizing them can help you to empathise with the other; not recognizing them can interfere with your communication.

There are different modes of listening. You no doubt experienced Deep Listening as part of your guide training; using that method, you give maximum space to the speaker, with very little 'interference' from your side. For some participants this can be hard to adjust to, certainly initially. Some elements of Active Listening - in particular, mirroring - can make it clear that you are in fact paying close attention.

At some point the speaker may insist on hearing opinions, from you or other members of the group. Remember that you are helping the other person to explore options. Not 'selling' your views or ways of taking action! Your role is also to help the other group members to adhere to this principle.

3. Make space for other perspectives

Encourage participants to express themselves freely in words or images, or any other way; and be prepared to mirror back - non-judgmentally! - what you hear or observe. Support other members of the group to do the same.

There is great value in receiving someone else's reframe. This is not just about listening and responding, but about making the participants feel heard and understood, AND about potentially creating the start for a perspective shift by adding our own flavour/perspective to what we mirror back. Be sure to make space for the person mirrored to tell you if they feel misunderstood, and to clarify if that is what they want.

4. Speak from the heart

The fourth task is connected with how you speak: with your own willingness to hold a solution focus and to speak from the heart.

- Ask questions!
- "Be yourself". Acknowledge your emotional responses to what happens, and practice parking. This means to allow and recognise your emotions, but not get hijacked by them. Try to stay with your intention of guiding the other person through THEIR process. If you notice that you can't do that, consider taking an unscheduled break to get back in balance: people can pick up on your ambivalence and you may lose their trust if you simply plough on.
- Sometimes intense emotions are best managed by putting them out in the open. When you DO need to bring up a tricky subject: take a deep breath and say what's going on for you. Use "I" and "me" statements – not "you". Make sure you give others the room to share different, even conflicting views when they also feel the need to do so. As long as everyone can do so respectfully, and using "I" statements.
- And remember to keep returning to a focus on solutions – not problems.

5. Be kind to yourself!

The fourth element is the insight that all of this is much easier to say than to do. Give yourself a pat on the back when it goes well, but without blaming yourself when you realise it didn't go so well. More important is the ability to *notice* whether you're doing well or not, and thus to learn from your own experience.

This bears repeating, as the process of supporting others through THEIR transformation will highlight what is going on inside you yourself. Fostering a growth mindset where all failures are learning opportunities and where your self-worth is not too attached to doing well, is vital. Learn to cushion those learning moments with a lot of self kindness, instead of fueling the voice of your inner critic, otherwise supporting others can become a fast train to burn-out city.

Look for some self-kindness practices that work well for you and do them regularly!

Part C
Annexes

Annexe I
A group program

The Innertopia Empowerment model
A generic structure for a sequence of events

Preparations

Recruit participants
Prior information to participants

1. Group meeting: A taste of Clarity

Welcome
The plan
Why clarity?
Exercise (individual+3s): Gratitude
Discussion
Exercise (individual): The Wheel of Life
What next?

- 'Homework': Exploring Clarity

2. Group meeting: Clarity

Welcome
Experience of The Wheel of Life and of own exploration
Reflect & review Clarity
Do we wish to continue? - review format
Overview of Confidence
Game with Power Stances
Discussion
What next?

- 'Homework': Exploring Confidence

3. Group meeting: Confidence

Welcome
Experience of own exploration
Reflect & review Confidence
Do we wish to continue? - review format
Overview of ‚Make it Real'
Exercise: mapping my connections
Exercise (2s or 3s): Finding my champion
Discussion
What next?

- 'Homework': Making it Real

4. Group meeting: Make It Real

Welcome
Experience of own exploration
Reflect & review Make it real
Exercise: eg Letter to Future You
Thinking ahead

5. Group meeting: Harvesting

Welcome
Personal outcomes and planned activities
Group activities, actual and potential?
Evaluation
Tomorrow is a new day
Thank you/closing celebration

Annexe II
Examples of empowering questions

Note. These are not questions you 'must' ask. Just questions that have proved fruitful for other guides. If you find yourself in an appropriate situation, try out some of them, see how they work for you.

Topic: Clarity

Understanding a situation

- On a scale 0-10 how clear are you about this topic/how satisfied are you with the current situation? Which number do you want to reach by the end of this session?
- *For example:*
  If you score a 3 here, what is included in that? If you'd like to score a 5 by the end of the program, what would that look like? What will be different?
- What exactly do you mean when you say…?
- How exactly do you envisage this when you…?
- Where do you think the problem comes from?
- For whom is this a problem?/Who wants to reach that goal?
- You as an individual? people around you? a certain group?
- Who suffers most from this problem? Who profits most from it?
- Which area in your life do you want to improve?
- Are there situations where the problem doesn't occur?
- Are there situations where the problem occurs less? Or more?
- What would happen if the problem was not solved?
- What will having more clarity on this help you do/ achieve?
- What negatives persist if you do not get more clarity on this?
- Is there a dilemma or dichotomy central to this issue?

Defining an intention

- What should be different for you after this program?
- What would a day, or the process, look like when you have succeeded in your intention?
- How would you know that you have reached the goal/you are moving in the right direction/the problem has disappeared? How would others know?
- What will you have to face after solving the problem? What would you have to deal with if you had already reached your goal?
  (Referring back to a dichotomy or dilemma that has been identified in the previous stage) What could more balance look like? Or do we need a commitment to a BIG shift?

Getting unstuck

*Imagine being 80 years old and telling your grandchildren about your situation today. What wisdom will you pass on to them? What was good about the situation and what did you learn from it?
*What could you do to make the problem worse?
Example: What would you need to do to ensure that your partner gets even more angry?
*What is stopping you? What would you have to deal with if the obstacle wasn't there? What could you use the obstacle for?
*If you could ask future you (say ten years from now, in a timeline where you have been successful) for advice, what might they tell you to do?

*What can you let go of to get ready for your solution/new, better situation?
*Who would you need to be to reach your goal or succeed in your intention?

Changing perspective

- What might be a benefit of this situation if you look at it from another perspective?
- Why is it good not to have reached your destination yet?
- What would a child /a fly on the wall/ your best friend /your worst enemy think of this situation?
- What do you definitely NOT want to change?

Topic: Confidence

Identifying resources

*What have you already done to solve the problem/ reach your goal? What worked best so far?
*Do you have one mini instance of success, or a moment when the current problem already became less? What was present in those moments?
*How did you manage to get along so well despite the problem?
*What works well in your life? / In which areas do you feel strong and competent? How could those strengths solve your problem/help you reach your goal?
*What has helped you before?

Moving from problem to solution orientation

If you had a magic wand, what would you conjure away or conjure up? What would have to happen in your life for that to come true with just everyday magic?

- Imagine you wake up one morning and your problems have gone away. How will you know? What first signals the change has happened, as you start your day?
- Who or what is preventing you from reaching a solution? Who or what could help you find a solution?
- Do you know anyone who is or has been in a similar situation and has overcome it? Do you know what they did?

Topic: Make it real

Grounding

*What little thing can you do today/this week to get a first taste of your preferred situation?
*Is there a current habit that hinders you from solving the problem/reaching your goal?
*Could you think of a habit that might support your goal?
*Who in your life/surroundings might be a good role model/supporter/companion for your endeavour?
*Who could you become that would make this (the desired outcome) into a reality?
*If the problem is not always there, what healthy behaviour can you practise -even if just once- to prolong that situation?

Harvesting

*When we meet again in (x months‘ time), what will you tell me about the problem/situation?
*If I meet your partner/colleague on the street in x month‘s time, what will they tell me about how you are?
*Looking back on the process, how have you benefited?
*What can you do now that you couldn’t at the beginning of the program?
*Connecting back to the score you previously gave to “understanding” -> Where would you score yourself now? How do you describe the difference those added points make in your life?

Annexe III
Want more?

More information

Web sites
https://legacy17.org/
https://hostingtransformation.eu/methods-toolbox/
https://www.neurodiversityeducationacademy.org/
https://self-compassion.org/

Books
Alex **Brooks**, Lana **Jelenjev**, Saskia **Wenniger**, *"What's Strong with You?!* , facilitators toolkit, Neurodiversity Education Academy, 2023 https://www.neurodiversityeducationacademy.org/whats-strong-with-you
Michael **Bungay Stanier**, 2016, Box of Crayons, *The Coaching Habit: Say Less, Ask More & Change the Way You Lead Forever*
Jutta **Goldammer** *et al.*, 2022, Transformation Library, *Online Alchemy*
Marilyn **Mehlmann** *et al.*, 2023, Transformation Library, *Empowerment: A Guide for Facilitators*
Kristin **Neff**, 2020, HarperCollins, *Self Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*
Marcia **Reynolds**, 2020, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, *Coach the Person, Not the Problem: A Guide to Using Reflective Inquiry*

Interested in becoming an ambassador?

If you would like to spread the word about the *Innertopia Empowerment* program and its availability in your language and region, do contact your trainer; or fill in the contact form on https://legacy17.org/contact/, specifying "Innertopia ambassador" in the subject line.

Interested in becoming a guide trainer?

Do you already have experience of giving workshops? Once you are certified as an *Innertopia* guide you can apply for training to become a trainer of new guides in your language/region. Talk to your trainer, or write a note to contact@legacy17.org, specifying "Innertopia trainer" in the message field.

Annexe IV
The team

This handbook

Overall author and editor Marilyn Mehlmann, with substantial contributions from Jutta and Boris Goldammer, Saskia Wenniger, Ursel Biester, Dóra Halász, as well as participants in our pilot workshops.

The project partners

Legacy17 • Sweden

Visionautik • Germany

Neurodiversity Foundation • Netherlands

Trekstones • Germany

Rogers Foundation • Hungary

transformation
hosts international
publications