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# COMPASS

## To self Compassion

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**A Practical Guide to Working with Young  
People**



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# COMPASS

## TO SELF-COMPASSION

## PREFACE

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This practical handbook was developed in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, as part of the transnational project Compass to Self-Compassion. The project brought together organisations and practitioners from Germany, Italy and Spain who share a common concern: the growing pressure that beauty standards, social media and the aesthetics industry place on young people's bodies, self-worth and life decisions.

Across the project, youth workers, educators and facilitators collaborated to explore how somatic practices, creative movement, community-based methods and reflective communication tools can be used to strengthen self-compassion and body appreciation. The methods and exercises presented here were developed, adapted and tested in workshops with young participants in the three partner countries. They are rooted in different professional traditions – including somatics, yoga and dance education, bioenergetics and biosystemics, Active Listening, Nonviolent Communication, community mental health and feminist pedagogies – and translated into concrete, accessible tools for everyday youth work.

The coordinating organisation, NamaStay e.V. (Germany), worked closely with partner organisations from Italy and Spain to ensure that the project spoke to diverse cultural contexts while addressing shared European challenges. Together, the partners aimed to contribute to the prevention of harmful, appearance-driven decisions – including unnecessary aesthetic surgery – by creating spaces where young people can question toxic beauty norms, experience their bodies as worthy and alive, and develop a kinder relationship with themselves.

This handbook is one of the key intellectual outputs of the project. It is intended for youth workers, educators, artists, counsellors and community practitioners who wish to address beauty standards, body image and self-worth with young people in an embodied, creative and critically reflective way. The practices can be used as complete workshop series or as individual modules and are meant to be adapted to local realities.

We hope that this material will inspire you to hold spaces in which young people can feel seen, heard and respected – not for how they look, but for who they are.



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# INTRODUCTION

## CONTEXT AND AIMS

Young people in Europe grow up in a culture that invests enormous energy in appearance, performance and visibility. Social media filters, influencer cultures and commercialised beauty norms shape everyday experiences of “being seen”. At the same time, aesthetic medicine and cosmetic surgery have become increasingly accessible and normalised in many countries, including Germany, Italy and Spain.

For many young people this creates a contradictory field of tension: on the one hand, a desire for self-expression, creativity and belonging; on the other hand, intense pressure to conform to narrow and often unrealistic beauty ideals. Feelings of shame, comparison, anxiety and self-criticism are common responses. The project “Compass to Self-Compassion” responds to this situation with an embodied, arts-based, youth work approach. Its aims are to:

- strengthen self-compassion and self-worth in young people,
- support critical thinking about beauty standards, social media and aesthetic surgery,
- offer practical, body-based tools for dealing with pressure and comparison,
- reduce vulnerability to harmful appearance-driven decisions, including unnecessary or extensive aesthetic surgery.

## TARGET GROUP AND SETTINGS

The methods in this handbook are designed for:

- young people and young adults
- mixed-gender groups with diverse body types, abilities and cultural backgrounds
- formal and non-formal educational settings (youth centres, NGOs, schools, trainings, exchanges)

Group sizes can vary. Many exercises work well in groups of 8–20 participants and can be adapted for smaller or larger contexts.

## CORE PRINCIPLES

Across countries and partner organisations, the project is guided by shared principles:

- **Embodiment:** Working with the body not as an object to improve, but as a living, sensing subject.
- **Self-compassion:** Encouraging a kind, supportive inner attitude instead of harsh self-judgement.
- **Participation and horizontality:** Treating young people as co-creators of the process, not passive recipients.
- **Critical reflection:** Linking personal experiences to social structures (gender norms, racism, class, ableism, media economies).
- **Safety and choice:** Creating spaces where participation is voluntary, boundaries are respected, and emotional processes are held with care.

These principles are reflected both in the methodological frameworks and in the concrete exercises described in this handbook.



## HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook is structured to move from context and theory into concrete practice.

- **Chapter 1** introduces the overall context, aims and principles of the project. It outlines why work on body image, beauty standards and self-worth is relevant in youth work, and describes the target groups and settings.
- **Chapter 2** provides an advocacy and background perspective. It summarises current knowledge on beauty ideals, social media and aesthetic surgery in Germany, Italy and Spain, and explains why these developments matter for prevention and youth empowerment.
- **Chapter 3** focuses on “The Art of Holding Space”. It describes how physical, emotional and social space are created and maintained so that the methods in this handbook can be used safely and responsibly with young people.
- **Chapter 4** presents the methodological background. It introduces key approaches such as somatic work, yoga and dance education, bioenergetics and biosystemics, Active Listening, Nonviolent Communication, self-compassion, and community- and arts-based methods.
- **Chapter 5** contains the concrete practices and exercises. It is the most practical part of the handbook and is organised in thematic clusters (grounding, listening and group cohesion, movement and self-expression, critical reflection on beauty norms, body image and self-compassion, creative integration). Each exercise includes aims and a suggested process so that youth workers can adapt it to their context.
- **Chapter 6** offers a process evaluation. It summarises what worked well, which challenges were encountered and what has been learned across different countries and groups, in order to inform future projects and adaptations.
- **Chapter 7** lists the bibliography. It brings together the main theoretical and research sources referenced in the previous chapters and can be used as a starting point for further reading.

Readers can work through the handbook sequentially, or use Chapters 2–4 as background and orientation while drawing directly on the exercises in Chapter 5 for programme planning and facilitation.





# ADVOCACY AND BACKGROUND

## BEAUTY STANDARDS, SOCIAL MEDIA AND AESTHETIC SURGERY

### BEAUTY IDEALS AND TOXIC BEAUTY CULTURE

Contemporary beauty culture is characterised by:

- narrow ideals of thinness or muscularity
- Eurocentric and gendered norms
- the constant availability of edited and filtered images
- a strong link between appearance, success and perceived value

Research in Europe and internationally shows that exposure to unrealistic beauty ideals on social networking sites is associated with higher body dissatisfaction and more frequent appearance comparison among adolescents and young adults.

Toxic beauty culture does not only promote particular looks. It also transmits messages about “enoughness”: being worthy, lovable and acceptable is subtly tied to looking a certain way. When young people internalise these messages, difficulties such as anxiety, depression, eating problems, obsessive self-monitoring and risky appearance-changing behaviours can follow.

### SOCIAL MEDIA, SELF-OBJECTIFICATION AND BODY IMAGE

Across Europe, recent EU and WHO data show that over 80% of young people use social media networks daily, and around one in three adolescents maintain continuous online contact with friends and others. Studies and policy reports highlight that social media plays a central role in how young people think and feel about their bodies.

#### **Key dynamics include:**

- Self-objectification
- Viewing one’s body from an external, evaluative perspective; monitoring appearance instead of sensing from within.
- Appearance-focused activity
- Taking and posting selfies, following influencers, viewing “fitspiration” and “thinspiration” content.
- Comparison and perfectionism
- Measuring oneself against edited images, highlight reels and unrealistic standards.

#### **Recent research shows that:**

- viewing idealised images and selfies is strongly associated with increased body dissatisfaction and a higher desire for cosmetic surgery, especially among those who already feel insecure about their appearance;
- exposure to appearance-focused social media activity predicts higher body dissatisfaction over time in adolescents;
- problematic social media use is rising among European youth, with young girls particularly vulnerable.
- 

Against this backdrop, youth work on body image needs to address not only individual feelings, but also digital environments and the economies that benefit from insecurity.





## BEAUTY STANDARDS AND AESTHETIC PROCEDURES IN SPAIN

In Spain, aesthetic medicine has become widespread. According to the Spanish Society of Aesthetic Medicine, around 40% of Spaniards have received some form of medical aesthetic treatment, with higher rates among women than men. Cosmetic surgery and non-surgical procedures are widely marketed as tools for confidence and self-improvement, and media reports highlight popular interventions such as breast augmentation, rhinoplasty and body contouring.

Parallel to this, Spanish youth – like their peers in other European countries – navigate intense social media environments and report high levels of body-related pressure and comparison.

## BEAUTY STANDARDS AND AESTHETIC PROCEDURES IN GERMANY



Germany is one of Europe's largest markets for aesthetic medicine. Market analyses indicate a steady growth in demand for aesthetic procedures, driven by increased emphasis on self-image, social media influence and growing disposable income.

Professional associations such as the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ästhetisch-Plastische Chirurgie (DGÄPC) and the Vereinigung der Deutschen Ästhetisch-Plastischen Chirurgen (VDÄPC) report high numbers of aesthetic procedures each year, with breast surgery, eyelid surgery and liposuction among the most common. Trend data indicate that a significant share of breast operations is carried out in younger age groups under 30.

Surveys on youth body image in Germany show that many adolescents and young adults struggle with body dissatisfaction, with girls and young women reporting more negative body images than boys and young men.



## BEAUTY STANDARDS AND AESTHETIC PROCEDURES IN ITALY

Italy consistently ranks among the leading countries worldwide in the number of aesthetic procedures performed. In 2019, more than one million medical or cosmetic practices were carried out, with a growth trend that has remained stable in recent years.

The Italian cosmetic surgery market continues to grow, supported by cultural emphasis on appearance, wide availability of services and increasing normalisation of aesthetic medicine as a form of self-improvement.

Young people are increasingly exposed to both traditional and digital forms of beauty norms, through fashion, media and social media culture.

## WHY THIS MATTERS FOR YOUTH WORK

Across Germany, Italy and Spain, the combination of:

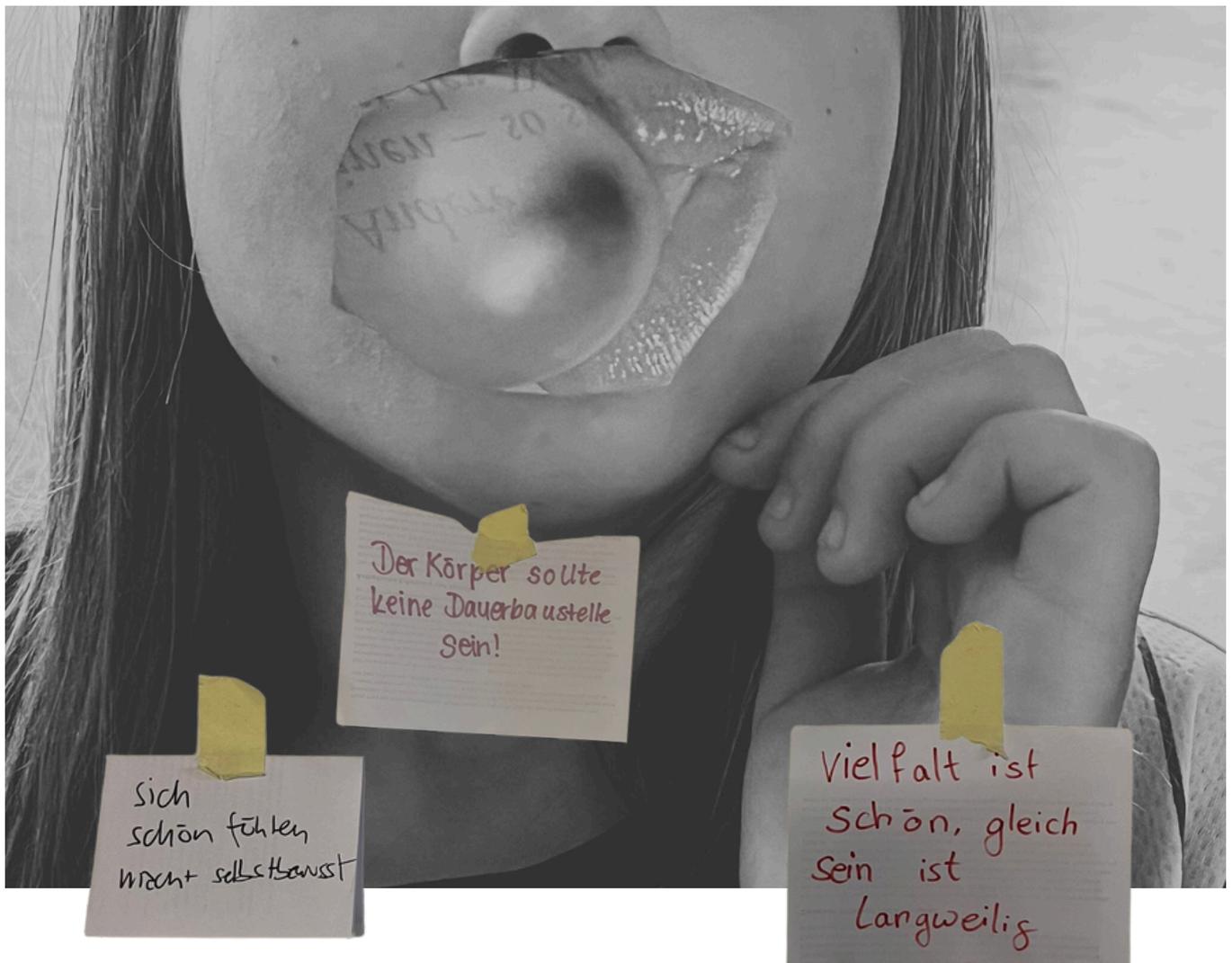
- high social media use,
- strong cultural emphasis on appearance,
- growth in aesthetic medicine markets,
- and rising youth body dissatisfaction

creates a landscape in which appearance-based pressure can lead to harmful coping strategies, including risky aesthetic procedures.

### **Youth work and non-formal education can offer:**

- alternative spaces where bodies are experienced from within,
- critical conversations about beauty norms, media and power,
- supportive relationships that reduce shame and isolation,
- practical tools for self-compassion and body respect.

**The methods in this handbook are designed to serve exactly these functions.**





# THE ART OF HOLDING SPACE

## WHY A SAFE SPACE IS ESSENTIAL

Working with beauty standards, body image and self-worth touches sensitive layers of experience: shame, comparison, fear of rejection, social exclusion, sometimes trauma. For this reason, the project is not only about what we do (methods and exercises), but also about how we hold space for young people.

“Holding space” means creating and maintaining conditions in which people can show up as they are – physically, emotionally and socially – without fear of being shamed, corrected or left alone with what emerges. It is both an inner attitude and a concrete practice.

In this project, holding space is described along three dimensions:

- physical space
- emotional space
- social space

Together they form the container in which transformation can happen.

## PHYSICAL SPACE – HOW THE ROOM HOLDS THE BODY

The physical environment communicates before anyone speaks. For many young people, experiences of exposure, control or shame are linked to particular spaces (school, changing rooms, gyms, social media). Creating a different kind of space is therefore a core intervention in itself.

Key aspects:

- **Room set-up**

Whenever possible, work in a room that:

- can be closed, to ensure privacy,
- allows chairs and mats to be arranged in a circle,
- provides enough space to move.

A circle signals that everyone is part of the conversation; there is no “back row”.

- **Comfort and accessibility**

Attention is given to:

- temperature, light and noise level,
- access to toilets and water,
- seating options for different bodies and needs,
- physical accessibility.

The intention is to reduce avoidable stressors and to show care.

- **Arrival and retreat**

It can help to mark:

- an arrival area where participants can take off shoes, breathe and land,
- a quiet corner where anyone can sit apart for a moment without leaving the group entirely.

This supports self-regulation and autonomy.

- **Sensory awareness and visual messages**

- Music, light, smells and images on the walls are chosen with care. Mirrors and beauty advertising are critically considered. If mirrors are present, facilitators may:

- cover them,
- or explicitly discuss their impact before using them.

- Images that reflect body diversity and connection, rather than perfection, support the project’s goals.



# EMOTIONAL SPACE

## HOW FEELINGS ARE WELCOMED AND CONTAINED

Emotional space refers to the climate in the room: what is allowed to be felt and expressed. Body image work is often charged with strong emotions. Holding emotional space means creating safety and boundaries at the same time.

### Core principles:

- **Voluntariness and consent**

No one is forced to share personal stories or to participate in a specific way. The right to pass is explicit. Participants choose their own depth.

- **Co-created agreements**

At the beginning, the group formulates agreements, for example:

- confidentiality,
- no mocking or comments about bodies,
- speaking from “I”,
- no unsolicited advice.

These agreements can be written on a flipchart and revisited.

- **Normalising different reactions**

Participants are reminded that all reactions are welcome: tears, silence, laughter, numbness. There is no “right way” to respond.

- **Containment and pacing**

The process begins with low-threshold, playful activities before moving to more intense themes. Grounding exercises (breathing, sensing feet, simple movement) frame deeper work. If signs of overwhelm appear, the group can slow down, pause or shift.

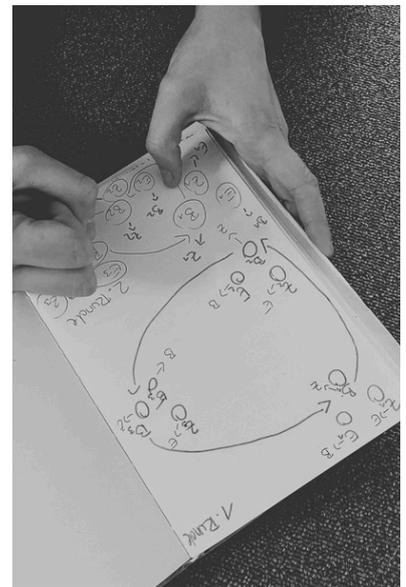
- **Listening instead of fixing**

When someone shares something vulnerable, facilitators and peers practice listening and witnessing rather than immediately giving advice or minimising feelings. This approach is closely related to Active Listening and Nonviolent Communication (see Section 4).

- **Respecting facilitator boundaries**

Facilitators are clear that they are not offering therapy. If topics exceed the scope of the project, they can suggest further support.

Emotional space is safe when participants experience: “My feelings are allowed here, and I am not left alone with them.”



# SOCIAL SPACE

## HOW RELATIONSHIPS AND BELONGING ARE SHAPED

The social space is the network of relationships in the group: who speaks, who is quiet, who feels included, who remains on the margins. It is also where power, culture and social norms show up.

Important elements:

- **Horizontal, yet held:** Participation is as horizontal as possible: experiences are taken seriously regardless of age or background. At the same time, facilitators are responsible for structure, time and safety, and intervene if someone is attacked or mocked.
- **Diversity and intersectionality:** Groups often include different genders, body types, cultural backgrounds, abilities and languages. Social space is held by:
  - using inclusive language and respecting pronouns,
  - avoiding assumptions about families, sexuality, religion or health,
  - naming beauty norms as connected to gender norms, racism, ableism, class and other structures.
- **Multiple ways of participating:** Expression through speaking, movement, drawing, writing or silence is equally valued. Plenary discussions are alternated with small groups, pairs and individual reflection.
- **Clear boundaries around judgement:** A central rule is: no negative comments about one's own or others' bodies. If such comments appear, they are gently reflected and re-framed towards self-compassion and respect.
- **Dealing with conflict and tension:** Disagreements are not treated as failure but as part of real life. When tensions arise, facilitators slow the process, make space for different voices and use principles of Deep Democracy (see Section 5.4).
- **Confidentiality beyond the room:** Participants are encouraged not to share others' stories in social media or other contexts without consent.

A well-held social space becomes a counter-space to everyday environments where beauty norms produce comparison and exclusion. Here, belonging is not conditional on appearance or performance.





# METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

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## ENVIRONMENTAL SOMATICS

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### THEORETICAL BASIS

Environmental Somatics is a practice drawing on methodologies from somatic education, biology, philosophy, and movement disciplines such as Feldenkrais. Developed by Katja Munker and taught at the Somatische Akademie Berlin, it helps people tune into bodily sensations in order to better understand themselves as living, sensing and moving parts of their environment.

It is based on the idea that we do not just exist in our bodies – we experience life through them. Through the lens of proprioception (the sense of movement and position) and interoception (awareness of internal bodily sensations), Environmental Somatics explores how different environments shape us individually and collectively. It supports experiencing oneself as part of environments and deepening connection to the body as it is.

### APPLICATION IN THE PROJECT

A key insight in Environmental Somatics is that humans are not separate from nature. When working with body image, the process can begin by looking at natural diversity – for example in flowers. There is no single ideal of a “perfect” flower; uniqueness, colours and forms are appreciated without a single standard.

Transferring this perspective to the human body opens space for recognising beauty as diverse, not singular. By connecting to natural elements – feeling the textures of trees, noticing the patterns of water, observing the asymmetry of landscapes – participants develop an embodied understanding of diversity. This awareness can gently transform how they see their own bodies, fostering self-compassion and self-confidence.

Environmental Somatics is therefore not only about changing how we think. It is about changing how we feel and experience ourselves in relation to the world, stepping out of rigid, socially constructed ideals into a more expansive and connected experience of beauty.

## YOGA AND DANCE EDUCATION

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### YOGA AS AN EMBODIED METHOD FOR SELF-COMPASSION AND BODY IMAGE WORK

Yoga is an embodied practice that integrates movement, breath and mindful awareness. In therapeutic, youth work and trauma-informed contexts, yoga is used not to improve flexibility or achieve postural perfection, but to cultivate presence, emotional stability and a kinder relationship to the body.

#### **Research shows that yoga can:**

- reduce self-objectification
- improve interoceptive awareness
- decrease anxiety and body dissatisfaction
- increase self-compassion and stress tolerance
- support autonomic nervous system regulation through breath and grounding

By shifting attention from how the body looks to how it feels, yoga directly counters beauty pressure and supports young people in reconnecting with internal cues instead of external judgement. Yoga is non-competitive and non-linear, which contrasts with performance-driven ideals in social media and beauty culture.



# DANCE PEDAGOGY AS A METHOD FOR SELF-WORTH, EXPRESSION AND BODY DIVERSITY

Dance pedagogy works with creative movement, body awareness, improvisation and relational interaction.

## **In contrast to technique-focused dance, pedagogical work emphasises:**

- expression over aesthetics,
- inner sensation over outer perfection,
- inclusiveness over comparison,
- creativity over correctness.

## **Research on dance movement therapy and community dance shows that dance can:**

- increase embodiment and reduce dissociation,
- support emotional regulation and expression,
- improve body appreciation,
- strengthen confidence and relational connection,
- reduce shame through playful, non-judgemental movement.
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In the context of this project, dance pedagogy creates environments in which bodies of all shapes, abilities and identities are welcomed as valid sources of expression and knowledge.

## BIOENERGETICS

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### THEORETICAL BASIS

Bioenergetics integrates verbal listening with listening to and reading the body. It understands personality in terms of energetic processes: the production of energy through breathing and metabolism, and the discharge of energy through movement. These are seen as basic functions of life.

The amount of energy available – and how it is used – influences how people respond to life situations. Bioenergetics is also a form of therapy that combines bodywork and work on the mind to help people resolve emotional difficulties and realise their potential for pleasure and joy. A central premise is that body and mind are functionally identical: what happens in the mind is reflected in the body, and vice versa.

### APPLICATION IN THE PROJECT

Applied to project workshops, bioenergetic principles inform interventions that address both psychological and bodily levels:

- themes are explored both via mental-emotional channels, leading towards bodily expression,
- and via bodily channels, where breathing, movement and expression allow unconscious emotional experiences to surface and be processed.

Regressive phases and processes of becoming conscious are supported by the unified engagement of the organism – both psychically and somatically. In a youth work context, this does not involve therapy, but light, carefully held activities that connect breath, posture, movement and emotion.

## BIOSYSTEMICS

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### THEORETICAL BASIS

The biosystemic approach draws on affective neuroscience and uses both verbal (top-down) and bodily (bottom-up) techniques oriented towards emotional regulation. Its goal is to restore connection between cognitive, sensorimotor and relational dimensions of experience.

Mind, body and relationships are seen as key elements of well-being. The person is approached in their full psychosomatic and relational complexity. Biosystemic methods can be applied in individual, couple and group settings. They offer a psychocorporal model that makes it possible to understand and integrate the complexity of relational phenomena, using tools that connect words with movements, gestures, postures, sensations and emotions.



## APPLICATION IN THE PROJECT

In workshop settings, biosystemic principles inform:

- experiential group activities centred on bodily empathy and attunement
- exercises that focus on breathing, grounding and key gestures
- work on listening to one's own body in relation to others

This supports emotional regulation, connection and awareness of how relationships are lived through the body.

## ACTIVE LISTENING

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Active Listening is a relational communication method developed by humanistic psychologist Carl R. Rogers within person-centred therapy. Its purpose is to create a climate of emotional safety in which authentic expression, self-discovery and psychological growth become possible.

**Unlike ordinary listening, which often focuses on preparing a response, Active Listening emphasises:**

- attending to the speaker with full presence,
- reflecting content and emotional tone,
- avoiding judgement, interruption or evaluation.

**Rogers identified three core attitudes for effective listening:**

- Empathy – sensing the speaker's internal world as if it were one's own, without losing the "as if" quality.
- Congruence (authenticity) – being genuine and transparent rather than performing a role.
- Unconditional positive regard – receiving the speaker with acceptance and non-judgement.

Practices such as paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, mindful nonverbal presence and allowing silence support this attitude. In this project, Active Listening underpins exercises such as the Deep Listening Practice and many sharing formats.

## NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION (NVC)

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Nonviolent Communication (NVC), developed by Marshall B. Rosenberg, is a framework for communication that aims to foster genuine connection, empathy and cooperative problem-solving. Rooted in humanistic psychology and influenced by nonviolence traditions, it teaches people to express themselves honestly while listening with compassion.

**NVC is organised around four components:**

- observation (without evaluation)
- feelings
- needs
- requests (not demands)

**It rests on assumptions such as:**

- all human actions are attempts to meet needs
- connection at the level of needs supports cooperation
- blame and criticism block empathy

In practice, NVC involves speaking from personal experience, listening for feelings and needs, and creating dialogue where all sides feel heard before exploring solutions. In youth work, it supports emotional literacy, healthier boundaries and conflict resolution.



# SELF-COMPASSION, SELF-OBJECTIFICATION AND MIRROR-BASED INTERVENTIONS

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Several key theoretical strands inform exercises like the Mirror of Presence:

- **Self-compassion (Kristin Neff):** Self-compassion combines self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness. Research shows that self-compassion reduces body dissatisfaction, shame, perfectionism and anxiety.
- **Self-objectification and appearance monitoring:** Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts) describes how people learn to view themselves from an external perspective as objects to be evaluated. This leads to self-surveillance, body shame and reduced interoception.
- **Somatic psychology and embodied acceptance:** Somatic approaches emphasise that emotional patterns are stored in the body and can shift through embodied awareness.
- **Mirror exposure:** Mirror-based interventions are used in body image therapy to reduce avoidance and distorted self-perception. Short, repeated mirror exposure can reduce anxiety and body dissatisfaction, particularly when combined with neutral or compassionate attention.

Together, these strands show that looking at oneself with mindful, kind attention can interrupt automatic negative evaluations and support self-acceptance.

## COMMUNITY-BASED, FEMINIST AND ARTS-BASED APPROACHES

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Beyond individual-focused methods, the project draws on:

- **Community mental health approaches** – understanding mental health as shaped by living conditions, relationships and community networks.
- **Community occupational therapy** – focusing on meaningful activity, participation and agency, rather than productivity.
- **Group psychoanalytic perspectives** – viewing the group as a space where unconscious dynamics and shared narratives circulate.
- **Feminist and popular education pedagogies** – treating lived experience as a source of knowledge, using dialogue and horizontality (inspired by authors such as bell hooks and Paulo Freire).
- **Embodied and expressive methodologies** – integrating breath, movement and sensory work as ways to reconnect with the body and build trust.
- **Artistic and narrative practices** – using collage, drawing, writing and zine-making as languages for what is difficult to say in ordinary words.

These approaches foreground the political and relational dimensions of body image, beauty norms and self-worth, and inform exercises such as Mapping Beauty Ideals, the Vision Board Method and collective zine creation.

## SHARED METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

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Across these diverse methods, certain principles recur:

- **the body is a subject, not an object;**
- **emotions are valid and meaningful;**
- **safety and choice are central;**
- **diversity of bodies and identities is normal and valuable;**
- **creativity and play are powerful tools for learning;**
- **critical reflection links personal experience with social structures.**

The exercise section shows how these principles are translated into concrete practice.





# PRACTICES AND EXERCISES

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This chapter presents the concrete practices and exercises used in the project Compass to Self-Compassion. They translate the methodological foundations (somatics, yoga and dance education, bioenergetics and biosystemics, Active Listening, NVC, community and arts-based methods) into practical tools for working with young people on beauty standards, body image and self-worth.

The exercises can be combined into longer workshop series or used as individual modules, depending on the context and time available. They are grouped into thematic clusters, but many of them overlap and can be placed flexibly.

## GROUNDING AND ARRIVING IN THE BODY

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### BREATHING AND ARRIVING IN THE BODY

#### AIM

To support participants in arriving in the space, regulating their nervous system and shifting attention from external demands to internal sensations.

#### HOW IT WORKS

##### Preparation

- o Participants sit on chairs or on the floor, or lie down if that feels safer.
- o Phones are put away.
- o The facilitator briefly explains that this is a short arrival exercise; there is no right or wrong.
- o

##### Guided breathing

The facilitator guides 3–5 minutes of simple breath awareness, for example:

- o “Feel the places where your body is supported – by the chair, the floor.”
- o “Notice your breath as it moves in and out.”
- o “You do not have to change your breath; just notice it.”
- o Gentle invitations to lengthen the exhale (e.g. inhale to 4, exhale to 6) can be added if appropriate.

##### Gentle stretching

Participants are invited to make small movements – rolling shoulders, stretching arms, circling wrists and ankles – always within their own range of comfort.

Transition

The exercise ends with a clear signal (for example, a chime or a simple “Thank you; you can open your eyes if they were closed”). Participants are given a moment to look around, reorient and notice how they feel.

#### NOTES

- This practice can open every session as a predictable ritual.
- It is particularly helpful for participants who arrive stressed, distracted or anxious.
- No one is forced to close their eyes; it is always an option, not a requirement.



# THE CENTERING PRACTICE

## AIM

To help participants develop grounded, embodied presence and to connect physical organisation of the body with values, self-compassion and choice.

## BACKGROUND

The Centering Practice, influenced by Staci Haines and the Strozzi Institute for Somatics, is widely used in somatic education, social justice work, youth work and trauma healing.

### It assumes that:

- the body stores histories and habits,
- sustainable change happens through embodied practice,
- young people can learn new bodily patterns that support dignity, confidence and compassion.
- Centering is not about correcting posture or achieving a “better” shape. It is a way of inhabiting the body so that participants feel supported, present and connected to what matters to them.

## HOW IT WORKS

Participants explore four interrelated dimensions of embodied presence: center, length, width and depth.

### Center

- Attention is guided to a point just below the navel.
- Participants are invited to sense this point as an anchor of stability.
- From there, they imagine sensing downward into the ground and upward through the spine.
- The centre becomes a reference they can return to during the exercise and in everyday life.

### Length

- From this centre, participants allow the spine to gently lengthen – as if creating a bit more space between each vertebra.
- The aim is an upright, dignified posture without tension or rigidity.
- Length supports clarity, orientation and the feeling of having room to breathe and to choose.

### Width

- Awareness expands to the left and right sides of the body – shoulders, arms, ribs.
- Participants sense the space they occupy and the presence of others around them.
- Width is experienced as relational: having a place among others, neither collapsing nor inflating.

### Depth

- Participants are invited to sense the space in front of the body (future, possibilities) and behind the body (history, lineage, past experiences).
- Depth links where a person comes from with where they are going.
- It helps integrate memories, current reality and hopes.

### Values and purpose

- From this four-dimensional presence, participants are asked quietly to bring to mind what matters to them: values, care, hopes, commitments.
- They may name these silently or write them down afterwards.

## INTEGRATION

The facilitator explains that centering can be used:

- before difficult conversations,
- when feeling overwhelmed by appearance pressure,
- when facing choices (for example, concerning body-related decisions).

Centering becomes a way of returning to oneself in moments of stress, supporting self-compassion and reducing impulsive, externally driven decisions.



# THE INNER SANCTUARY PRACTICE

## AIM

To guide young people into a felt sense of inner safety, dignity and self-acceptance, using simple yoga-based movement and imagery.

## WHAT THE PRACTICE IS ABOUT

The Inner Sanctuary Practice invites participants to experience their bodies as trustworthy companions rather than objects to be evaluated. Instead of striving for flexibility or “good form”, the focus lies on:

- breath-led movement,
- grounding,
- and an inward-focused meditation on an inner place of safety.

## HOW IT WORKS

### Arrival and grounding

- Participants sit or lie down in a comfortable position.
- They are guided through a slow breathing pattern, for example: inhale to 4, soft hold to 2, exhale to 6.
- The facilitator invites them to imagine the floor gently rising to meet them – a symbolic reminder that they do not have to earn their belonging.

### Three gentle self-compassion movements

#### A. Heart-Space Opening (Compassion Breath)

- One hand rests over the heart, the other over the belly.
- On each inhale, participants silently say: “Here I am.”
- On each exhale: “I am enough.”
- The aim is to replace inner criticism with warmth and recognition.

#### B. Sheltering Arms (Self-Hold Stretch)

- In a seated or standing position, participants cross their arms over the chest as if giving themselves an embrace.
- On the inhale, they gently open the arms to the sides.
- On the exhale, they return to the self-embrace.
- This explores the contrast between protection and openness – both seen as valid modes of being.

#### C. Mountain of Dignity (Simple Mountain Pose)

- Participants stand with feet hip-width, knees soft, shoulders relaxed.
- They imagine roots growing downwards through their feet and soft length through the spine and crown of the head.
- The facilitator offers an invitation such as: “Stand as if you belong here – because you do.”

### Sanctuary visualisation

- With eyes open or closed, participants are guided to imagine a place inside the body that feels calm, warm and steady – a sanctuary that cannot be judged, taken away or evaluated from the outside.
- Questions support the imagination:
  - “What colour does this place have?”
  - “What texture?”
  - “What does safety feel like inside you?”
  - “What part of you softens when you arrive here?”

### Closing

- The group takes a few regular breaths.
- Participants may place a hand again on their heart or another part of the body that needs attention.
- The facilitator reminds them that this inner sanctuary can be revisited whenever pressure or shame arises.

## WHY IT MATTERS

### The practice helps young people:

- experience their bodies as safe and alive
- soften harsh inner dialogue
- build self-trust and grounding,
- separate their identity from external beauty standards,
- develop an inner refuge to return to in challenging moments.



# RELATIONAL LISTENING AND GROUP COHESION - THE DEEP LISTENING PRACTICE (SPEED-DATING METHOD)

## AIM

To enable young people to experience what it is like to be listened to with full presence and without interruption, and to practise this kind of listening for others.

## WHAT THE PRACTICE IS ABOUT

The Deep Listening Practice – sometimes called “Speed Dating for Presence” – is a structured relational exercise.

Unlike everyday conversation, where listening often serves to prepare an answer or to compare oneself, this method creates a rare space where:

- one person speaks freely for a short time,
- the other listens with complete presence,
- no feedback, advice or evaluation is given.

The goal is witnessing, not dialogue. This form of listening is deeply regulating for the nervous system and can feel surprisingly intimate and grounding.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

- **Active Listening (Carl Rogers):** presence, curiosity, listening to understand rather than to respond, allowing silence and emotional expression.
- **Nonviolent Communication (Marshall Rosenberg):** recognising feelings and needs without fixing them; creating connection before trying to solve problems.
- **Somatic Relational Presence:** physical signals of safety (open posture, soft eyes, steady breath) support co-regulation.

## HOW IT WORKS

### Set-up

- Participants sit in two concentric circles facing each other.
- Each person in the inner circle has a partner in the outer circle.

### Roles

- For the first round, one circle is the speaking circle, the other the listening circle.
- The speaker talks for two minutes; the listener remains silent.

### Prompts

- The facilitator reads a reflective question. Prompts are open, and each person chooses their depth.

### Examples:

- What is love for you?
- When do you feel alive?
- What is ugly?
- When do you feel beautiful?
- What scars are you carrying – emotional or physical?
- When does your body feel like home?
- Where are your boundaries?
- What is the art of living?
- When do you feel loved?
- What makes the perfect body – and does such a thing exist?
- Where do you feel safe?
- What gives your life meaning right now?
- What are you learning about yourself lately?
- What beliefs or expectations are you ready to let go of?
- What feels heavy in your life – and what feels light?
- What do you appreciate about your younger self?
- What is something people do not see about you at first?
- What kind of beauty cannot be photographed?
- What would you like to experience more often?
- What does freedom feel like in your body?



### Two minutes of speaking and listening

- The speaker talks freely for two minutes.
- The listener does not speak, nod, comfort or react – they simply stay present, with soft eyes and grounded breath.
- The intention is to hold space, not to influence.

### Rotation

- After two minutes, a signal (bell, clap, short music) marks the end.
- One circle moves one seat to the side, creating new pairs.
- Roles may remain the same for several rounds or be switched.

### Debriefing

- In plenary, the group reflects on:
  - What was it like to speak without interruption?
  - What was it like to listen silently?
  - Did anything surprise you?
  - What felt challenging, and what felt good?



## WHY IT MATTERS

### Participants often report that this exercise:

- makes them feel seen and accepted,
- reduces pressure to perform or explain themselves,
- increases empathy and understanding of others,
- builds trust and group cohesion,
- provides a new experience of connection that counteracts comparison and isolation.

## EMBODIMENT, MOVEMENT AND SELF-EXPRESSION

## BEAUTY IN THE EVERYDAY

### AIM

To explore the concept of beauty in a playful, low-threshold way using everyday actions – in this case, preparing and sharing food.

### WHAT THE EXERCISE IS ABOUT

The exercise invites participants to find beauty in ordinary activities, not in abstract ideals. Food is used because it is familiar, sensory, creative and linked to pleasure.

### HOW IT WORKS

#### Creative food preparation

- Participants are given ingredients to assemble their own meals (for example, pizza toppings, ramen components, bowls, snacks).
- They are encouraged to decorate and arrange the food as they wish: combining colours, shapes and textures in ways that please them.

#### Anonymous presentation

- The finished plates are placed together on a table, anonymously.
- The group walks around, observing the plates.
- Participants comment on what they find beautiful, interesting or less appealing – focusing on the plate, not on the person who made it.

### Shared meal and guided conversation

- the group eats together.
- The facilitator introduces reflection questions such as:
  - You prepared your food in a way that you like. What do you find beautiful about it?
  - How do you define beauty here – colour, shape, composition, memory, smell, taste?
  - Must food look like a perfect recipe photo to be enjoyable?
  - Are there foods that look “ugly” but taste wonderful?
  - Which colours and forms feel beautiful to you?
  - Is there something that looks simple or plain but you love it?

## WHY IT MATTERS

### This exercise:

- shows that beauty can be experienced through senses, memories, emotions and personal taste,
- demonstrates that there is no single “correct” way for something to be beautiful,
- offers a gentle entry to the topic of beauty and appearance without immediately touching more charged themes,
- helps transfer insights from food to the body: just as food does not need to be perfectly styled to be delicious and meaningful, bodies do not need to be perfect to be beautiful or worthy.

## THE FIVE RHYTHMS – RHYTHMS AS SEASONS

### AIM

To support interoception, emotional awareness and self-compassion through free-form movement.

### WHAT IT IS

The Five Rhythms is a movement meditation practice developed by Gabrielle Roth. It works with five sequential movement qualities:

- Flowing
- Staccato
- Chaos
- Lyrical
- Stillness

Each rhythm reflects a different energy and emotional tone. There are no steps to learn; participants move freely, guided by music and simple prompts.

### Adaptation: Rhythms as seasons

To make the practice more accessible for young people, each rhythm is connected to a season:

- Flowing – Spring: gentle emergence, fluid beginnings.
- Staccato – Summer: active growth, clear expression.
- Chaos – Late summer/harvest: peak energy, transformative release.
- Lyrical – Autumn: lightness, letting go, cyclical movement.
- Stillness – Winter: rest, deep integration, quiet.

## HOW IT WORKS

### Introduction

- The facilitator briefly introduces the five rhythms and season metaphors.
- Emphasis is placed on feeling, not performing.





Gestures can be tiny or expansive; the only requirement is that they feel meaningful to the person.

### Sharing in the circle

- Participants gather in a circle.
- One by one, they step into the centre and show their three gestures.
- The group gently mirrors them with respect and care.

### Reflection

- The group reflects on what it felt like to be seen and to see others in this way.
- Questions might include:
  - How was it to share your gestures?
  - How was it to mirror someone else?
  - What did you notice about the variety of stories in the room?

## WHY IT MATTERS

### The Unwritten Body Poem:

- allows young people to express themselves beyond appearance and verbal explanation,
- offers an experience of being recognised without judgement,
- helps reclaim the body as creative and powerful,
- strengthens connection and empathy in the group.

## CRITICAL REFLECTION ON BEAUTY NORMS AND MEDIA

## EXPLORING SOCIETAL PRESSURE: DEEP DEMOCRACY & ROLE-PLAY PRACTICE

### AIM

To explore beauty standards, media influence and body image from multiple perspectives, using Deep Democracy and structured role-play.

### WHY DEEP DEMOCRACY?

Deep Democracy, based on the work of Arnold Mindell and further developed by Myrna and Greg Lewis, assumes that collective wisdom emerges only when all voices – including marginal and unpopular perspectives – are heard and integrated. Instead of treating resistance as a problem, it sees it as a source of information needed for sustainable decisions.

### WHAT THE PRACTICE IS ABOUT

The exercise uses role-play to safely amplify diverse viewpoints. Participants step into different roles and respond to guiding questions. This creates emotional and cognitive distance from their own opinions and opens space for deeper listening, curiosity and empathy

### HOW IT WORKS

#### Role assignment

- The facilitator prepares role cards representing different actors in the field of beauty standards, body pressure and cosmetic interventions, for example:
  - Influencer
  - Aesthetic surgeon
  - General practitioner / doctor
  - Parent
  - Young woman or young person struggling with self-esteem
  - Psychologist
  - Media writer or journalist
  - Teacher



Participants draw a card at random. They are invited to answer only from the viewpoint of the assigned role.

### Group discussions in role

- Participants form two small groups, each supported by a facilitator.
- For each question, they respond only from their role's perspective.
- Approximately seven minutes are allocated per question.
- Focus areas and guiding questions include:
  - **Experience:** How does your role experience the pressure to be perfect in today's society?
  - **Drivers:** What role do Instagram filters, influencers and fitness/wellness culture play from your role's viewpoint?
  - **Nuance:** When might cosmetic surgery feel genuinely liberating, and when might it feel like conformity?
  - **Marginalisation:** Which beauty ideals disproportionately impact marginalised groups (for example, people of colour, trans youth, people with disabilities)?
  - **Reaction:** How would your role respond if someone close to them were considering a cosmetic procedure? What attitude would they hold?
  - **Missing perspectives:** What important question still lingers? Which voice or perspective was missing from this discussion?

### Collective sharing

- After the small-group discussions, everyone comes back together.
- Participants share:
  - key insights from their role,
  - surprising viewpoints or emotional reactions,
  - tensions, contradictions or moments of clarity.

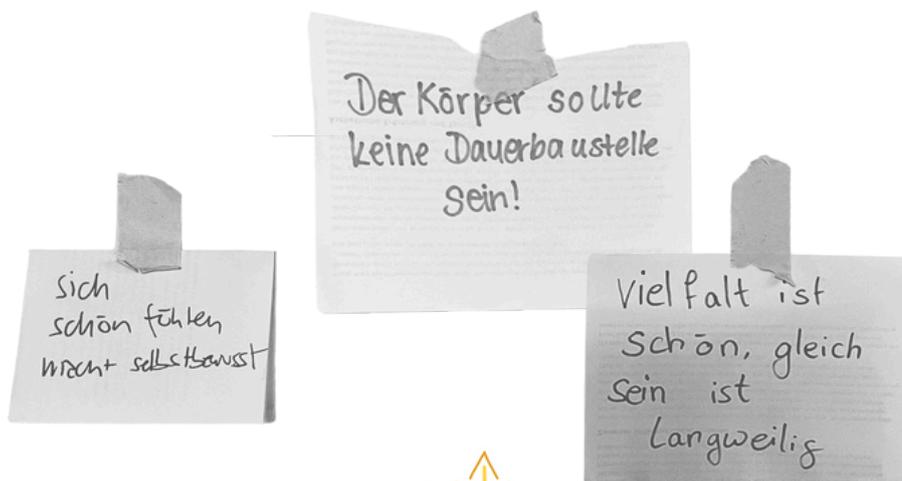
### Integration: "Cross the Line" exercise

- Each participant writes a brief personal statement summarising their own belief or conclusion about beauty ideals and cosmetic surgery, now informed by the role-play.
- The facilitator marks a line on the floor (with tape, rope or imagination).
- One by one, participants read their statement aloud.
- Group members who agree cross the line; those who do not remain where they are.
- Those who do not cross are invited to share:
  - Which feelings, thoughts or values keep them from agreeing?
  - What perspective or experience are they representing?

## WHY IT MATTERS

### The practice:

- reveals the complexity of beauty culture beyond simple "for or against" positions,
- supports empathy across very different roles and realities,
- validates disagreement and difference as valuable,
- prepares the group for later phases of creative work (for example, designing video content) with a deeper shared understanding.



# MAPPING BEAUTY IDEALS – A CRITICAL REFLECTION EXERCISE

## AIM

To make visible the beauty ideals that shape participants' self-perception and to explore their social, cultural and economic roots.

## WHAT THE PRACTICE IS ABOUT

Using Post-its and collaborative clustering, this exercise combines personal reflection with systemic analysis. It invites participants to see beauty norms as external forces rather than personal failures.

## HOW IT WORKS

### Naming beauty ideals

- Each participant receives 5–7 Post-its.
- Working silently, they write down beauty ideals that:
  - feel familiar,
  - they grew up with,
  - they once believed,
  - or that still influence them.
- Ideals can concern physical traits (thinness, muscularity), lifestyle (productivity, constant availability), or identity (gendered behaviour, “femininity”, “masculinity”).

### Clustering as a group

- Participants place their Post-its on a wall or large sheet of paper.
- Together, they group similar notes into clusters, such as:
  - gendered standards,
  - racialised or Eurocentric ideals,
  - body shape and size,
  - lifestyle and productivity,
  - social media aesthetics and trends.

### Critical inquiry: Who benefits?

- The facilitator asks:
  - Who profits from these beauty ideals?
  - Who is harmed by them?
  - Who is excluded or made invisible?
- Discussion opens questions about:
  - media and advertising,
  - fashion and fitness industries,
  - class and access,
  - gender and power,
  - racism and body hierarchies.

### Personal reflection

- Participants reflect individually or in pairs:
  - When did you last compare yourself to such an ideal?
  - How do these ideals influence your daily behaviour?
  - Which ideals still hold power over you – and why?
  - What would change if these ideals lost their power?
  - What does beauty mean to you personally, beyond these norms?

### Imagining new possibilities

- As a group, participants imagine:
  - What would a society look like that values body diversity and self-compassion?
  - How could we contribute to such a society – individually and collectively?



## WHY IT MATTERS

### **Mapping Beauty Ideals helps young people:**

- externalise and question norms they may have internalised,
- understand links between beauty, power, gender, class and race,
- move from self-blame to systemic critique,
- strengthen resilience against media pressure,
- reclaim their own definitions of beauty and worth.

## THE VISION BOARD METHOD

### AIM

To support young people in critically examining harmful beauty messages and in building alternative, self-supportive narratives around self-love and body perception.

### WHAT THE PRACTICE IS ABOUT

The Vision Board Method is a creative, visual reflection tool widely used in personal development and education. Traditionally, it focuses on future goals. In this project, it is adapted to:

- include critical reflection on existing cultural messages,
- and cultivate narratives of self-compassion and body respect.

It is carried out entirely in groups; participants work together on large sheets of paper.

### HOW IT WORKS

The process unfolds in two stages.

#### **Stage 1: Identifying and critiquing harmful or limiting messages**

- Participants explore magazines, advertisements and other print materials.
- They cut out images and words that represent harmful, limiting or toxic social messages, especially about:
  - beauty and bodies,
  - gender roles,
  - success and productivity,
  - “enoughness” and perfectionism.
- These elements are glued onto a large sheet to form a collage of dominant messages.
- The group discusses:
  - What do these images and words suggest about how we “should” look or be?
  - How do they make us feel?
  - Where have we encountered similar messages in our lives?

This stage helps participants understand that society and media actively try to define “enough”.



## Stage 2: Finding images of strength, care and self-compassion.

- Using the same or additional materials, participants now search for images and words that can support well-being, confidence and self-love, such as representations of:
  - joy and positivity,
  - individuality and self-expression,
  - care, rest, emotional nourishment,
  - diverse bodies and identities,
  - dreams, values and strengths,
  - supportive relationships and environments.
- These are arranged on top of, next to or in dialogue with the first collage, creating a new layer of meaning.
- The resulting vision board expresses:
  - what helps participants feel whole,
  - how they want to relate to themselves,
  - and what direction they want to grow towards.

## WHY IT MATTERS

The Vision Board Method applies a critical pedagogy approach, emphasising how social systems shape personal experience, and narrative practices that help separate the person from the problem. Working visually:

- makes complex emotions more tangible,
- allows for reflection without pressure to speak,
- supports the internalisation of more realistic, self-supporting ideals,
- fosters a sense of agency in rewriting personal and collective stories around beauty.



# BODY IMAGE, SELF-COMPASSION AND SELF-PERCEPTION

## MIRROR OF PRESENCE – A TWO-MINUTE SELF-COMPASSION EXERCISE

### AIM

To create a brief but powerful moment of self-awareness in which participants look at themselves without judgement, performance or correction.

### HOW IT WORKS

#### Introduction (1 minute)

- The facilitator explains that participants will look at themselves in the front-facing camera of their phone for exactly two minutes.
- They are invited not to pose, adjust or evaluate, but simply to observe.
- It is emphasised that all reactions are normal: discomfort, numbness, emotion, curiosity.

#### Two minutes of self-looking

- Participants activate selfie mode and look gently at their own face.
- The facilitator occasionally offers soft guidance, such as:
  - “See if you can look beyond appearance into presence.”
  - “Notice whatever arises without pushing it away.”
  - “Stay with your breath.”
  - “Let your gaze be soft.”

#### Closing

- After two minutes, participants turn off their cameras and lower their phones.
- Everyone takes one or two slow breaths together.

#### Reflection

- Participants may write privately or share voluntarily in pairs or plenary. Possible prompts include:
  - What did your attention focus on first?
  - What emotions came up?
  - What, if anything, surprised you?
  - Was there any moment that felt soft, tender or compassionate?
  - How was this different from how you usually look at yourself?

### WHY IT MATTERS

#### The exercise:

- gently interrupts habitual self-objectification and self-surveillance
- offers a direct experience of witnessing oneself without immediate correction
- supports the development of a non-judgemental inner witness
- connects theory on self-compassion and mirror exposure with a practical tool appropriate for group settings



# THE BODY MAPPING METHOD

## AIM

To help young people recognise and value their inner strengths, skills and positive qualities by using their body outline as a canvas for identity and appreciation.

## WHAT THE PRACTICE IS ABOUT

Body Mapping is a creative and reflective method in which participants trace their body outline on large paper and use this space to explore their relationship with themselves. In this project, the focus is shifted away from appearance towards internal resources and self-worth.

## HOW IT WORKS

### Creating the body map

- Participants work in groups of three.
- One participant lies on a large sheet of paper while the other two gently trace their outline.
- Care is taken that the tracing feels safe and non-invasive.
- Roles are rotated until everyone has their own body outline.

### Internal self-appreciation (inside the outline)

- Each person then works on their own outline, writing or drawing inside the shape things they appreciate about themselves, for example:
  - character strengths,
  - skills and talents,
  - emotional qualities,
  - values,
  - important achievements,
  - qualities they are proud of or want to strengthen.

- **The focus shifts from “What do I look like?” to “Who am I, and what is good about me?”.**

### External appreciation (from others)

- On a separate sheet of paper, the two peers write positive things they admire about the person whose outline they traced, such as:
  - how they treat others
  - their energy or presence
  - their humour, determination, sensitivity
  - contributions to the group
  - moments where they showed strength, leadership or kindness
- This creates a second image: how the person is seen through supportive eyes.

### Empowered choice: receiving or not receiving the external view

- In the final step, each participant chooses whether they want to hear or read the external reflections.
- They can say yes, no, or “not now”. It is the participants choice to take on or reject any external attribution.
- All choices are respected without pressure or interpretation
- Anything they want to accept, they can glue onto their map and make it “stick”



## WHY IT MATTERS

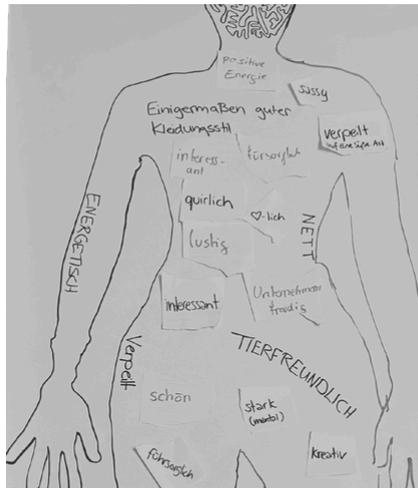
### The Body Mapping Method:

- invites participants to experience their body as a container for identity, not as an object to judge
- strengthens the ability to name and own positive qualities
- offers a rare opportunity to see oneself through the eyes of others in a safe way
- practises autonomy and boundary setting in receiving feedback

### Participants often report:

- feeling more connected to themselves
- discovering strengths they had not previously named
- surprise at the warmth and appreciation reflected back by others

The creative, playful format – lying on large paper, tracing outlines, decorating and filling them with words and symbols – makes the process engaging rather than heavy. It allows participants to “see themselves” not in a mirror or photograph, but as a symbolic figure filled with inner qualities.



## DESIGNING AND EXPERIENCING INTENTIONAL TIME WITH ONESELF - THE SELF-DATE PRACTICE AND A SELF CARE MENU

### AIM

To support participants in cultivating self-connection, self-worth, and self-care by intentionally designing and later experiencing a meaningful “date with oneself.” The practice strengthens agency, self-attunement, and the ability to create nurturing moments within everyday life.

### WHAT THE PRACTICE IS ABOUT

The Self-Date Practice invites participants to imagine, describe, and then carry out a realistic, accessible and deeply personal moment of self-care. Unlike purely reflective methods, this practice connects inner exploration with concrete action. Participants design a sensory-rich self-date and later enact it in real time. The focus is on presence, authenticity, and achievable everyday practices—not on luxury, escape, or unattainable experiences.

The guiding question is:

**“What would it look like to spend intentional, caring, and pleasurable time with myself, within my real life and with the resources I currently have?”**

## HOW IT WORKS

### Step 1 – Introduction (5 minutes)

The facilitator explains the idea of an intentional self-date: a 1–2 hour period dedicated entirely to oneself, planned with care and attention to sensory detail.

Principles include:

- It must be realistic and attainable.
- It should fit the participant’s actual resources (time, space, finances, energy).
- It is meant to be nourishing, grounding, or joyful—not perfect.

### Step 2 – Sensory and contextual prompts (15–20 minutes)

Participants design their self-date in writing. They are invited to describe the experience as vividly and concretely as possible using sensory, emotional and environmental prompts.

#### Setting

- Where does the self-date take place?
- What does the space look like? What colours, light, textures are present?

#### Sensory world

- What do you smell (fresh air, food, a candle)?
- What do you hear (music, silence, city sounds, nature)?
- What textures do you feel (blanket, warm cup, clothing)?
- Is there anything you taste?

#### Embodiment and atmosphere

- What are you wearing that makes you feel comfortable or expressive?
- How do you want your body to feel (warm, relaxed, energised, grounded)?
- Is the atmosphere quiet, playful, creative, slow?

#### Activities

- What do you do during this time?
- (e.g., a slow walk, reading, stretching, making a simple meal, journaling, drawing, listening to music)
- Why does this activity feel supportive or meaningful to you?

Participants create a rich, sensory and emotionally coherent description of their self-date.

### Step 3 – Feasibility check (5 minutes)

Participants review their plan using the question:

Can I truly do this with the resources I have right now?

If needed, they adjust the plan to ensure it is realistic, accessible and achievable.

### Step 4 – Optional sharing (10–15 minutes)

Participants may share a short description of their envisioned self-date in pairs or small groups. The listeners practise the Deep Listening attitude: presence, no interruption, no advice unless explicitly asked.

This step often:

- inspires others
- normalises personal pleasure and rest
- strengthens relational trust

### Step 5 – Implementation (up to 2 hours)

At multi-day workshops, the practice unfolds across the seminar:

- On the first day, participants plan and write their self-date.
- On the last day, they are invited to leave the workshop earlier than expected to carry it out exactly as they designed it.

This “real-life application” affirms their autonomy and supports the translation of self-care into daily life.



## Step 6 – Sharing One Valued Aspect (10 minutes)

After completing the self-date, participants return to the group and (if they wish) share one aspect they particularly enjoyed or appreciated.

### Examples might include:

- a sensory detail
- a moment of calm
- an activity that felt especially good
- a small gesture of care that surprised them
- a feeling of dignity, comfort or joy

The sharing is brief, voluntary, and framed as a celebration of self-care without comparison or performance.

## Step 7 – Creating a Collective Self-Care Menu (15 minutes)

Using the shared aspects and ideas, the group co-creates a Self-Care Menu: a list of low-threshold, realistic practices that can support wellbeing in daily life.

### This menu may include:

- small sensory rituals
- comforting or grounding actions
- micro-moments of rest
- creative or expressive ideas
- mood-supporting activities
- small, achievable pleasures

The menu becomes a collective resource that participants can photograph or take home. It mirrors the diversity of the group and expands each person's repertoire of self-supportive practices

## WHY IT MATTERS

### The Self-Date Practice:

- strengthens self-awareness and emotional literacy
- fosters the ability to identify personal needs
- reorients attention from external pressure (“How should I be?”) to internal wisdom (“What feels good and right for me?”)
- builds trust in one's ability to create nurturing moments without perfection or external validation
- supports autonomy, boundary-setting and agency
- offers a powerful closing ritual that connects workshop learning to everyday life
- normalises rest, pleasure and care as legitimate components of wellbeing

By designing, living and reflecting on a moment dedicated entirely to themselves, young people experience self-care as something achievable, grounded and personally meaningful—an essential counterbalance to appearance-based pressure and self-objectification.

Together, these practices and exercises offer a rich toolkit for youth workers and facilitators who want to address beauty standards, body image and self-worth in embodied, creative and critically reflective ways. They can be combined and adapted according to group needs, cultural context and available time, always grounded in the principles of safety, voluntariness and respect.



# PROCESS EVALUATION

## WHAT WORKED AND WHAT REMAINS CHALLENGING

### WHAT WORKED WELL

**Across partner countries and groups, several elements consistently supported positive outcomes.**

- **Consistency of the space:** Regular meetings (for example weekly sessions) helped build trust. Participants reported looking forward to having a space that was “for them” within their week.
- **Combination of body and word:** Starting with movement, breath or creative activities allowed participants who felt less comfortable with verbal expression to engage meaningfully. For many, it became easier to speak after their bodies had been included.
- **Horizontal and flexible approach:** The absence of rigid hierarchies encouraged free participation. Young people felt they could speak without fear of being corrected or judged. Having options (speaking, drawing, moving, writing, or simply being present) increased inclusion.
- **Aesthetic and creative dimension:** Working on self-love, body image and the pleasure of feeling good about oneself – through movement, food, collage, writing, zines – generated enthusiasm and rich conversations.
- **Gestures of mutual care:** Informal support between participants, such as helping each other, sharing snacks, or listening without interruption, became a central learning experience. Group building effects were strong; participants reported that they grew closer through the exercises.
- **Feeling less alone:** Many young people said that they had previously felt alone with their worries about appearance, beauty pressure and self-worth. Hearing others speak about similar fears and experiences made it easier to open up and reduce isolation.

### CHALLENGES AND LIMITS

At the same time, important challenges emerged.

- **Irregular attendance:** In some settings, it was difficult for participants to attend regularly, due to work, family responsibilities or unstable living conditions. This limited continuity and the depth of individual and group processes.
- **Initial resistance to introspective work:** Exercises involving closing eyes, visualisations or deeper sharing were sometimes experienced as “too personal” or unfamiliar. It took time to build trust and to make clear that participation and depth were always voluntary.
- **Interpersonal tensions:** As in any group, conflicts and tensions occasionally surfaced, for example around perceived effort, roles or attention. These moments required careful facilitation and sometimes slowed down the planned programme.
- **Differences in language levels:** In multinational and multilingual groups, some participants could not express themselves as easily in the working language. This highlighted the importance of visual methods, simple language, translation support and non-verbal expression.



- **Balance between emotional expression and containment:** In some sessions, strong emotions appeared. While this showed the relevance of the topic, it also revealed the need for clear boundaries, additional psychosocial support where necessary, and careful pacing.
- **Reaching the target group:** Especially in some German contexts, it was challenging to attract and engage young people and partner organisations. In conversations it became clear that:
  - on the one hand, there is already a wide range of offers,
  - on the other hand, sensitive topics such as body image and cosmetic surgery can be intimidating.
 Many young people initially prefer light, creative offers that do not foreground difficult themes.
- **Cultural narratives of hopelessness:** A recurring attitude in some environments was that youth are “lost anyway” and that it is impossible to counter the pressure of mass media. The project experience, however, showed that even small, local interventions can make a difference in individual lives and that young people are open to this work when it is well framed.

## LESSONS LEARNED FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

From these experiences, several practical conclusions can be drawn:

- The combination of symbolic group structures (circles, rituals, agreements) with body-based and artistic work is particularly effective in promoting mental health and prevention.
- The most powerful moments occurred where affection, creativity and critical reflection intersected.
- Challenges such as resistance, conflict and irregular attendance do not invalidate the process; they are part of realistic community work and can become learning moments.
- It is important to communicate the project in ways that emphasise creativity, empowerment and curiosity, rather than only focusing on problems or risks.
- Even though structural pressures (social media economies, beauty industries) are strong, local spaces of self-compassion and critical awareness matter. They can influence individual trajectories and create seeds for wider cultural change.

## AFTERWORD

This handbook grows out of a shared European concern: that many young people feel intense pressure to shape their bodies and identities according to narrow, often toxic beauty standards. Across Germany, Italy and Spain, the project Compass to Self-Compassion has shown that these pressures are real, persistent and deeply emotional – but also that they can be worked with in concrete, hopeful and embodied ways.

The practices collected here emerged from real workshops with young participants. They are not blueprints or fixed recipes, but living tools: they invite adaptation, translation and re-invention. In some settings, group processes flowed easily; in others, participation was irregular, resistance was strong, or the topic felt “too heavy” at first. These challenges are part of the reality of youth work – and they remind us that meaningful change rarely happens in straight lines.

What became clear across countries and contexts is that small, well-held spaces can make a difference. When young people experience non-judgmental listening, playful movement, critical reflection and moments of genuine self-connection, they often report feeling less alone, more understood and more able to question the “normality” of beauty pressure. Even brief experiences of self-compassion and embodied dignity can become reference points in future choices, including those related to appearance and aesthetic procedures. This handbook is therefore not a final word, but an invitation: to experiment, to listen closely to the groups you work with, and to keep developing practices that place the humanity, creativity and complexity of young people at the centre. If the methods presented here support you in holding spaces where young people can relate to their bodies with more kindness and courage, then the project has achieved something of its deepest intention.



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