



FRID

Success factors and learnings

INITIATED
BY

mieli

Hug.

HELP
UKRAINE
GOTHENBURG

**REACH FOR
CHANGE**



Co-funded by
the European Union

**Social
Innovation 
Initiative**

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 European Social Fund Agency. Neither the European Union nor the Granting Authority can be held responsible for them.



© Daniela Allansson

ABOUT THIS REPORT

What does meaningful support look like when people are rebuilding their lives in a new country?

For many people, integration is not just about finding a job or learning a new language. It is about carrying the weight of displacement, uncertainty, loneliness and being distanced from home; all whilst trying to build something stable in an unfamiliar place. For Ukrainians specifically, this uncertainty carries an added dimension: many arrived without knowing how long they would stay. As the full-scale invasion has continued longer than many initially expected, research shows that a growing number of Ukrainians have gradually shifted from a mindset of "waiting it out" to actively deciding to stay and build a life in Sweden for the foreseeable future.

FRID – Facilitating Refugee Integration through Dedicated Mental Health Support –

is a cross-border project initiated by Reach for Change, Help Ukraine Gothenburg, and MIELI Mental Health Finland that aims to tackle this question in practice through socially innovative means; including peer-led groups, practical tools and cross-country collaboration, focusing on the experiences of Ukrainians in Sweden. This report shares successes, challenges and what we learned along the way; insights we believe are relevant well beyond this one project.

WHO IS THIS REPORT FOR

This report is both a narrative and a practical tool for grassroots organisations, and other actors that support refugees and migrants in their integration and wellbeing.

HOW IT CAN BE USED

The report has two objectives. The first one is to present the **success factors and learnings** from the process by which partners worked together to transfer and adapt a socially innovative approach from one country's context to another. The second is to provide **learning and recommendations** as per the design and implementation of informal mental health support, tailored for displaced Ukrainians.

This report is not just about what was done in the project: it is also about what others can use.



The reality of displacement

For many Ukrainians living in Sweden, daily life is shaped by stress, uncertainty, and the weight of maintaining resilience.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 has triggered one of the largest humanitarian crises in modern Europe, forcing millions of Ukrainians to flee their homes and seek protection across Europe. In Sweden alone, by June 2026, **48,725** Ukrainians were registered under the Temporary Protection Directive.¹

While many Ukrainians have found safety in another country, the psychological burden of war, loss, and forced displacement still affects their daily lives and wellbeing. While several benefits have been offered through the EU Temporary Protection Directive, the long waiting times, lack of available native language support, and heavy bureaucracy in Sweden as regards access to the public healthcare system have limited the number of refugees seeking formal mental health support. According to a survey conducted in 2023 (n=330) among displaced Ukrainians in Sweden, more than half of respondents felt lonely. Another survey in 2023 (n=130) showed that 68% experienced high levels of anxiety, while in 2024 (n=100) the figure increased to 77%.²

“... when you don’t know what tomorrow will bring, that’s a challenge in itself”

“... right now it feels like we are completely alone”

— Woman, 50-65

Yet despite these deep and pressing needs, access to mental health support remains painfully limited, hindered by language, culture, and systemic gaps. Against this backdrop, even small forms of support – a space to slow down, meet others, and feel less alone – can matter enormously.

This is what sparked the project FRID.

¹ Eurostat, June 2026.

² Help Ukraine Gothenburg. (HUG). (2025). Mental Health as a Bridge to Integration. Research & Evaluation Report.

"I miss my relatives, I miss Ukraine. I want physical contact. Visual contact is not enough"

"You cannot read the social codes... [that's why] you cannot build deep relationships"

"Even when you get access to help, specialists here may not always have the right experience to support people who lived through occupation or violence"

"... right now it feels like we are completely alone"

"I was a professional for years... now I'm a ghost of myself"

"A traumatic event happened here... I didn't know where to turn, I didn't know if it was even considered a problem, and there was no support"

"For many the need is to speak in their own language with someone who also understands the context"

"Even if I learned the language, I still don't know how to find a way to people here"

"[I need] a place where I can come to my people"

"I can't say this to my children, I can't say it to my husband... The best thing was to come and tell it to a completely unfamiliar person"

"We are like in a tin can... No matter what you do, it's never enough to become Swedish"

"It would be much easier if there was someone to talk to, to openly discuss the problem. I'm sure many have the same issues, and I'm not the only one"



FRID Fact Sheet

PROJECT PERIOD

April 2025 — October 2026

FUNDER

The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) Social Innovation+ Initiative initiated a specific call with the objective of increasing the integration and social inclusion of displaced Ukrainians in European host countries.

WHAT

Conducted between April 2025 and October 2026, FRID – Facilitating Refugee Integration through Dedicated Mental Health Support – is an international, EU-funded project supporting the mental wellbeing and integration of displaced Ukrainians living in Sweden. The project combines peer-led support groups with practical, evidence-based tools to create accessible, culturally sensitive mental health support that reaches people where they are.

WHO

FRID is a joint project between Help Ukraine Gothenburg (HUG) and Reach for Change (RfC) in Sweden, and MIELI Mental Health in Finland.

Reach for Change is a global non-profit empowering social entrepreneurs with skills, network and funding to scale their impact. RfC's vision is a world where everyone can shape their own future.

Help Ukraine Gothenburg was founded in 2022 in response to the Russian full-scale invasion. HUG's mission involves not only immediate relief through medical and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, but also long-term support, particularly in helping displaced Ukrainians integrate into Swedish society.

MIELI is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation established in 1897 whose mission is to promote mental health and prevent mental health problems. MIELI coordinates the operation of a nationwide network of crisis help centres and promotes mental health and wellbeing for children, youth, those of working age, and the elderly in Finland.



PART 1:

Adapting from one country to the next

The project started from one core assumption; that there is a clear need to expand and diversify support mechanisms currently available to displaced Ukrainians in Sweden.

Complementary support mechanisms such as peer and group-based therapy are often delivered by grassroots social entrepreneurs and community-based NGOs, and as such are dependent on project cycle financing, lacking sustainability and effective reach in the longer-term. Furthermore, based on previous research by HUG, Ukrainians in general have positive attitudes towards support groups, meeting other Ukrainians in similar situations, and having support in their native language. This project

responded directly to this and brought together three organisations that share a common aim: **to provide low-threshold, culturally and trauma-sensitive mental health support to those who have fled from Ukraine.**

Whilst many peer-support groups exist, the FRID project was designed to benefit from MIELI's TOIVO model. Transferring the TOIVO model from Finland to Sweden was not a matter of simply exporting a manual. It was built through direct, structured collaboration between MIELI, HUG, and RfC to ensure it would feel relevant and accessible to Ukrainians who have moved to Sweden.

THE MODEL

MIELI's **TOIVO model** was developed as a peer-led mental health approach for migrant communities in Finland under the **Mental Health and Wellbeing in Multicultural Finland (MIOS)** project that was conducted between 2018 and 2020.³

The TOIVO model is a peer-led mental health approach. The Finnish word "toivo" means "hope," capturing the essence of the group experience. At its core, the model encourages small, practical steps that help people care for their mental health in everyday life.

TOIVO groups are closed peer-support groups of approximately 10 participants that meet on a weekly basis 8-10 times and are facilitated by 2 trained volunteers, with each session lasting around 2 hours. The TOIVO model is based on the principle "Act/Do – Feel – Reflect/Understand." Each meeting is structured around a specific theme and a corresponding activity that the group performs together. Participants are then guided to reflect

on how the group activity made them feel and to understand how these experiences influence their own wellbeing.

This methodology was designed for migrants who have already settled in the host country, not for those who have recently arrived. Though the model was initially designed for people not in crisis, during the FRID project the partners came to realise it served refugees well when focusing on wellbeing in general. Group facilitators are not required to hold an educational background in psychology or to be qualified healthcare professionals. The facilitators' role is to create a safe, structured, and supportive environment, guide discussions, and lead activities, while ensuring that participation remains voluntary and everyone feels included.

³ For more information on the MIOS project, please search for "MIOS" under www.mieli.fi/en

The TOIVO model is flexible and accessible; and it can be adapted for different age groups and life situations. It is suitable for anyone who wants to strengthen their wellbeing, build new connections, or find a sense of community. At the same time, it is a strong example of community-led, low-threshold support, where participants are empowered to support one another in a safe and inclusive environment. Participants are actively involved in

shaping the process, choosing topics, activities, and focus areas, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment. This approach lowers barriers to participation and helps build meaningful, locally rooted support networks.

Through transnational collaboration, expert guidance, and participatory design, the project partners shaped this model to serve displaced Ukrainians from Ukraine in Sweden.

HOW WE DID IT – A THREE-STEP PROCESS

The model was continuously refined over a one-year period through a three-step iterative process.

This included **1/ a target group and stakeholders mapping**, **2/ a four-day workshop** amongst partners to adapt the model, and **3/ three progress review workshops** to implement any changes during the actual implementation of the model.

1/ MAPPING EXERCISE

Before initiating any adaptation of the TOIVO model, partners recognised the importance of conducting a needs assessment and mapping of the experiences of displaced Ukrainians as well as relevant stakeholders. The goal of this mapping was to complement previous mappings conducted by HUG and go deeper, including the gathering of a broader range of qualitative data and testimonies on the needs, views, ideas and perceived opportunities among individual displaced Ukrainians in relation to their mental health and integration in Swedish society.

LEARNING

Speaking about topics such as forced displacement can be very sensitive and triggering. Especially when it comes to mental health related matters; not to mention the challenge in assessing the state of one's mental health. It can be difficult to feel safe and comfortable to be able to speak freely and openly. A tip is therefore to establish a trusting relationship between the data collector and the affected, as well as collecting data anonymously and making this clear for the respondents with a formal signatory form.



2/ FOUR-DAY WORKSHOP

With this mapping in hand, a MIELI FRID representative visited Sweden to work directly with HUG and RfC, running structured workshops that introduced two key models: **KOTU** and the **TOIVO** model.⁴ KOTU stands for the phrase “Kohtaa ja Tue” in Finnish, translating to “Encounter and Support.” The objective of KOTU training is to provide a solid background for TOIVO, and to better understand the impact of migration on mental health to better support migrant mental wellbeing and integration. The training is composed of lectures and joint discussions as well as small group works. Content includes: creating safer spaces, how we define mental health, migration as a life course changer, risk factors as well as protective factors on mental health, psychosocial phases of integration, talking about self-harm and suicidal thoughts, coping skills, minority stress, cultural sensitivity, prevention of compassion fatigue. Partners were afterwards introduced to TOIVO training. The training is composed of lectures,

joint discussions as well as pair work. The content includes: introducing “hand of mental health” topics that can be covered within groups, exemplary activities the groups can conduct, planning the content, organising the groups and reporting, practical tools for volunteers and facilitation skills.⁵

Hand of mental health is a visual tool to remind how good sleep, healthy nutrition, exercising, creative time, social interactions and quality time alone are essential for mental health maintenance.

The partners then began shaping how they could be tailored to the Swedish context. Rather than handing over a finished methodology, this visit created a two-way exchange: MIELI brought the model and its evidence base, while HUG brought contextual knowledge from the mapping exercise, allowing the pilot's initial design to reflect both. Following the four-day workshop, partners finalised a pilot plan outlining the adapted TOIVO model, facilitator training approach, and target locations, which HUG then used to launch a pilot in October 2025.

3/ PROGRESS REVIEW WORKSHOPS

During the time HUG implemented their pilot, three workshops were held to assess whether it was working as intended or needed further change.

These checkpoints gave partners a structured way to adapt the model further based on emerging results and feedback; testing assumptions against real group dynamics, facilitator experience, and participant engagement.

EXAMPLE

Here is an example of what an agenda for these workshops can look like:

1. Welcome with check-in – warm-up exercise / 10 min
2. Presentation of experiences from implementation (successes, challenges, notable outcomes) / 20 min

3. Technical and troubleshooting support on what has been presented / 15 min
4. Reflection and discussion on lessons learned from everyone (identifying patterns, trends and gaps in implementation, ideas for developments) / 30 min
5. How is impact being tracked? / 15 min
6. Discuss if adjustments to the implementation is needed / 15 min
7. Recap of key takeaways and agreement on next steps / 15 min

⁴ For more information regarding the two trainings, please search for “Trainings” on www.mieliyhdistykset.fi/mieliwithoutborders.

⁵ For more information on the “hand of mental health,” please search for “Hand of mental health poster” on www.mieli.fi/en

WHAT MADE IT WORK

A major reason for the transfer working so well was due to complementary and clear roles defined by each project partner. No single organisation carried the full weight alone. MIELI acted as the **methodology holder and source** of TOIVO, holding the expertise and key troubleshooting support. HUG acted as the **main implementer of the methodology**, translating the model into practice in Sweden and staying closest to participants and facilitators. RfC acted as the **facilitator of collaboration** in the project, also bringing perspectives on social innovation, social entrepreneurship, scalability and long-term change.

Another reason was the structure of **continuous feedback and revisiting of the adapted model** as it was being implemented. By having continuous follow-ups through progress review workshops, arising successes and challenges were addressed early and effectively.

Alongside this, the partnership also included so-called **learning circles**. These were recurring sessions bringing together Finnish and Swedish grassroots organisations that support refugees in their integration and wellbeing. The learning circles' purpose was to facilitate transnational exchange and learning between similar organisations, particularly

around "what works" and best practices in delivering frontline mental health support outside of formal healthcare systems. It also served as a sounding board for the partners to adapt the TOIVO model and other key tools to the Ukrainian target group. Themes addressed during these learning circles include: volunteer coordination, youth and mental wellbeing, peer-support groups, organising TOIVO groups for the elderly, and mental wellbeing in NGO teams. The sessions were held online during the project, giving partners a lasting mechanism for cross-country collaboration that ran throughout the project's lifecycle. Beyond this knowledge-sharing, the learning circles also acted as spaces for networking and fostered a sense of community and solidarity among frontline support staff, many of whom face similar day-to-day challenges.

Furthermore, the **importance of language** in creating a safe and comfortable space was highlighted from the outset. Materials were therefore translated into Ukrainian and sessions were agreed early on to be delivered in Ukrainian, with bilingual support available where needed for integration into local initiatives. Treating translation as a core deliverable helped ensure the model would actually resonate with participants.





PART 2:

Pilot design and implementation

© Andrii Oliinyk

Between October 2025 and May 2026, HUG implemented a pilot based on the adapted TOIVO methodology. Twelve TOIVO groups successfully started, with eleven running through all 8 group sessions, with a total of 134 participants. The groups took place in six locations: Gothenburg, Kungälv, Trollhättan, Helsingborg, Lund and Eslöv.

EXAMPLE

There are several themes and topics that can be covered using the TOIVO model: Nature, Sleep, Emotions, Healthy Food, Mental Health, Art and Creativity, Physical Health, Stress, and Relationships. To help visualise the TOIVO model, below are two examples of sessions implemented:

Agenda 1 | Topic: Healthy food

1. A brief discussion about the participants' daily eating habits and their impact on health and wellbeing
2. A mini-debate in teams on the topic "Healthy Eating: Pros and Cons"
3. A discussion of myths, current trends, and personal challenges related to nutrition
4. Baking Christmas gingerbread cookies together using a traditional recipe
5. A discussion on the balance between healthy food and guilt-free sweet treats

Agenda 2 | Topic: Emotions

1. Introduction to Ukrainian Easter traditions
2. Creating pysanky (Ukrainian Easter eggs) using traditional symbols and patterns
3. Sharing memories, stories and family traditions
4. Discussing traditions as a source of strength, support and inner resources
5. The creative process as a way to relax, shift focus and fill oneself with emotions
6. Reflection on the sense of home, unity and connection to culture

FACILITATORS

FACILITATOR TRAININGS

A central part of the project was facilitator training and support – as the groups would not have been possible without the facilitators. As part of the planning phase of the project's implementation, HUG staff had a one-week training with MIELI on their TOIVO and KOTU methodologies. Based on the received input combined with HUG's previous experience and analysis of mental health challenges and needs of Ukrainians in Sweden, HUG created training material for the TOIVO group facilitators for Ukrainians.

Trainings for facilitators were then delivered on site in Gothenburg and Lund, with one additional session held online. They introduced facilitators to the TOIVO

FACILITATING PATTERNS

The TOIVO model was implemented through a wide range of group activities. These included psychoeducational elements, practical exercises, creative workshops, movement-based activities, shared meals, and cultural and nature excursions. Across the groups, improving wellbeing was approached through small changes in familiar everyday routines: sleeping, eating, moving, resting and staying connected.

As facilitation went on, there was a clear shift from **facilitator-led sessions toward participant-shaped group experiences** in almost all groups. At the beginning, sessions were often focused on introductions, wellbeing self-assessments, group rules and planning. Over time, participants became more active in suggesting activities and bringing their own experiences, skills and interests into the group. In one group, for example, a participant who was a professional cook led a cooking workshop.

Another outcome was that **wellbeing themes were translated into very different activities for different groups**. **Stress management**, for example,

LEARNING

Volunteer coordination takes time and requires organisational skills. It is therefore recommended that the coordination is done by professionals, or at least by the host organisation, and not solely left to volunteers. **Professional coordination does not only make sure things run according to plan but also provides reassurance and safety for volunteers.** This is important to keep in mind!

model and provided a practical foundation for working with peer-support groups. Special methodological materials were developed, covering group facilitation, facilitator roles and boundaries, burnout prevention, cultural sensitivity, healthy communication and tools for planning TOIVO group content.

was explored in some groups through quieter self-regulation practices, such as breathing, grounding and sensory relaxation exercises, while others approached it through social (spa, bowling) and/or creative activities (clay, music and poetry workshops). **Exploring creativity**, in turn, included painting, making candles, pysanky (traditional Ukrainian Easter egg decoration), pottery, photography, theatre, visiting concerts and doing symbolic exercises. **Physical wellbeing** themes and activities ranged from hiking and laser tag to walks and observing bodily reactions.

Another pattern observed was that **wellbeing was often approached indirectly**, which is at the core of the TOIVO model. Rather than asking participants to speak about difficult emotions or migration-related stress, facilitators used creative, practical, and social activities as entry points. This made abstract topics more accessible by connecting them to concrete practices, such as cooking, walking, handcrafting, and sharing memories. The kinetic aspect of the group meetings actually gave space for connection in a way that lowers the threshold of sharing deeper subjects.

Many activities **combined familiar Ukrainian cultural elements with opportunities to explore Swedish society and local environments.** Ukrainian songs, traditional food and crafts, sharing family memories and even the use of Ukrainian language during the groups sustained familiarity and emotional connection with home. At the same time, visits to museums, parks, theatres, concerts and local public spaces opened accessible ways of discovering local services and surroundings, as well as Swedish traditions.

Therefore, in a culturally sensitive approach the group activities were built to combine existing habits and know-how with new elements from Swedish culture and local surroundings, allowing participants to pace their own integration.

“Facilitating a group is a lot of responsibility, and at the same time a source of both professional and personal inspiration.”

— Facilitator

FACILITATING EXPERIENCES

Facilitators described their **involvement as personally meaningful.** Many were motivated to join because the project resonated with their own experience and understanding of migration. They wanted to create spaces where people could feel connected with others who are going through similar experiences.

Reflecting on the facilitator role, they often described it as hands-on, yet **bounded by a clear scope of responsibility.** Facilitators were organisers, connectors, and holders of the group process. Their task was to create a safe atmosphere, listen carefully, notice participants’ needs, support initiative and help the group find common interests. This role was distinct from being a social worker or therapist.

Facilitators also drew attention to the **emotional and organisational weight** volunteering brought. Maintaining group atmosphere, keeping people engaged, coordinating schedules and working with a co-facilitator required a lot of effort. In some cases, different expectations between facilitators created tension, especially when one person wanted more planning while another made decisions more independently. This points to the importance of co-facilitation alignment: pairs need shared expectations, communication routines and clarity about how decisions will be made.

LEARNING

Participants valued having a voice in choosing activities, and facilitators observed stronger engagement when activities reflected participants’ interests. However, when activity choices remain open for too long or have to be renegotiated several times, planning may become more difficult and create uncertainty about the

next steps. This suggests that participant involvement works best when there is a clear framework for choice: participants can influence the content, but the range of options and final decisions need to be manageable for facilitators. Providing simple guidelines for volunteers eases the workload of facilitators.



Facilitators also highlighted the value of **“learning by doing”**. Activities such as drawing, cooking, pottery, spa, etc. allowed participants to practice rest, communication, and self-expression without turning every meeting into a formal discussion about mental health. This approach made wellbeing concrete and accessible. Some facilitators said that this worked in exactly the same way for themselves: organising and planning wellbeing activities encouraged them to pay attention to their own wellbeing and to the ways they could support it.

When reflecting on other ways that volunteering and facilitation supported their wellbeing, facilitators often shared that it gave them social contact, purpose, positive emotions, self-realisation and the feeling of doing something useful. Some described feeling inspired, more confident and more aware of their capacities. This reciprocal effect could be especially important in a migration context. When people lose familiar roles and professional status, **volunteering can restore parts of identity through contribution**. Facilitators’ reflections suggest that organising something valuable helped them feel more grounded. In this case, the act of supporting others became a way of supporting themselves.

“For me personally, this group (facilitation) became a valuable experience. I was able to use my organisational and creative skills: planning the meetings, designing activities, and working with the group. It also helped me develop my leadership and management skills.”

— Facilitator

TARGETED SUPPORT FOR FACILITATORS

An important learning throughout the pilot that became more evident as time went on, was the importance of **peer-support also for the facilitators**. HUG therefore implemented structured activities specifically for facilitators, including:

Dedicated TOIVO group for facilitators: After the first facilitator training, it became clear that facilitators were also interested in participating in a TOIVO group themselves. A dedicated TOIVO group for facilitators was therefore established. Working in pairs, facilitators took turns preparing and leading sessions. This allowed them to practice facilitation while also taking part in the same reflective and supportive group process that they would later offer to others.

Learning circles: Learning circles were organised for facilitators as a space for reflection, exchange

and shared problem-solving. They gave facilitators an opportunity to discuss what was working in their groups, what was challenging, and how different activities could be organised or adapted. The circles also created space to reflect on the facilitator role itself and build a shared bank of ideas.

LEARNING

Volunteer support is always important and it needs to be structural. This is not only to safeguard the sustainability of the relationship with volunteers, but also to protect the quality of the facilitation they deliver. No matter what format, it is important to consider how to reach out to the facilitators for any de-briefing support, and make sure they also feel comfortable in reaching out. One tip is therefore to already set planned dates for de-briefing sessions before a TOIVO group starts.



© Inna Zhalkovskaya

PARTICIPANTS

PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES

For many participants, the groups offered a rare social space where they could meet people with similar experiences, speak Ukrainian, feel understood, and temporarily step outside pressure of uncertainty and isolation. They often described the groups through the language of warmth, trust, unity, and feeling “at home”.

The clearest change for participants was a reduction in social isolation. Many joined the project because they wanted communication, friends, and a feeling of being less cut off from society.

“I liked that everyone spoke Ukrainian, used familiar expressions and sayings, and you feel like you’re at home.”

— Participant



“For participants (these groups) are about expanding their circle of connections. Many of them felt very lonely before the project... The groups we held have already addressed some of their needs... Thanks to the project, they will now have the opportunity to support each other more outside of it.”

— Facilitator

Another finding was that the groups gave participants a reason to **pause and reflect on how they feel and what they need**. Many described everyday life in Sweden as a constant effort to manage practical tasks related to integration, work, study, housing, but still full of uncertainty. Simple questions, “how are you feeling, what do you need, what supports you”, in this context became extra meaningful. They helped shift attention back to oneself and find small sources of energy and peace.

By reducing isolation and offering regular shared activities, the groups may also have **helped address migrant-related stress in a practical and accessible way**. Participants valued the rhythm

created by regular meetings. Weekly activities offered people something to expect, plan for and look forward to. In participants’ reflections, this rhythm was associated with feeling calmer, less irritable, and more positively oriented toward the week ahead.

The groups also created opportunities to **explore Sweden together**. Visiting museums, city outings, and other activities lowered the barrier to going out and engaging with the surrounding environment. This was particularly relevant for seniors, who often needed more practical support and an accompanied introduction to local life.

“I really liked the idea of these meetings. That it’s a Ukrainian community, that I would meet people like me – Ukrainians living in Sweden, who feel some of the same pressure and stress that we experience here. And it’s not a secret – every day there’s this uncertainty about our future, even about the present.”

— Participant

REACH AND PARTICIPATION

Attendance data suggests generally strong engagement among those who entered the programme. The **overall attendance rate was 75.3%**, calculated for implemented groups only and excluding one discontinued group. Youth and teen groups showed particularly strong attendance and full-session completion, while some adult groups had lower attendance rates.

Full-session attendance indicates strong commitment among the majority of participants. A total of 34 participants (26%) attended all eight sessions.⁶ The highest proportion of full attendance was observed in one of the teen groups, where 5 out of 9 participants attended all sessions, and in the youth group, where 6 out of 11 participants

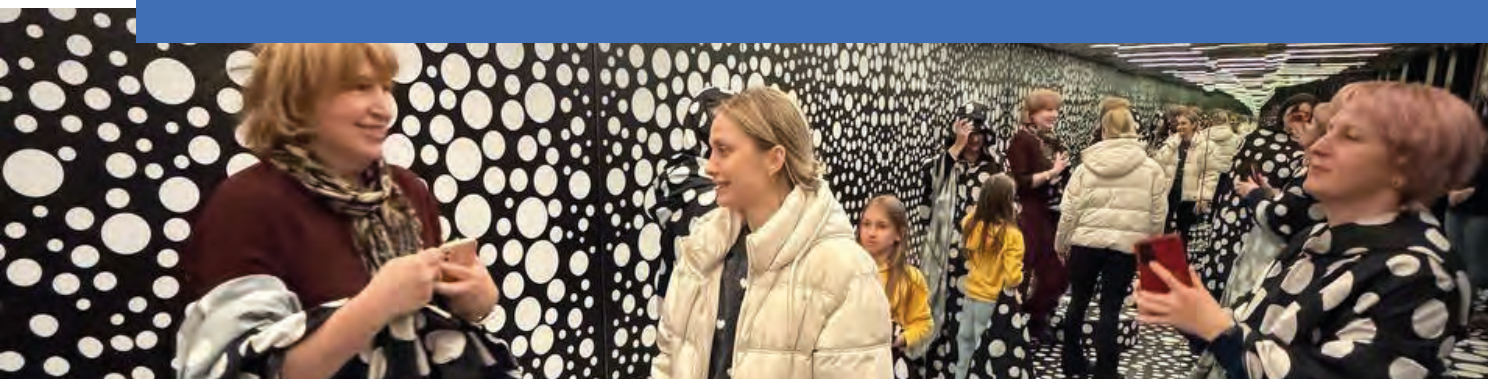
attended all sessions. At the same time, one group was discontinued after its first session because only 3 participants had registered, which was not sufficient to run the group. This is an important implementation finding, suggesting that while the programme had strong overall reach, recruitment was uneven across locations or target groups.

Some participation barriers became visible only later, through attendance patterns and drop-out reasons. These barriers included practical factors, such as timing conflicts, work, studies and health limitations, as well as less visible factors, including low energy, self-doubt, and uncertainty about the value of group sessions. Age mismatch among participants also affected participation in one group.

LEARNING

Even though there may be a high sign-up rate, the retention rate is what can be more difficult to achieve. A tip is therefore to call or reach out to those who signed up before the first meeting,

not only to allow for any questions to be asked but also to show that their participation is valued. It is also good to follow up with those who ended up not showing up, to gather feedback as to the reason behind.



© Oksana Breitreits

AGE-SENSITIVE GROUP DESIGN

Participants joined small group sessions organised for different age groups: teens, youth, adults and seniors. While all groups worked within the same TOIVO framework, each of them shaped the themes in their own way, reflecting their needs, context, interests and energy. For **youth and young adults**, the group value was linked to choice, rhythm, and both flexibility and predictability. Young participants benefited from being able to select activities that felt meaningful to them, such as pottery, opera, bowling, yoga or shared meals. At the same time, they valued

consistency: knowing that the group would meet at a certain time, in a certain place, with a predictable structure. For **seniors**, the groups addressed loneliness, practical disorientation, and the emotional weight of starting over in a new country later in life. Facilitators noted that many seniors had left behind their homes, routines and familiar environments, while facing a fast-changing world that required a new language and digital skills. For this group, meetings and activities became reminders that they were not alone and that new social ties they gained during the groups could continue beyond the formal project.

⁶ Excluding the 3 participants from the group that later discontinued after its first session.

YOUTH AND ADOLESCENTS	✓ More energy ✓ Games and movement	✓ Events and experiences ✓ Self-expression
ADULTS	✓ Reflection and balance ✓ Creativity ✓ Learning	✓ Practical tools ✓ Meaningful conversations
SENIORS	✓ Slower pace ✓ Memories and stories ✓ Nature	✓ Walks ✓ "Fika" and togetherness

CLOSURE OF GROUPS

When reaching the end of a TOIVO group, a strong bond and cohesion had formed among the group. Ending a TOIVO group however is important: both from a participant's point of view, as the main objective of the model is to make small changes in their daily lives that would eventually better their wellbeing in the long run, and from an organiser's point of view as it is not sustainable for the organiser to keep running several of the same groups longer-term. Having follow-up tools that can be used individually both during and after a group has ended can therefore be one solution.

My Power Journal was introduced as an additional tool for individual reflection. The journal was originally designed by MIELI and translated into

Ukrainian and Swedish as part of the project.⁷ Its purpose is to pay attention to feelings and naming emotions, reflect on needs, and build mental health care routine via journaling. The Power Journal was offered as a tool to encourage participants in continuing self-reflection work and to turn group experience into personal self-practice.

In participants' feedback, My Power Journal emerged as a valuable tool for reflection. It helped identify feelings, understand what those feelings signal and create a small routine of mental hygiene beyond the group setting.

⁷ To access a digital copy of the Power Journal, please search for "My Power Journal" on www.mieli.fi

LEARNING

Participants repeatedly asked for more meetings, regular groups, more outings, and similar projects in the future. This demand shows that the groups became meaningful, but it also creates an implementation challenge: short-term projects can generate social bonds and expectations that exceed the project period. When designing themes and sessions, it is important to consider the five stages of group development:

1. **Forming:** The group comes together, and members get to know one another.
2. **Storming:** Differences, tensions, or conflicting expectations surface as the group finds its footing.
3. **Norming:** The group settles into shared norms, trust, and a sense of cohesion.

4. **Performing:** The group works effectively together, drawing on the trust and structure built in earlier stages.

5. **Adjourning:** The group comes to a natural end, having completed its purpose together.

Adjourning, or closing, is not a sign that something has gone wrong, but a sign that the group has run its full course. Skipping over this stage risks leaving participants' sense of connection and progress without a clear resolution, which can make the group's end feel abrupt rather than complete. While continuation of meetings after a group ends ultimately depends on participants themselves, this finding shows the importance of acknowledging closure as part of the group process, and giving participants the chance to reflect on what the group gave them and take it forward in their own lives.

PART 3:

Recommendations



1. MAKE WELLBEING CONCRETE THROUGH “LEARNING BY DOING”

Talking about mental wellbeing can be a vulnerable and heavily stigmatised topic for many. Activities like cooking, pottery, or shared movement can let participants practise rest, self-expression, and connection without every session becoming a formal discussion about mental wellbeing. This can therefore act as a more accessible entry point.



2. DESIGN PEER-SUPPORT GROUPS WITH AGE AND LIFE-STAGE IN MIND

Whilst mixed groups can create intergenerational exchange and wider social contact, needs, energy levels and preferred formats differ significantly across age groups. Younger participants benefit from more active, choice-driven formats, whilst seniors benefit from a slower pace and space for memory-sharing and conversation. In contrast, our evaluation found that senior groups required more guidance and practical support than facilitators initially expected, creating an initial boundary tension. Build this expectation, and clear guidance from the facilitators, directly into training to create a greater group cohesion.



3. VOLUNTEER COORDINATION REQUIRES REAL-TIME BUDGETING AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

Having peer-support groups demands staff time and resources, especially when several are ongoing at the same time. This includes everything from fostering a connection based on trust and comfort with the facilitators, to delivering practical support and financial matters. Plan coordination capacity into your organisation's budget and timeline from the outset.



4. GIVE PARTICIPANTS A VOICE WITHIN A MANAGEABLE FRAMEWORK

Designing the peer-groups to foster participant input is important to create a sense of ownership and community with the group. However, leaving choices open-ended for too long can create planning uncertainty for facilitators. Offer a clear and concise checklist or guide for the facilitators that offers a curated set of options, rather than fully open-ended choice, to help them manage this balance. Having a “must have” versus a “nice to have” guide can be useful.



5. INVEST IN COMPREHENSIVE, PRACTICAL VOLUNTEER TRAINING AND GUIDELINES

Volunteers are often the backbone of any peer-support model, yet they are rarely mental health professionals. It is therefore important to invest time in quality training and guiding materials, to make them feel comfortable and ready to facilitate. Training should go beyond introducing the model itself, and cover group facilitation skills, understanding facilitator roles and boundaries, burnout prevention, healthy communication, and practical tools for planning session content. It is also important to create comprehensive guidelines for the volunteers that would also cover practical matters, such as roles and responsibilities between the organisation and facilitators, reporting (e.g. filling out attendance, writing a short report about each meeting, taking at least one picture at each meeting), how to report financial expenses, other policies, how to get support, and so forth.



6. PEER-SUPPORT IS JUST AS IMPORTANT FOR FACILITATORS AS IT IS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Facilitators carry real emotional and organisational demands. Having peer-support groups and/or activities for the facilitators is therefore important. Also rather than arranging de-briefing sessions reactively, set planned de-brief dates before a group even starts, and make clear that facilitators are welcome and encouraged to reach out for support between sessions.



7. RECRUITMENT SUCCESS DOES NOT ALWAYS GUARANTEE ATTENDANCE

Whilst initial sign-ups can be easily accessible, barriers in actual participation exist; this can be both visible (timing, work, studies, health) and invisible (low energy, self-doubt, fear of connection). A personal call or message to participants before their first meeting, answering questions and showing them that their presence matters, meaningfully improves retention. Following up with no-shows to understand why is equally valuable for future planning.



8. LET CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND LOCAL INTEGRATION COEXIST

The TOIVO groups with the most cohesion combined familiar Ukrainian cultural elements (such as language, food, songs, traditions) with structured opportunities to explore Swedish society (visiting museums, local outings). This dual approach supported integration through encouraging a continuity of identity, rather than making participants set that identity aside. This was especially valued by senior participants navigating a new environment later in life.



9. PLAN FOR CLOSURE, NOT JUST CONTINUATION

Groups often generate stronger bonds and demand for continuation than a single project cycle can sustain. Build a deliberate closing process into the group design, acknowledging the group's ending as a meaningful part of the experience, instead of letting it end abruptly or leaving expectations unaddressed. Having an individual tool, such as a Power Journal, can act as a second phase in participants' own journeys.



10. INCORPORATE FEEDBACK LOOPS, AND MEASURE OUTCOMES WITH SIMPLE BEFORE-AND-AFTER WELLBEING MEASURES

The TOIVO model is flexible and easily adjustable, something that is important to keep in mind throughout its implementation. Incorporate dedicated sessions amongst organisers, such as learning workshops, for reviewing what is working and what may have to be adapted. A lightweight baseline and endline survey can help demonstrate impact convincingly to funders and partners, and also help identify which themes are landing best for the participants.



11. TREAT CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AS A FOUNDATION

Effective peer-support cannot be culturally neutral. Language, cultural framing, and lived context shape whether participants feel safe enough to open up at all. This means delivering sessions in participants' own language wherever possible, adapting materials and themes to reflect cultural understanding of wellbeing, and training facilitators explicitly in cultural sensitivity alongside group facilitation skills.



12. RECOGNISE MENTAL WELLBEING AS A PRECONDITION FOR INTEGRATION

Integration is often measured through "practical" factors such as language acquisition and employment status. Yet without addressing migrants' mental wellbeing - the isolation, unresolved stress, and disrupted identity they may feel - these "practical" factors cannot be sustained. Mental wellbeing should therefore be incorporated as a core pillar in any integration strategy. Put simply: without mental health, integration cannot be meaningfully achieved.

PHOTO CREDITS

Cover & back cover: ©joka2000

Inside photos: Credited individually on each image.

All other uncredited images: Courtesy of www.unsplash.com



Want to learn more?

This report has been shortened to suit a wider audience.

If you have any questions or considerations and want to learn more about FRID in-depth, please contact:

- ✓ Help Ukraine Gothenburg: contact@hug.ngo
- ✓ MIELI Mental Health Finland: mieli@mieli.fi
- ✓ Reach for Change: info@reachforchange.org

INITIATED
BY

mieli

Hug.

HELP
UKRAINE
GOTHENBURG

**REACH FOR
CHANGE**



Co-funded by
the European Union

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 European Social Fund Agency. Neither the European Union nor the Granting Authority can be held responsible for them.

**Social
Innovation 
Initiative**