



EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS · MENTORING TOOLKIT

Tools for Promoting Mental Health in the European Solidarity Corps

English edition

Tools for Promoting Mental Health in the European Solidarity Corps

English translation of *Herramientas para la promoción de la salud mental en el programa Cuerpo Europeo de Solidaridad*.

This manual is addressed to mentors and staff of organisations taking part in the European Solidarity Corps. It is not a clinical guide: its purpose is to help mentors accompany volunteers with presence and care, recognise when more support is needed, and look after themselves along the way.

Where the original edition recommends Spanish-language resources, they are kept and marked (ES).

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MODULE 01

Mental Health in the ESC

1. What is mental health and why does it matter in the European Solidarity Corps (ESC)?

What is mental health?

Mental health is not just the absence of illness. It means feeling good about yourself, about other people and about your surroundings. It has to do with how we think, feel and act in everyday life.

When we look after our mental health:

- We feel safer and calmer.
- We adapt better to change.
- We make decisions more clearly.
- We relate to others in a more positive way.

Why does it matter in the ESC?

Taking part in an ESC project is a unique and enriching experience, but it can also be challenging. Volunteers often:

- Live far from their family and friends.
- Have to adapt to a new culture and language.
- Face unfamiliar or stressful situations.

All of this can bring up intense emotions, both positive and negative. That is why talking about mental health from the very beginning helps to:

- Normalise the fact that we don't always feel good.
- Prevent more difficult situations.
- Create an environment where volunteers feel supported and understood.

And what can a mentor do?

A mentor is not a psychologist and doesn't have to solve everything. But a mentor can:

- Listen without judging.
- Ask sincerely how the person is doing.
- Notice signs of distress and offer support, or help to find the right resources.

Promoting mental health doesn't require sophisticated tools. Sometimes it is enough to be present, show empathy and create an environment where volunteers know they can talk about how they feel.

2. The mentor's role: accompanying, supporting, caring

What does a mentor do in the ESC?

The mentor is someone who accompanies the volunteer. The role goes beyond helping with the project or the logistics: it means being there as a trusted person throughout the whole volunteering experience.

The mentor:

- **Listens actively:** takes an interest in how the volunteer is feeling.
- **Offers emotional support:** validates their emotions and encourages them to express doubts and fears.
- **Provides guidance:** helps to solve problems or to find the right resources.
- **Creates safe spaces:** where the volunteer can speak without fear of being judged.

What is NOT the mentor's role?

- The mentor is not a therapist and does not have to solve clinical problems.
- The mentor is not available 24/7 and should not sacrifice their own wellbeing.
- The mentor doesn't have to know everything or have an answer for everything.

Examples of things the mentor CAN do

- Ask: "How are you really doing this week?"
- Notice signs of isolation or sadness and offer a conversation.
- Organise informal get-togethers to build bonds with other volunteers.
- Talk openly about frustration, motivation or homesickness as normal topics.

Examples of things the mentor should NOT do

- Give diagnoses about mental health.
- Ignore signs of distress for fear of "putting their foot in it".
- Try to solve every problem on their own.
- Become the volunteer's "rescuer".

The mentor is a bridge, not a wall. They accompany, observe and listen, and when necessary they connect the volunteer with more specialised support.

3. Factors that influence mental health

Mental health doesn't just depend on "having a good day" or "being strong". Many elements come into play, and knowing them helps us understand how to support volunteers. We group them here into three broad areas.

a) Biological factors: the body speaks too

- **Genetics and family history:** some people may be more sensitive to stress or anxiety for hereditary reasons.
- **Physical condition:** tiredness, poor diet or lack of sleep can strongly affect mood.
- **Brain and chemistry:** there are substances in the brain that influence how we feel. Stress or lack of rest can upset that balance.

As a mentor, you can encourage the volunteer to look after their body (eating well, resting, getting some exercise). This also improves their mental wellbeing.

b) Psychological factors: what we think and feel

- **Negative thoughts:** sometimes people are very self-critical or imagine the worst. This creates anxiety or sadness.
- **Intense emotions:** being in another country can trigger strong emotions such as fear, insecurity or frustration.
- **Ways of seeing the world:** some people are more perfectionist, others more impulsive, others more sensitive... Each personality lives volunteering differently.

As a mentor, you can help them put their feelings into words, normalise their emotions and remind them that they are not alone.

c) Social and environmental factors: our surroundings matter

- **Relationships:** getting on well (or badly) with flatmates, mentors or local people has a direct impact on emotional state.
- **Physical and cultural environment:** living in an uncomfortable house, not understanding the language or feeling discriminated against can increase stress.
- **Social support:** knowing that someone is available to listen or help makes a big difference.

As a mentor, you can create small actions that build community, trust and belonging.

Mental health doesn't depend only on a person's willpower. It also depends on what is happening in their body, in their mind and in their environment. If a volunteer feels bad, it is not weakness: it may be a sign that they need support.

4. Daily habits that improve wellbeing

Everyday life has a big impact on how we feel. Sometimes small adjustments to a routine can make a real difference to volunteers' mental wellbeing. Here are some key elements.

a) Food: eating well is also self-care

- What we eat affects our body and also our mood.
- Skipping meals, eating only fast food or not drinking enough water can lead to tiredness and irritability.
- Eating together or trying new local food can lift the mood and build connection.

As a mentor, you can encourage volunteers to keep regular mealtimes, share recipes or cook together.

b) Sleep: rest well to think better

- Sleeping too little affects memory, mood and concentration.
- A noisy environment, changing schedules or using screens before bed can disturb rest.

As a mentor, you can help set up sleep routines, such as respecting "quiet hours" in the house, or talk openly with volunteers about how they are sleeping.

c) Movement: the body helps calm the mind

- Walking, dancing, stretching or playing sport releases tension and improves mood.
- There's no need to go to the gym: moving a little every day already helps.

As a mentor, you can suggest simple physical activities: walks around the neighbourhood, a game of volleyball, yoga classes or even outdoor games.

d) Managing stress: balancing activity and rest

- In volunteering, work, the excitement of everything new and the pressure of "wanting to do it well" often get mixed together.
- Volunteers also need time and space to switch off.

As a mentor, encourage moments of pause. You could suggest keeping a journal, listening to music, colouring, meditating or simply having free time without feeling guilty.

Simple habits such as eating well, sleeping enough, moving and resting are powerful self-care tools. Help volunteers value them and keep them up, even in the whirlwind of everything new.

5. Risk and protective factors

During their ESC experience, volunteers can go through moments of great growth, but also situations that put their wellbeing at risk. As mentors, it is important to know what can affect their mental health negatively and what can help them feel stronger.

a) Risk factors: what can make wellbeing harder?

- **Far from home:** distance from their support network can lead to loneliness or homesickness.
- **New language and culture:** not understanding everything can cause frustration or make them feel "out of place".
- **Difficult housing or shared living:** sharing a house without privacy or with conflicts causes stress.
- **Overload or unrealistic expectations:** wanting to do everything perfectly or feeling under pressure can lead to exhaustion.
- **Personal problems:** grief, break-ups, or past traumas that resurface in a new environment.

As a mentor, you can keep an eye on these factors and address them sensitively before they grow.

b) Protective factors: what strengthens wellbeing?

- **Support network:** having people to talk to (fellow volunteers, mentors, local people).
- **Stable routines:** clear schedules, rest time and enjoyable activities.
- **Safe spaces for expression:** knowing they can talk about how they feel without being judged.
- **Self-care tools:** from breathing deeply to doing something creative or calling someone they trust.
- **Recognition and meaning:** feeling useful and valued for their work.

As a mentor, you can foster these conditions so the volunteer feels they have resources and is not alone.

A balanced approach

Volunteering in the ESC is a mix of risks and protections. What matters is recognising the difficult moments, talking about them naturally and reinforcing whatever gives support and wellbeing.

Spot what causes stress and strengthen what protects. That is the basis of support that safeguards the volunteer's mental health.

6. Resilience: how to help volunteers grow stronger

What is resilience?

It is a person's capacity to adapt and recover after difficult moments. It doesn't mean "not suffering" or "being strong all the time", but being able to keep going, learn and grow despite the challenges.

a) Why does it matter for volunteers?

During their experience they may go through:

- Disagreements with other volunteers or within the organisation.
- Homesickness, fear, frustration or a sense of failure.
- Unexpected changes or cultural barriers.

Rather than avoiding these challenges, the aim is to help them face them with tools and support.

b) How is resilience built?

- **Talking about what is happening:** putting feelings into words helps people understand themselves better.
- **Learning from experience:** reflecting on what worked and what didn't.
- **Celebrating small achievements:** recognising progress, however small it may seem.
- **Building support networks:** knowing that someone is listening makes a difference.
- **Having time to rest:** to breathe, reconnect and look after body and mind.

As a mentor, you can encourage them to keep a journal, share learning in a group, or simply ask: "What are you taking away from this experience?"

c) Practical tools for mentors

- Use metaphors such as the "emotional rollercoaster" to normalise ups and downs.
- Suggest self-reflection exercises (for example: *What made me feel proud this week?*).
- Help turn mistakes into learning: "What would you like to do differently next time?"
- Be available without solving everything: guide, don't replace.

Building resilience means showing volunteers that they don't have to be perfect, just human, and that every challenge is also an opportunity to grow.

7. How to recognise and support mental health difficulties

Volunteers may go through moments when they feel sad, anxious or lost. It is not your job to "diagnose" them, but as a mentor you can play a key role in noticing signs, opening conversations and guiding them towards the right support.

a) Warning signs that may indicate distress

- **Mood changes:** irritability, persistent sadness, apathy.
- **Isolation:** they stop taking part in activities, avoid talking.
- **Physical changes:** insomnia, fatigue, frequent aches without a clear physical cause.
- Lack of motivation or difficulty concentrating.
- Talking negatively about themselves or their experience.

Not all of these signs mean there is a serious problem, but they are reason enough to open a space for listening.

b) How to start a conversation without being intrusive

- Choose a quiet, private moment.
- Use open, non-judgemental phrases: "I've noticed you've been quieter lately. Would you like to talk about how you're feeling?"
- Listen without interrupting, without minimising ("it's not a big deal") and without rushing to "fix" things.
- Validate: "It makes sense that you feel this way right now."
- Ask: "What do you think would help you right now?"

Showing genuine interest can be more powerful than any solution.

c) What if the situation is more complex?

Sometimes a volunteer needs more help than you can offer. In those cases:

- Don't try to be a therapist.
- Help them look for professional help: local services, helplines, support from the project coordinator.
- Ask for advice yourself if you don't know what to do: other mentors or programme staff can guide you.

You are not alone. Referring in time is an act of care, not a failure.

Listen, observe and accompany. Sometimes just being there is enough. Other times, it is about knowing when and who to ask for help. What matters is not ignoring the signs and acting with humanity.

8. Practical strategies for mentors and supervisors

Accompanying volunteers in the ESC is a rewarding experience, but also a demanding one. Here are some practical tools that can help you day to day.

a) Effective communication and active listening

- **Really listen:** beyond the words, notice tone, gestures, silence.
- **Ask open questions:** "How has this week been for you?"
- **Paraphrase:** repeating what you understood shows that you are present.
- **Validate emotions:** "I understand that it hurt you", instead of "Don't exaggerate".

What matters most is not having answers, but being genuinely willing to listen.

b) Create a safe and trustworthy space

- Show availability without being intrusive.
- Respect confidentiality.
- Be clear about your limits and your role: you are not a therapist or a close friend, you are a support figure.
- Let the volunteer have a say in decisions that affect them.

A safe space is not one without problems, but one where problems can be talked about without fear.

c) Look after your own limits and wellbeing

- **Don't overload yourself:** it's fine to say "I need to think about it before I answer" or "let's look for help together".
- Take breaks and ask for help when you need it.
- Talk to other mentors, share doubts and emotions.
- Use tools such as supervision, peer supervision (intervision) or reflection spaces with colleagues.

Looking after yourself is not selfishness, it is responsibility. If you are well, you can accompany others better.

d) Small actions with a big impact

- Organise informal get-togethers where people can talk without pressure.
- Ask about what brings them joy, not only about problems.
- Suggest self-care activities: walks, quiet time, spaces to share music or art.
- Use visual or creative resources to explore how they feel (drawings, emotion cards, metaphors...).

Being a mentor isn't about doing it perfectly. It is about being present, making room for the other person, setting healthy limits and growing together in the process.

9. Accompanying from a human place

Being a mentor in the European Solidarity Corps is not only a practical task. It is an act of humanity, presence and care. It means being there when someone faces the unknown, when they need support, or when they simply need to be heard without being judged.

This document doesn't aim to turn you into a mental health expert. It does aim to give you clarity, confidence and tools so that you can:

- Recognise that emotional wellbeing matters.
- Talk about it naturally.
- Accompany with empathy and respect.
- Know when to act and when to refer.
- And, above all, look after yourself too along the way.

Mental health is a shared journey. In the ESC, every mentor has the power to create a healthier, more human and more aware environment.

10. Bibliography

Below is a list of relevant resources and links on mental health and mentoring in the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). Resources marked (ES) are in Spanish.

European Solidarity Corps Guide – European Youth Portal. The document setting out the objectives, priorities and main features of the ESC, including aspects related to volunteers' mental health and wellbeing. Available in all EU languages. https://youth.europa.eu/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2025_ES.pdf

Voluntariado en Salud Mental – Universidad de Málaga (ES). A document on effective strategies for volunteering in mental health, including active stimulation and adapting the environment for people with dementia. https://www.uma.es/media/tinyimages/file/Voluntariado_en_Salud_Mental.pdf

Voluntariado en Salud Mental – Plataforma del Voluntariado de España (ES). A guide exploring how mental health results from every aspect of daily life and the importance of emotional bonds for psychological wellbeing. <https://plataformavoluntariado.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/voluntariado-en-salud-mental.pdf>

Informe sobre el voluntariado en Salud Mental España 2022 (ES). A report analysing the situation of people who volunteer within organisations of the mental health movement in Spain. <https://www.consaludmental.org/publicaciones/Informe-Voluntariado-Salud-Mental-2022.pdf>

Toolkit for working with volunteers with fewer opportunities. A tool offering advice for facilitators, including communicating with people who know the volunteer in order to better understand their mental health issues. https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/project-result-content/f848ec5a-28b9-4baf-89eb-37c49cb57b41/toolkit_ESP__3_.pdf

Inteligencia emocional, estrategias de afrontamiento y bienestar psicológico en voluntariado – Cruz Roja (ES). A study of the relationships between emotional intelligence, coping strategies and psychological wellbeing among Red Cross volunteers. <https://plataformavoluntariado.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/tesisestudiovoluntariadocruzroja.pdf>

Bienestar y salud mental del voluntariado – Red Íncola (ES). A training session reflecting on the importance of self-care and how to promote the emotional wellbeing of people involved in volunteering. <https://redincola.org/en/bienestar-y-salud-mental-del-voluntariado/>

La salud mental durante el voluntariado: ¿Cómo abordarla? – Fundación Maniapure (ES). An article on how exposure to emotionally demanding situations and pressure to meet expectations can affect volunteers' mental health. <https://www.maniapurefoundation.org/post/salud-mental-durante-el-voluntariado-c%C3%B3mo-abordarla>

Mentoría en el CES – Cardenal Cisneros (ES). A mentoring programme that sets up an educational relationship of support and guidance between a more experienced person and someone who wants to gain that experience. <https://www.cescisneros.es/mentoría/>

European Solidarity Corps – European Youth Portal. The official portal with information on how to take part in volunteering activities, solidarity projects and humanitarian aid volunteering within the ESC. https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity_en

MODULE 02

The Lifeline of a European Solidarity Corps (ESC) Volunteer

A mental health perspective and the role of the mentor

1. Introduction

The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) is a European Union initiative that gives young people the opportunity to take part in solidarity projects in their own country or abroad. These experiences support personal and professional development, and they also involve a deep emotional transformation.

In this context, mental health becomes a key factor in ensuring a positive, sustainable and meaningful experience. Emotions, insecurities, intercultural learning and moments of crisis are all part of the volunteering journey. That is why emotional support from the beginning to the end of the process is essential.

This is where the mentor comes in. The mentor guides the volunteer through administrative and logistical matters and also acts as an emotional point of reference. Their presence can make the difference between an experience that overwhelms and one that empowers.

2. Active listening and emotional depth in mentoring

Going deeper than "everything's fine"

This is a key point in supporting volunteers emotionally: trust doesn't come straight away, and an "everything's fine" often hides nuances that need time and safety before they can surface.

Even when a volunteer says "everything's fine", it doesn't always mean there is no discomfort, doubt or inner conflict. Out of embarrassment, fear of disappointing, not knowing how to name what they feel, or simply because they don't yet trust their mentor, volunteers often give general or evasive answers.

Building an emotional bond with the mentor takes time. It is essential not to push, while still creating a space of safety, empathy and genuine listening where the person feels allowed to express even what they find hard to admit.

A key tool is moving from general questions to more specific ones. Open but focused questions allow the volunteer to connect with their emotions, name them and begin to reflect on their experience more consciously.

Examples of specific questions to go deeper

These questions can be adapted to the stage the volunteer is at. The idea is not to ask them all, but to choose the most suitable ones for each meeting.

About day-to-day life

- What was the best and the worst thing about your week?
- What has been hardest for you lately?
- At what times of day do you feel most comfortable, or most uncomfortable?
- Do you feel you're finding your place in the organisation / flat / city?

About relationships and living together

- How are things with your flatmates lately?
- Have you been able to make any new connections with local people or people around you?
- Is there anyone you'd like to talk to more, or less?
- Do you feel accompanied or rather alone in your daily life?

About emotions and changes

- Which emotions have been most present this week?
- Has anything surprised you or stirred you up lately?
- How do you handle the days when you feel low?
- Have there been moments when you felt overwhelmed?

About the project

- Which tasks do you enjoy most day to day? And which ones frustrate you?
- Do you feel you're learning something that interests you?
- Is there anything you'd like to propose or change in your role?
- Do you feel your initial expectations are being met?

For critical moments

- How have you been sleeping / eating lately?
- What are you doing to look after yourself during this period?
- Is there something worrying you that you haven't told anyone yet?
- What would you need right now to feel more supported?

These questions help not only to detect difficulties but also to strengthen the bond and the volunteer's inner reflection. They open the way to more human, preventive and empathetic support.

As mentors, it is important to be aware of the key moments in a volunteer's journey from an emotional point of view. Below are useful tools to help mentors carry out their role more consciously and effectively.

3. Before the volunteering activity

Search and selection phase

Emotional impact: At this early stage, young people may feel a mix of emotions: excitement about the chance of an international experience and anxiety about the pressure to find the "ideal" project. Fear of rejection, or doubts about whether they have the right profile, are common. Uncertainty can lead to insecurity and even frustration.

The mentor's role:

- Listen actively if the volunteer expresses insecurity or discouragement.

- Validate emotions such as nervousness, impatience or frustration.
- Help review expectations realistically, with empathy, encouraging an open attitude.

Preparing to leave

Emotional impact: Once the project is confirmed and departure approaches, mixed emotions arise: enthusiasm for what's new, curiosity, but also fear of the unknown. Worries appear about the language, the destination country, personal relationships or adapting. Feeling dizzy at the imminent changes is common.

The mentor's role:

- Create conversations focused on managing the emotions of change.
- Offer self-care resources such as personal journals, mindfulness, breathing exercises or relaxation techniques.
- Put them in touch with former volunteers who can share their experience and offer a closer, more realistic view of the process.

4. During the volunteering activity

Arrival in the host country

Emotional impact: Arrival can be overwhelming. Culture shock, disorientation, the language barrier, first impressions of the accommodation, curiosity about flatmates, emotions about the presence or absence of other volunteers, feelings of loneliness or vulnerability are all common. There may also be enthusiasm, but the first days are usually marked by strong emotional impact.

The mentor's role:

- Keep in regular contact during the first days.
- Strengthen the local support network: project mentor, flatmates, other volunteers.
- Notice signs of isolation, sadness or distress and act preventively to contain and guide.

First days in the host organisation

Emotional impact: The volunteer may feel lost, unsure about their role or afraid of not meeting expectations. Unclear tasks or organisational structure can cause stress and a sense of being useless.

The mentor's role:

- Support the process of adapting to the work environment with patience.
- Encourage transparent communication between the volunteer and the organisation.
- Encourage them to express their concerns without fear of judgement, reminding them that doubts are part of the process.

Shared living

Emotional impact: Sharing space with people from different cultures and habits can lead to friction, moments of loneliness or a need for privacy. Living together is one of the biggest challenges, and one of the biggest learning experiences, of volunteering.

The mentor's role:

- Offer safe spaces to talk openly about living together.
- Mediate in case of conflict, with empathy and neutrality.
- Encourage strategies for respectful coexistence: agreeing shared rules, encouraging assertive communication, promoting self-care and mutual care.

Difficulty communicating in the local language

Emotional impact: This can lead to frustration, embarrassment, fear of making mistakes, isolation and a sense of incompetence. It affects daily life as well as social and work relationships.

The mentor's role:

- Validate the learning process and reinforce achievements.
- Suggest accessible resources (apps, language exchanges, support from peers).
- Motivate through the process, not through perfection.

Cultural comparison and clash of values

Emotional impact: Cultural differences can be fascinating, but they can also lead to judgement, frustration or a sense of strangeness. There may be clashes with social norms, gender roles, ways of communicating, and so on.

The mentor's role:

- Encourage a critical but empathetic view of both cultures.
- Accompany through intercultural reflection, not through judgement or idealisation.
- Offer tools to understand differences without losing one's own identity.

Difficulty connecting with local young people

Emotional impact: This can lead to frustration, a sense of exclusion or of being uprooted. Comparing reality with an idealised image of cultural integration can be discouraging.

The mentor's role:

- Reinforce the idea that integration takes time.
- Help find places to meet people (leisure groups, cultural activities, local volunteering).
- Encourage a variety of relationships, not only with local people.

Insecurity, shyness or difficulty expressing oneself

Emotional impact: These personal traits can intensify in an unfamiliar environment. The volunteer may withdraw, avoid taking part or develop self-critical thoughts.

The mentor's role:

- Build a safe and patient relationship.
- Invite them to express emotions gradually.
- Avoid pushing them towards being outgoing; encourage participation at their own pace.

Doubts about the choice of project or country

Emotional impact: Questions like "what if I made the wrong choice?" may arise, causing anxiety, sadness or a need to compare themselves with other volunteers.

The mentor's role:

- Help them reframe the meaning of the project.
- Encourage a flexible view: even a difficult experience can be meaningful.
- Help distinguish between passing frustration and a real wish for change.

Mandatory training (on-arrival training and mid-term evaluation)

Emotional impact: These trainings are moments of meeting other volunteers, validating experiences and reflecting on the process. They can also stir up intense emotions or raise new questions about the path taken so far.

The mentor's role:

- Talk before and after the trainings to prepare and accompany emotionally.
- Offer spaces to put into words and process any emotions that come up.
- Be alert to possible mood changes or concerns arising from these experiences.

Crises and difficult moments

Emotional impact: Personal crises may appear during the project: burnout, anxiety, sadness or an identity crisis linked to the experience. Distance, a change of environment and constant exposure to new realities can cause emotional imbalance.

The mentor's role:

- Be a trusted figure who listens without judging and is present in difficult moments.
- Provide emotional support and, if necessary, refer to professional mental health services.
- Remind the volunteer of their rights and the resources available for emotional care.

Holidays during the project

Emotional impact: Holidays can bring enthusiasm, rest and a chance to switch off. They can also bring anxiety about organising time, loneliness if other volunteers travel and they don't, or sadness at not having a "home" to go back to.

The mentor's role:

- Help with the emotional planning of holidays, not just the logistics.
- Validate feelings of loneliness or disappointed expectations.
- Encourage enjoyment, exploration and rest, without guilt.
- Make sure they know who to contact in an emergency during the holiday period.

Christmas and meaningful dates

Emotional impact: Distance from family and traditions brings homesickness, sadness or a sense of loss. It is a time of comparison, and isolation can feel more intense, especially in a country with very different customs.

The mentor's role:

- Talk in advance about the emotions that may arise at these times.
- Suggest symbolic or group activities to share with other volunteers.
- Remind them that it's fine not to feel festive, and that every emotion is legitimate.

Going home and returning to the project

Emotional impact: Volunteers who go home temporarily (for holidays, Christmas, etc.) may experience an emotional shock both when arriving home and when returning to the project. Loss of motivation, a sense of disconnection or frustration from comparing the two realities may appear.

The mentor's role:

- Prepare them emotionally before the trip and on their return.
- Listen without judgement to any post-return slump.
- Reinforce the meaning of the project and allow a gradual re-engagement.

Not going home during the whole project

Emotional impact: Staying in the host country the whole time can bring a sense of isolation, envy of those who travel, or even guilt if they feel they should be with their family.

The mentor's role:

- Be especially available at sensitive times.
- Validate the choice to stay, whether chosen or not.
- Encourage "personal rituals" or meaningful activities.

Travelling during the project

Emotional impact: Travelling can be a source of enjoyment and learning, but it can also cause fatigue, disconnection from the immediate environment, or even logistical or interpersonal conflicts.

The mentor's role:

- Invite reflection on the purpose of the trips (escape or exploration?).
- Encourage responsible planning.
- Recall the importance of real rest and emotional balance.

Illness during the project

Emotional impact: Falling ill far from home can bring vulnerability, fear, loneliness or a lack of care. Even minor illnesses can have a big emotional impact.

The mentor's role:

- Be attentive and available at these times, even if the illness seems minor.
- Ensure practical support (access to healthcare) as well as emotional support.
- Validate fear or sadness and avoid minimising the experience.

Conflicts with flatmates

Emotional impact: Conflicts at home are among the most draining; they cause stress, daily tension, a sense of injustice or of being "trapped".

The mentor's role:

- Listen to both sides without taking sides.
- Facilitate mediation with non-violent communication tools.
- Suggest house agreements and conflict-resolution activities.

Conflicts in the host organisation

Emotional impact: Problems with the organisation can lead to disappointment, loss of motivation or even a breakdown in the meaning of volunteering. The volunteer may feel alone, without resources, or guilty for "not fitting in".

The mentor's role:

- Validate the experience without undermining the organisation.
- Facilitate dialogue and help manage expectations.
- Intervene in situations of abuse, discrimination or negligence.

Loss of motivation with the tasks or the project

Emotional impact: When the project doesn't meet expectations or the tasks become monotonous, apathy, frustration, discouragement or questioning the point of volunteering may arise.

The mentor's role:

- Listen actively without pushing for "everything to be fine".
- Encourage small adjustments and the volunteer's own proposals.
- Explore together what can be learned beyond the tasks.

Illness or death of a close relative

Emotional impact: Grief or worry from a distance carries a heavy emotional load. Guilt at not being close, distress, helplessness or emotional isolation may appear. It can also interrupt the project.

The mentor's role:

- Offer immediate support, without pressure.
- Respect the individual emotional process, without minimising or over-intervening.
- Facilitate contact with family, travel options if needed, or a break from volunteering if the situation requires it.
- Follow up emotionally over the medium term.

Visits from family or friends during the project

Emotional impact: A visit can bring joy and relief, but also homesickness or a sense of disconnection afterwards. It can reopen the "previous world" and lead the volunteer to question the present experience.

The mentor's role:

- Prepare emotionally for the visit, before and after.
- Accompany possible mixed emotions: joy, homesickness, anxiety when the visitors leave.
- Reinforce the volunteer's autonomy after the visit.

Over-responsibility for tasks

Emotional impact: Some volunteers feel they have to "give everything" and end up exhausted, struggling to set limits, and feeling guilty for not doing more or for failing.

The mentor's role:

- Help identify signs of burnout or overload.
- Promote a balance between commitment and self-care.
- Confirm that learning does not depend on extreme sacrifice.

Feeling like a failure, or not "making the most" of the experience

Emotional impact: Many volunteers arrive with high expectations. If they feel they are not growing, learning or connecting as they "should", guilt or frustration appears.

The mentor's role:

- Help redefine success in a personal and realistic way.
- Confirm that growth is not always linear or spectacular.
- Invite them to notice what they have learned in small things.

Change of role, tasks or accommodation during the project

Emotional impact: Any change can be emotionally destabilising and cause anxiety or a sense of loss or lack of control.

The mentor's role:

- Support the emotional side of adapting, not only the logistics.
- Validate the impact of the changes.
- Help give new meaning to what is new without dismissing the discomfort.
- Provide clarity and support throughout the adaptation.

Taking part in activities outside the project (activism, art, sport)

Emotional impact: These activities can be a source of energy, belonging and personal expression. If there is no space or time for them, this is experienced as a loss or a frustration.

The mentor's role:

- Encourage them to explore their own interests outside the project.
- Reinforce their personal identity beyond the role of volunteer.
- Support the balance between involvement in the project and personal life.

Romantic or emotional relationships

Emotional impact: Euphoria, emotional dependence, jealousy, break-ups, etc.

The mentor's role:

- Be available if these relationships affect the emotional experience, without intruding.
- Offer a space to process.

Birthdays and other personal dates

Emotional impact: These can be difficult days if there is no solid local network.

The mentor's role:

- Accompany and encourage them to celebrate these days or give them new meaning.

Mid-term evaluation / self-evaluation

Emotional impact: This point in the process invites them to look back on the experience with perspective. Insecurity, pride, frustration or satisfaction may arise. It is a key moment to connect with what has been learned and to readjust goals.

The mentor's role:

- Accompany the evaluation from an emotional and human perspective.
- Encourage deep reflection on the journey and on future expectations.
- Recognise the achievements, even if they seem small or invisible.

Last months and end of the project

Emotional impact: Goodbyes are approaching, and with them homesickness in advance, fear of losing relationships and uncertainty about the future. It is a time of closure that can also bring feelings of loss or anticipatory grief.

The mentor's role:

- Accompany the emotional side of saying goodbye.
- Suggest symbolic rituals to close the experience meaningfully.
- Help plan the transition home or to new stages consciously and carefully.

5. After volunteering

Emotional impact: Returning can bring a strong emotional contrast. A sense of emptiness, disconnection from the previous environment or even a crisis of meaning may appear. It is common to feel different and not know how to integrate the experience.

The mentor's role:

- Offer spaces for reflection to integrate the experience.
- Reinforce the value of the journey and its personal impact.
- Offer occasional follow-up or connect them with local networks of former volunteers to support the reintegration process.

6. Key points for mentors

For the European Solidarity Corps experience to be truly transformative, decent accommodation and good task planning are not enough: mental health care has to be part of the educational process. Volunteers' emotional wellbeing is not an extra or an added value; it is a pillar on which their learning, their sense of belonging and their capacity to engage actively in the project and the host community are built.

The mentor has a strategic and deeply human role: they can become the anchor, the support and the guidance a young person needs at the most challenging moments of the process. This support is not only about solving problems, but about being present in a conscious, empathetic and consistent way.

Here are some key actions and attitudes that can help you carry out your role with more depth and preparation:

- **Take part in specific training** on emotional support, crisis management, youth mental health, burnout prevention and psychological first aid. This will give you practical tools and also more confidence and capacity to respond to complex situations.
- **Cultivate active, non-judgemental listening.** Sometimes the greatest contribution is not a concrete solution but the chance to be listened to with attention, calm and presence.
- **Create or join networks of mentors,** locally and at European level, where you can share good practices, clear up doubts and feel supported in your own process as a mentor. Those who accompany also need to be accompanied.
- **Strengthen the mentor's role as a key figure,** emotionally as well as operationally. Being clear about your limits, and also about your possibilities, allows you to play a more solid and coherent role.
- **Promote a holistic view of volunteering** that considers the whole person: their emotions, relationships, learning, doubts and development. We are not accompanying "a volunteer", but a person in a process of transformation.
- **Trust the power of the human bond.** Sometimes a single genuine conversation can be the turning point that helps a young person regain motivation, handle their fears better or feel seen in their uniqueness.

Let's remember that a mentor is not a therapist, but a significant figure who can ease, or hinder, the volunteer's personal growth. Investing in emotional support means investing in the quality of the project, the wellbeing of the team and the deeper meaning of the ESC experience.

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MODULE 03

Understanding Emotions

Their adaptive function and how to accompany them in the ESC

1. Introduction

What are emotions for?

Emotions are not a problem to be solved. They are signals from the body that tell us something important is happening inside or outside us. They appear when something needs attention. Even when they are uncomfortable or hard to manage, they all have a function. They are not "wrong". They show us what matters to us.

An inner compass

We can imagine emotions as a compass that guides us. They warn us that something needs care, that something is in danger, that we need to step back or, on the contrary, that we should move closer to someone or something. They are automatic, ancient reactions that our body activates to help us survive and adapt. Even if we often can't explain them, emotions are there to protect us.

Emotions are very present in volunteering

During an ESC project, volunteers are exposed to new cultures, roles, relationships and challenges. Their environment, routine, language and circle of trust all change. All of this sets emotions in motion. As mentors, we can observe how these emotions are expressed, how they are silenced or how they affect volunteers' wellbeing.

Accompanying without intervening too much

You don't need to be a therapist to offer emotional support. What you do need is to be available and attentive, and able to hold an emotion without wanting to take it away straight away. Often what helps most is having someone who listens without judging, validates what the other person feels, and lets the emotion be present without rushing to offer solutions. That presence is support in itself.

Noticing and making room

One of the best ways to support a volunteer is to help them notice what is happening to them: what they are feeling, when, with whom, what effect it has on their body, what thoughts come up. The aim is not to analyse or correct, but to help the person become aware. From that awareness it is easier to make decisions, self-regulate and connect with what they really need.

2. Emotions

2.1 Sadness

What is its function?

Sadness appears when we lose something meaningful or when something important doesn't happen as we expected. It may be the loss of a relationship, a disappointed expectation, the end of a stage or an inner disconnection. Although we often see it as a negative emotion, sadness has a clear adaptive function: it helps us stop, gather energy and process a loss or a change. It invites us to slow down, look inwards and get in touch with what hurts.

It is an emotion that helps us digest what has happened, let go, say goodbye, and sometimes also ask for support.

How can it show up in ESC volunteers?

- Lack of energy or enthusiasm for activities.
- Needing more time alone.
- Crying for no apparent reason.
- Constant homesickness for their country, family or partner.
- A feeling of "not being connected to anything".
- Difficulty enjoying things or connecting with their surroundings.

These signs often appear after the first few weeks, when the novelty of the project wears off and the contrast with reality begins to emerge.

How to accompany this emotion

As a mentor, you can:

- Validate sadness without trying to take it away ("It makes sense that you feel this way after so many changes").
- Give space for them to express themselves if they need it.
- Not push them to "be OK" or look for an immediate solution.
- Ask kindly: "What do you think you need right now?"
- Invite small actions that connect with the body (walking, writing, breathing, resting).
- Accept silences as part of the process.

What to avoid:

- Phrases like "It's not that bad", "Cheer up", "You have to think positive".
- Quickly distracting them with activities if they need to stop.

- Giving unsolicited advice.
- Pressuring them to talk if they don't want to.

2.2 Anger

What is its function?

Anger is an emotion that tells us about limits that have been crossed or situations we perceive as unfair or harmful. It can also arise when we feel we can't do something we need or want. Its adaptive function is clear: to defend ourselves, protect ourselves and recover our vital strength.

Listened to properly and expressed safely, anger has the power to set processes of change and self-affirmation in motion. It activates us and connects us with the impulse to say "enough!" and protect what matters to us.

How can it show up in ESC volunteers?

- Irritability over small details.
- Explosive reactions or excessive criticism.
- A need to confront authority figures.
- A feeling that "everything annoys me" or "nobody understands me".
- Comments expressing frustration, anger or blame.
- Withdrawing after an argument or tension with the group.

In the ESC context, it often appears when there are cultural misunderstandings, unclear boundaries or a sense of lack of recognition.

How to accompany this emotion

As a mentor, you can:

- Acknowledge the emotion without judging it ("I understand that made you very angry").
- Help name what the person is feeling.
- Create a safe space where they can talk without fear of being told off.
- Invite them to explore the need behind the anger (for example, respect, clarity, rest).
- Encourage ways of channelling the energy of anger constructively (writing, walking, talking to someone they trust, physical activity).
- Remember that anger is not "bad" in itself; what can cause harm is how we express it.

What to avoid:

- Taking the anger personally.
- Repressing or minimising what the person expresses ("It's not that bad", "You're exaggerating").
- Reacting with more control or excessive authority.
- Avoiding conflict when what is needed is clear dialogue.

Aggressiveness vs. violence: reclaiming a legitimate strength

Understanding aggressiveness as vital energy

In the daily life of ESC projects, both volunteers and mentors often go through moments of tension, frustration or conflict. In these contexts, aggressiveness tends to be quickly misread as something negative or unacceptable. But that is not always the case.

Aggressiveness, at its most authentic root, is a form of living energy. It connects us with the impulse to protect ourselves, set limits and take care of what is ours. It is what allows us to say "no", defend our space or express what we are not willing to tolerate. It is the force behind the healthy defence of our inner and outer territory.

Without this energy, we risk constantly giving in, silencing ourselves or building up tensions that will eventually come out in much more destructive ways. Repressing aggressiveness doesn't eliminate it: it turns it into physical symptoms, chronic sadness or disproportionate emotional outbursts.

And what about violence?

Violence appears when that natural energy becomes distorted: because it has not found legitimate channels of expression, out of fear, because of growing up in environments where showing oneself was forbidden, or from not knowing how to use that strength without causing harm.

Where aggressiveness protects, violence bursts in and destroys.

Aggressiveness might say: *"This isn't good for me. I need a change."*

Violence acts like this: *"I'm going to make you pay for this."*

Between the two there is a line that is not as thin as it seems, but which is often blurred.

A legacy that represses the instinctive

Many of us, and many young volunteers too, come from cultures deeply shaped by Judaeo-Christian values. Historically, this has meant rewarding submission, obedience, sacrifice and endurance.

Within this framework, anger, impulse, desire or the need to defend what is one's own have been read as signs of moral weakness or "bad character", especially in women and young people. This cultural heritage leads us to penalise or repress legitimate expressions of discomfort.

The result: people who don't dare say what they feel, who stay quiet when they should speak, or who end up exploding after putting up with too much.

What can an ESC mentor do?

As a mentor, you are not there to control or correct emotions, but to accompany with presence and clarity. Here are some key points:

- **Recognise aggressiveness as a sign of life.** If someone rebels, it is not necessarily negative. They may be setting a limit or asking for a necessary change.
- **Don't judge the emotion.** Ask yourself: what need lies beneath this expression?
- **Help translate.** An aggressive outburst is often a poor translation of a need that hasn't been heard. You can step in to help with that translation respectfully: "It seems this has really stirred you up. What do you need that isn't happening?"
- **Accompany from your centre.** Don't get drawn into the clash. If you can stay present, firm and calm, you will help regulate the situation without repressing the emotion.
- **Promote spaces where it's OK to say "no".** An environment where only "yes" is possible is an environment that doesn't really listen.

2.3 Fear: an alarm signal and an opportunity for growth

Fear is not the enemy

In ESC projects, volunteers and mentors alike often face new, uncertain and challenging situations. In these contexts, fear appears easily. But feeling fear is not a problem in itself.

Fear is a primary, adaptive emotion. Its function is clear: to warn us of possible danger and prepare us to respond. It alerts us, activates the body and focuses attention. It is thanks to fear that we avoid unnecessary risks or make prudent decisions.

The problem arises when:

- Fear settles in beyond its original function, without a clear reason.
- It turns into constant anxiety or paralysis.
- It is denied, silenced or ridiculed.

Healthy fear and paralysing fear

We need to distinguish between two forms of fear:

- **Functional fear**, which helps us prepare for a challenge. For example, a volunteer who feels nervous before speaking in public can use that state to prepare better.
- **Dysfunctional fear**, which blocks, isolates or limits participation. For example, someone who avoids every meeting for fear of being judged and ends up isolated.

In many cases, this second kind of fear is not resolved by giving more information or explanations. It needs a different kind of presence: someone who listens, accompanies and normalises what they are feeling.

What can you do as a mentor?

You are not a psychologist or a therapist. But you can be a stable, reliable point of reference. Some keys to accompanying fear without intruding:

- **Validate the emotion.** "It makes sense to feel afraid of this." Acknowledge without minimising.
- **Help make it concrete.** Fear grows in the fog. You can help the person give it shape: "What worries you most about this situation?"
- **Offer external security.** Sometimes a little structure (knowing who is with them, what is going to happen, what options they have) greatly reduces the weight of fear.
- **Don't push, don't ridicule.** Phrases like "it's not that bad" or "come on, cheer up" can lead to more withdrawal.
- **Remember your place.** If fear becomes unmanageable or starts to seriously limit the volunteer's daily life, discuss it with the team and consider whether a referral is appropriate.

2.4 Disgust: a boundary against what invades

Disgust protects not only the body... it also protects identity

Although it is usually associated only with physical reactions (nausea, rejection, revulsion), disgust also has a very important emotional and symbolic function: protecting us from what we feel as harmful, invasive or contaminating. Not only physically, but also emotionally and in relationships.

Disgust is a boundary emotion: it marks the line between what I am and what I don't want to let in.

In the context of volunteering:

- It may appear in response to behaviour that repels us or contradicts our own values or ethical codes.
- It can also show up as an instinctive rejection of certain dynamics or people, even if we don't always know why.

Distinguishing between intuition and prejudice

Care is needed here: not every rejection signals real danger. As mentors, we should help to distinguish between:

- A legitimate emotional reaction (something is hurting me, invading me, attacking me), and
- A reaction conditioned by stereotypes, inherited fears or prejudice (for example, towards different ways of life, cultural expressions or identities).

The aim is not to repress disgust, but to explore it with curiosity and without judgement: what it tells me, what it shows me about myself, and whether I am projecting something that doesn't belong there.

How to accompany these emotions as a mentor

- **Help name what is happening.** Sometimes being able to say "this makes me feel rejection" is the first step to understanding and modulating that emotion.
- **Offer a safe space to talk without censorship.** Many people feel ashamed of feeling disgust, and hide it.
- **Open reflection, not confrontation.** "What part of this situation makes you uncomfortable?" can open a more useful dialogue than "you shouldn't think like that".
- **Avoid imposing tolerance as a moral obligation.** The process of opening up and understanding needs time and emotional honesty.
- **Be careful with your own reactions.** As a mentor, you may also feel rejection. Notice what it is telling you about yourself and, if necessary, seek support from your team.

2.5 Complex emotional states: guilt, shame, jealousy, envy

Secondary emotions: not "basic", but very common

This group of emotions, sometimes called social or secondary emotions, doesn't have an instinctive counterpart as immediate as fear or disgust, but they are deeply human and are built over time in interaction with others. They appear when elements such as the gaze of others, social norms, comparison, expectations or inner ideals come into play.

Guilt and shame: have I done something bad, or am I bad?

- **Guilt** usually arises when we feel we have broken a rule, caused harm or let someone down. It points us towards repair and responsibility.
- **Shame** appears when we feel there is something wrong with us, something that would make us unworthy if others saw it. It has a very strong component of self-image and belonging.

In volunteering, they may appear if:

- The young person feels they are not up to the project.
- They have had a conflict with someone and don't know how to repair it.
- They have been made to feel that they "don't fit in" or are "a nuisance".

How to accompany guilt and shame

- Don't minimise ("it's not a big deal") or exaggerate ("this is very serious").
- Ask gently: "What part of this do you think is yours?" or "What are you telling yourself in this situation?"
- Validate the emotion as a signal: "It seems this is affecting you a lot."
- Accompany without rescuing: "What could you do with this now? What do you need?"

Jealousy and envy: "taboo" emotions, but deeply human

- **Envy** appears when we want something another person has and feel that we lack it. Not only things, but also recognition, security, relationships.
- **Jealousy** arises when we feel we may lose something or someone important to us in favour of another person.

In a volunteering project, these states may emerge if:

- Volunteers compare themselves with each other.
- A mentor or coordinator seems to favour someone.
- A very close relationship with someone starts to change or cool down.

How to accompany these emotions without judgement

- Open a space where these emotions can be named without shame or censorship.
- Ask questions that invite them to look at what lies behind the desire or the fear of loss.
- Help them review their own needs ("What do you need right now?").
- Reinforce the value of dialogue and self-responsibility, without falling into guilt.

3. Practical tools for working with emotions without doing therapy

Key principles for ESC mentors

Before using any tool, it is essential to remember that we are not therapists, but we can:

- Listen with presence and without judgement.
- Accompany without directing or "rescuing".
- Name what we observe without diagnosing.
- Open safe spaces where emotions have a place.
- Hold the emotion without trying to change it straight away.

Useful tools for everyday situations

1. Empathic reflection

This means reflecting back what we perceive emotionally, without adding interpretation.

Example: "I can see you're feeling very frustrated with this situation." "It seems this is really stirring you up."

This helps the person feel seen and recognised, and connect with their experience without feeling judged.

2. Using open questions

Questions that open a space for exploration and awareness:

- "What part of this touches you most?"
- "How is this affecting you?"
- "What do you need right now?"

Avoid "why?" questions, which tend to make people defensive and force them to justify themselves.

3. The three-focus technique

Suggest it as a tool for emotional self-regulation:

1. **Body:** "Where do you notice this in your body?"
2. **Emotion:** "Which emotion is most present right now?"
3. **Thought:** "What story are you telling yourself about this?"

It helps integrate sensations, emotions and thoughts, without the mind dominating the whole process.

4. "Stay a little longer"

When someone starts to get emotional and wants to cut it short ("sorry, I shouldn't cry"), we can say gently: "Yes, you can. Stay there a little longer. I'm with you."

This kind of presence without pressure allows emotions to flow instead of getting blocked.

5. Naming what is unsaid

Sometimes an emotion is in the air even if nobody names it. The mentor can make it visible respectfully: "I feel there's something in the air that's affecting us. How are you with this?"

This helps reduce implicit tension and restore authentic communication.

6. Closing difficult conversations consciously

Before ending an emotionally intense mentoring session, do a small closing ritual:

- "What are you leaving with now?"
- "What do you need before carrying on with your day?"
- "Is there anything else you'd like to say before we finish?"

This offers containment and helps integrate what has been experienced.

A final reminder for mentors. The key is not having "the solution", but holding the space where the other person can find themselves. Your presence, your non-intrusive attention and your ability not to intervene too soon are the real tools.

4. Recommendations for ESC mentors when emotions are expressed

The mentor's role is not to "solve", but to accompany with presence and care.

Emotional expression can arise at many moments during volunteering: a mentoring session, an informal conversation, a group activity... What matters is not "doing something perfect", but holding the moment with humanity and respect. Here are some key recommendations that can help you.

1. Hold the emotion; don't rush it or cut it off

- Let the volunteer express what they feel.
- There is no need to fill silences.
- Avoid phrases like "don't cry", "don't get like that".

Your attentive silence is more powerful than any quick advice.

2. Regulate your own emotion first

- If you feel moved or uncomfortable, breathe and notice what is stirring in you.
- Don't rush to intervene on impulse.
- The mentor's emotional self-care is key to accompanying well.

You can tell yourself inwardly: *"What I'm feeling is mine. I don't need to act from it right now."*

3. Be a "mirror", not a "fixer"

- Repeat in your own words what you are hearing ("you seem tired", "this is getting on top of you").
- Don't try to be right, convince or reassure too soon.
- Don't give advice unless explicitly asked.

Reflecting means helping the other person see themselves without distorting their experience.

4. Take care of the setting: space, posture, eye contact

- Find a quiet place without interruptions.
- Sit at the same height, facing each other, with an open posture.
- Look kindly, without intruding.

The way you position yourself conveys more than your words.

5. Respect the other person's pace

- Each person needs a different amount of time to talk, cry or sort out what they feel.
- Not everyone is ready to put into words what is happening to them.
- Sometimes they just need to feel accompanied.

Accompanying isn't pushing; it's walking alongside.

6. Value the emotional side, without labelling

- Avoid judgements ("that's silly", "it's not a big deal") or diagnoses ("that's anxiety", "you're depressed").
- You can say: "What you're feeling seems really important to me." "Thank you for sharing it."

Naming with care opens things up; labelling closes them down.

7. If there is cause for alarm, act without dramatising

- If you see signs of self-harm, emotional collapse or risk, contact the person responsible for the project and follow the established protocols.
- Report calmly, without creating more fear or pressure.

Your role is not to be a therapist, but you can be a bridge to more specialised help.

5. Essential bibliography (in Spanish)

The original edition of this manual recommends the following Spanish-language titles.

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MODULE 04

Conflict Management and Mental Health in the ESC Programme

Empathic communication: supporting volunteers when they experience intense emotions

1. Introduction

Emotions are part of our everyday life. Sometimes they are pleasant, and sometimes they can be uncomfortable or even overwhelming. Being able to recognise, understand and manage them is part of emotional intelligence. Unfortunately, this is not usually taught at school.

In some cultures or families, talking about or expressing emotions may be seen as inappropriate. We often learn that certain emotions are "not acceptable" through subtle messages such as "Don't cry, that's for the weak", or by watching family members hide their emotions and only cry when they are alone.

If we haven't developed emotional competence, facing emotional situations can be really hard. Emotions and emotional reactions can seem surprising, even frightening. Volunteers may say things like "That's not normal". This can also be confusing for mentors, since volunteers may seem upset but say they are fine or refuse to talk. Even when they are willing to talk, they may struggle to identify and put into words what they feel, or not understand the cause of their emotions or reactions.

This is where mentoring plays a key role. Regular mentoring sessions offer a space to talk about emotions, build relationships, normalise emotional dialogue and expand emotional vocabulary. Through these conversations, volunteers gain a better understanding of themselves and their emotions.

Emotional competence helps volunteers cope with difficult situations and unpleasant emotions, not only in extreme cases such as crises (violence, abuse, theft), but also in everyday challenges: homesickness, conflicts with peers, the challenges of living together, feelings of loneliness or emotional distress.

Whatever the situation, mentoring can be an important source of support while volunteers go through new experiences, cultural adjustment and personal growth. The following text explores emotional competence and empathic communication as some of the most powerful tools a mentor can have.

2. Emotional competence

We can define emotional competence as the capacity of educators, mentors and trainers to recognise, understand and manage both their own emotions and those of the young people they work with. This competence makes it possible to create a safe, empathetic and motivating learning environment where emotions become a driving force for personal and collective development.

Inspired by the principles of emotional intelligence, this concept is adapted to the context of youth work, with particular emphasis on self-awareness as the basis for promoting young people's overall wellbeing.

Dimensions of emotional competence

Emotional self-awareness. The mentor's ability to recognise their own emotions and understand how they affect their interactions with volunteers. This includes identifying their own emotional triggers in the volunteering context and adjusting their behaviour accordingly.

Example: A mentor who notices their own frustration during an intervention can change their approach so as not to pass that emotion on to the volunteer.

Adaptive emotional regulation. The capacity to manage one's own emotions in a way that maintains a safe and motivating environment, adapting to the emotional dynamics of youth groups.

Example: A mentor who steps in calmly and effectively during a group conflict, modelling how to manage emotions in challenging situations.

Dynamic empathy. The ability to understand and attune to young people's emotions, taking into account their emotional and cultural diversity. It goes beyond passive empathy and involves active interaction that encourages emotional growth.

Example: Adapting emotional support to each volunteer's cultural and personal needs.

Fostering motivation and purpose. Connecting the volunteer's emotions with their personal and educational goals, using emotion as a driver of intrinsic motivation.

Example: Helping a volunteer relate their learning achievements to their personal purpose and emotional wellbeing.

Social skills for cohesion and mutual support. The capacity to build and maintain effective interpersonal relationships among volunteers, fostering an environment of support and collaboration.

Example: Facilitating conflict resolution within a group to strengthen cohesion and mutual support.

Promoting self-awareness in volunteers. Guiding volunteers in developing their own emotional self-awareness, helping them recognise and manage their emotions effectively.

Example: Teaching reflection and mindfulness practices adapted to young people's emotional needs.

In more practical terms, emotionally competent mentors can make sure their emotions don't steer the process, and they can become positive role models for volunteers. They are also better prepared to support volunteers in developing their own emotional intelligence.

(If you are interested in this topic, see the publications *Emotional Intelligence in Youth Work* and *Switch it on – practices for youth work on emotional intelligence*.)

3. Supporting when emotions arise

Simply being there

Imagine a volunteer arrives at a mentoring session visibly affected by something that has happened in the organisation. What should we do?

In most cases, it is enough to be fully present and hold the space for the volunteer to express themselves, without trying to fix, judge or control their experience. Our task is "simply" to be there while the person shares whatever they wish. We accept whatever comes, and by doing so we create a safe environment where the person can explore their emotions without having to suppress or change them.

We say "simply" because being there, available and without judgement, is often all the other person needs. Sometimes, after expressing aloud what they feel, the volunteer may say something like: "I feel better now, I understand what happened", even if we didn't say a single word.

(Adapted from Plett, H. (2019), What It Means to Hold Space for Someone.)

Example: A mentor sits with a grieving volunteer, listening and offering comfort without giving advice, without trying to make them stop crying or "cheer them up".

Tuning in and practising attunement

Sometimes, as well as being present, we need to "tune in" to the volunteer's emotional state and practise attunement. This means picking up the volunteer's unique emotional frequency, trying to understand their inner experience and how it resonates within them.

We pay full attention to the present moment, to what is said and what is not said, to the atmosphere and to the emotional energy that is generated. We listen actively, show curiosity and practise patience. Once we have tuned in, we begin to practise attunement by creating a deep connection, responding to the volunteer's feelings and needs with warmth and acceptance. We offer understanding and respond with empathy.

(Adapted from Emond, Steckley, Roesch-Marsh: A Guide to Therapeutic Child Care, 2016.)

A practical example. A volunteer arrives at a mentoring session frustrated after failing at an important task. Their head is down, they avoid eye contact and speak quietly.

Tuning in (observing and listening): the mentor picks up the disappointment even before the volunteer expresses it.

Volunteer: "I completely messed up. They gave me a task and I failed. I'm no good at this."

The mentor doesn't rush to give answers or comfort; they simply listen.

Practising attunement (emotional connection and response): instead of minimising their feelings, the mentor responds with empathy.

Mentor: "I can see this is weighing on you a lot. Failing at something that matters to us can really hurt."

Sometimes that validation alone is enough for the volunteer to feel seen and understood. If the volunteer becomes even more emotional, they may need additional help to understand and process what they are going through.

Containing

This is where emotional containment comes in. The mentor stays calm, centred and present, helping the volunteer feel safe while going through intense emotions. Containment means helping the person experience, name and express their emotions and regain emotional balance without feeling overwhelmed. In practice, the mentor receives the volunteer's emotions calmly and helps them process them.

Containment, step by step:

Bringing the emotional content into awareness: "It sounds like you had a really difficult day and you're upset about something that happened in the organisation. I can hear a lot of frustration in your voice."

Naming the emotion: "I can see you're having a hard time, and it seems you're angry. That must be really tough for you."

Making the emotion manageable and expressible: "Sometimes our body shows us what we feel, like when we clench our fists. Anger can bring a lot of pent-up energy. Would you like to release some of that energy? You could walk fast, hit a cushion... whatever feels safe and appropriate to you."

4. Empathic communication

At the heart of everything above lies empathic communication, an essential tool for creating a supportive environment in which volunteers feel understood, valued and safe to express their emotions.

Before starting a meaningful conversation, it is important to choose a suitable time and place where both people feel comfortable and safe. Remove distractions, both external (phones, papers) and internal (worries, assumptions), so that you can really be present. Showing that active presence tells the volunteer that their wellbeing is a priority for you.

Key elements of empathic communication

Active listening. Pay full attention. Reflect what you hear without interrupting. Let the volunteer finish their thoughts before you speak.

Affirmation. Show you are present with verbal and non-verbal signals: nod, say "I'm listening" or "I understand". This conveys that the message has been received.

Genuine empathy. Try to feel what the volunteer feels, to see the world from their perspective, to imagine how they feel in their situation.

If the volunteer says "This sounds stupid" or "I don't want to bother you with this", respond with something like: "I *don't even know what to say... but I'm so glad you told me.*" (Inspired by Brené Brown's approach to empathy.)

Allowing silence. Sometimes the volunteer needs time to put their thoughts in order. Don't be afraid of silences; they can be powerful.

A non-judgemental attitude. The volunteer should feel they can express themselves without fear of judgement. Listen with an open mind and a compassionate heart. Don't correct how they should feel or act.

Non-verbal communication. Notice gestures, body posture and tone of voice. These elements say a lot. Keep your body language open and calm. Your posture and gaze can influence the volunteer's sense of safety.

Position and gaze. Sit close but at a respectful distance. Sitting facing the person shows openness. Use eye contact naturally, focusing on one eye if a prolonged gaze feels intimidating.

Empathic verbal communication. Focus on the volunteer's story. Don't interrupt or redirect the conversation. Let them tell their experience at their own pace.

Reflect what you hear. Summarise what the volunteer said to make sure you understood. *Example:* "If I understood correctly, yesterday (whatever happened), and since then you've been feeling..."

Pick out key ideas. Listen for repeated words or central emotions. Reflect what you notice to help the exploration. *Example:* "You've mentioned three main things..."

Ask open questions. Encourage reflection and going deeper. Avoid "why?" questions, as they can make the person defensive. Ask instead: "Can you tell me more about that?" or "How do you see this situation?"

Avoid diagnosing. You are not there to make clinical diagnoses. If necessary, refer to a professional.

Don't push them to share more than they want. Respect their limits. Let the volunteer set the pace.

Focus on support, not on giving solutions. Don't give orders or advice straight away. Don't impose solutions unless asked. Accompany the volunteer while they process their emotions, without rushing to solve things.

Acknowledge their emotions. Use phrases that validate what they feel: "I can understand why you feel this way", "It sounds like this has been really hard for you."

Emotional regulation. Keep your own calm. Breathe, notice your body and emotions. Respond from calm, not from reactivity. If needed, help the volunteer regulate their emotions as well.

5. Essential keys for mentors

This is a practical summary of the most important points to remember as a mentor when you accompany a volunteer going through a difficult emotional moment. They are small gestures with a big impact.

LISTEN. Let the volunteer express what they feel and describe the situation that upset them. Give them time and space without interrupting. Avoid giving premature advice or minimising their experience.

TUNE IN, CONNECT AND ACCOMPANY. Connect emotionally with what the volunteer is saying, but also pay attention to your own emotions. Stay emotionally present, empathise and adapt your response to what they need at that moment.

ASK. Ask questions that help you better understand the volunteer's emotional reaction. For example: "What did you think and feel at that moment?" "What was the hardest part of that situation for you?"

SUMMARISE. Reflect what you have heard, using the volunteer's own words. Check that your understanding is correct before continuing. For example: "If I understood correctly, you're telling me that..."

HOLD THE SPACE AND CONTAIN. Receive everything the volunteer expresses. Acknowledge their emotions, name them and normalise their reactions. For example: "These are normal responses to an abnormal situation."

Only after the volunteer has expressed what they needed to, offer information that may help them better understand their reaction. For example: "You mentioned that you're feeling (repeat the signs of stress)... These are common reactions to difficult situations."

ASK ABOUT THEIR OWN RESOURCES. Help them reconnect with their inner strength. Share examples of self-care and healthy strategies. For example: "What do you usually do to feel better at times like this?" "What has helped you in the past?"

EXPLORE THE NEED FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT. "Do you need more support to deal with this situation?" "Is there anything I can do for you?" "Do you think it would help to involve someone else?"

These keys are not a script but a compass. The aim is not to control the conversation, but to create a space of trust where the volunteer feels seen, accompanied and understood. In this space, emotions are not a problem to solve but a door opening onto connection, understanding and growth.

Bibliography

Below is a collection of relevant resources and links on emotional support for volunteers in the European Solidarity Corps (ESC).

Emotional Intelligence in Youth Work – SALTO-YOUTH. A handbook offering a practical approach to developing emotional intelligence in youth work, with tools and methods for youth workers and young people to manage their emotions and thoughts in the face of current challenges. <https://www.salto-youth.net/tools/toolbox/tool/emotional-intelligence-in-youth-work.2538/>

Switch it on: practices for youth work on emotional intelligence – European Academy on Youth Work. A valuable tool for youth workers and trainers to integrate emotional intelligence into their practice, supporting both their own wellbeing and that of the young people they work with. It includes exercises, tools and methods currently used in youth work practice across Europe. <https://www.eayw.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/report-Maria-Pagano-final.pdf>

Emotional Intelligence in Youth Work – Limina. This resource highlights the importance of emotional intelligence in youth work and provides a handbook of educational practices to support emotional intelligence in young people and youth workers. <https://www.limina.at/emotional-intelligence-in-youth-work/>

Emotional Intelligence in Youth Work – Youth Networks. This project developed an updated and sustainable concept for educational opportunities aimed at young people, supporting the development of emotional intelligence for a better life. <https://youthnetworks.net/take-control-over-your-emotions-emotional-intelligence-in-youth-work/>

Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. A research centre that designs and studies evidence-based approaches to help school communities understand the value of emotions, teach and practise emotional intelligence skills, and build positive emotional climates. <https://www.ycei.org/>

Six Seconds – The Emotional Intelligence Network. An international non-profit organisation that researches and teaches emotional intelligence, providing tools and programmes to increase emotional intelligence in various contexts, including education and youth development. <https://www.6seconds.org/>

CuentosIE: can a chatbot about "tales with a message" help teach emotional intelligence? An article presenting CuentosIE, an educational chatbot about emotions that also gives teachers and psychologists a tool to monitor their students or patients through indicators and data it collects. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2403.07193>

Investigating the feasibility of virtual reality for emotion regulation with young people. A study exploring the feasibility of using virtual reality experiences to develop emotion regulation skills in adolescents, as a way for young people to practise managing their emotions. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2212.00002>

The impact of psychotherapy on emotional intelligence in children. An article on how play therapy allows children to express their inner emotions, helping therapists understand their struggles and teach healthier emotional responses, which is crucial for developing self-awareness and resilience. <https://www.kidsfirstservices.com/first-insights/the-impact-of-psychotherapy-on-emotional-intelligence-in-children>

MODULE 05

Supporting Volunteers in Difficult Times

1. Introduction

As a mentor, your work in relation to mental health focuses mainly on promoting emotional well-being, supporting volunteers in developing mental health competences, and creating a working and living environment that supports their wellbeing. For most volunteers, this support is enough to maintain good mental health during their volunteering experience and to gain skills that will benefit them in the future. However, there are times when this level of support is not enough.

Volunteers may have mental health difficulties (mild or severe) before they start volunteering, previous problems may resurface because of the challenges of volunteering activities, or they may experience mental health difficulties for the first time during their project. Whatever the case, the following steps and questions are designed to help you navigate these difficult situations.

2. Key requirements for putting the support system in place

Before going into detail, it is important to highlight some key requirements for implementing an effective support system.

Build relationships and normalise conversations about mental health. Invest time in building solid relationships with volunteers and show that mental health is not a taboo subject. Addressing mental health from the start can make it easier to discuss these topics when challenges arise.

Respect volunteers' privacy. During mentoring, you may learn sensitive information about volunteers' mental health that they consider private (for example, traumatic experiences or a diagnosis of depression). Protecting confidentiality is essential: don't share privileged information without the volunteer's consent. If some information does need to be shared (for example, with other mentors, team members, other volunteers or professionals involved), make sure that you and the volunteer agree on who needs to know, how much they need to know, and the purpose of sharing it (for example, to ensure safety, address concerns, or provide appropriate support during an anxiety attack).

Define the holistic support system from the start. The support system should be defined and communicated to everyone from the beginning of the project. It should be adjusted to each individual and to the situation during the project, and it should not rest on a single person. Some support measures should be in place from the start to maintain the mental health of everyone involved (for example, regular mentoring for volunteers and peer support for mentors), while others can be activated as needed (for example, reinforced mentoring for a volunteer and supervision for mentors). As you read this document, consider the support mechanisms you already have and those you still need to organise and put in place.

Make sure no one is left without support. The challenges a volunteer faces will probably affect not only them, but also other volunteers and team members. Everyone involved should receive appropriate support so that no one, neither the volunteer nor the mentors, feels alone.

3. Implementing a support system is a process

The steps we take within the support system don't follow a rigid sequence and are not necessarily linear. Some actions may happen at the same time, while others may not apply in certain cases. You might reflect on one of these steps and decide to skip it if it isn't relevant to the situation, or you might need to return to it or pause as the context evolves.

In emergencies where someone's life is at risk, the absolute priority is to ensure safety and provide Psychological First Aid. The actions described in this document can be put in place once that immediate safety has been secured. For more on providing psychological first aid, see section 4 below, "Psychological First Aid".

Step 1: We recognise signs of mental health difficulties in volunteers

What have volunteers shared about their mental health, and/or what have we observed that gives cause for concern?

A fundamental part of the mentor's role is the ability to be present, attentive and alert to signs that may indicate emotional or psychological distress. It is important to stress that the mentor is not a mental health professional and should not diagnose; their role is to open dialogue, accompany and, if necessary, facilitate access to professional resources.

Although there is a list of signs that may indicate a volunteer is going through difficulties, it should not be used as a mechanical checklist, but as a tool for conscious observation.

It is also crucial to interpret these signs in context and with an individual approach. For example, an introverted person may tend to withdraw without this being an indicator of distress. What we are looking for are changes in usual patterns of behaviour.

Whether you notice these signs yourself, the volunteer shares them with you, or other volunteers or team members point them out, it is essential to address them promptly, gently and with empathy.

Questions to start the conversation:

- "I've been worried about you. Can we talk a bit more about what you're feeling? And if not with me, is there someone you'd feel more comfortable talking to?"
- "Has anyone helped you with something similar in the past? Who was it, and how did they help?"
- "Do you know other people who have been through something similar and who you could talk to?"
- "How could I help you find more information or resources about what you're going through?"

Possible signs of mental health difficulties

- Drastic changes in appetite or sleep patterns (eating or sleeping too much or too little).
- A tendency to isolate themselves and avoid other people.

- Giving up activities that used to be important or enjoyable (such as hobbies).
- Neglecting responsibilities or more frequent unexplained absences.
- Increased use of substances such as tobacco, alcohol or drugs.
- Risky behaviour, such as dangerous actions in public or personal neglect.
- Recurrent physical complaints or somatic symptoms without a clear medical explanation.
- Neglect of personal hygiene, clothing or general self-care.
- A persistent feeling of weakness or exhaustion without an obvious physical cause.
- Loss of interest in life, feelings of deep boredom or apathy.
- Expressions of hopelessness, worthlessness or meaninglessness.
- Intense emotional expressions: tension, sadness, anger, constant worry, anxiety, fear or guilt.
- Abrupt or unpredictable mood swings.
- Aggressive reactions, shouting or frequent arguments.
- Confusion, excessive forgetfulness or difficulty concentrating.
- Intrusive thoughts or recurring memories that cause distress.
- Excessive self-criticism, self-deprecating comments.

Step 2: We adjust the individual support system

1. We adjust the individual support system for the volunteer

Once signs of mental health difficulties have been identified, the next step is to work together with the volunteer to build an individual support system. It is key to listen carefully, respect their decisions and timing, and make sure the person feels empowered, not infantilised, in their wellbeing process.

This support system may involve different levels of intervention, and it is worth exploring them with the volunteer collaboratively.

Some guiding questions for mentoring:

- What kind of help do you need right now? Are there people close to you who could help?
- Who in the hosting or sending organisation could support you?
- Are there support measures within the ESC programme that we could activate?
- Do you know a mental health professional (outside the project) who could accompany you?

A good starting point is to identify significant people in the volunteer's life who could become key support (friends, family, spiritual leaders, neighbours, etc.). If the person has received psychological support before, they may be able to resume that relationship online and in their mother tongue.

More questions that can help you explore these options:

- "How can I help you talk about this with your parents or with someone who matters to you and could help?"

- "It seems you're going through a difficult time. How can I support you in finding the help you need? Is there anything that scares you or makes you uncomfortable about looking for support?"

Don't underestimate the importance of coping mechanisms the person already uses: their pet, a blanket, a journal, a comfort object, a call to someone special. Make sure they can access these resources whenever they need them.

Supporting the volunteer's surroundings as well

Although the main focus is on the person in crisis or going through difficulties, we should not forget that their immediate environment is also affected. Other volunteers may:

- Feel uneasy or guilty.
- Experience episodes of aggressiveness, anxiety or withdrawal from their peer.
- Carry information or emotions they are not prepared for.
- Try to "rescue" their peer, taking on a role that isn't theirs.

Recommended interventions:

- Individual or group meetings to talk about what is happening (without revealing confidential details).
- Conversations about clear limits: what they can do to help and what is not in their hands.
- Training or preventive activities on stress management, self-care and emotional containment.

Even if some volunteers have training in mental health or care, their role is still that of peers, not professionals. They accompany through everyday closeness: they invite their peer for a walk, a chat, to cook together. But they cannot and should not take on therapeutic responsibilities.

Resources within your organisation

Even if you feel you can handle the situation on your own, remember: you don't have to do it all yourself. Self-care also means knowing how to ask for help. Some ideas:

- A colleague who listens to you or collaborates with you more actively.
- Someone who can take the volunteer to hospital.
- A team member who invites the volunteer on an outing so that they don't isolate themselves.
- Useful contacts or the team's previous experience in similar situations.

The sending organisation must stay in contact with the volunteer throughout the project and after their return. Activate that link if necessary, even if they haven't been very involved so far.

Formal resources of the ESC programme

When you receive your project budget, it already includes inclusion support funding for volunteers with fewer opportunities. This funding is intended to cover barriers of all kinds, including those related to mental health, that make full and active participation in projects difficult.

It can be used for different purposes, as long as you justify how it responds to the volunteer's needs and particular situation. Examples of how these funds can be used:

- Additional funding so the person can travel home more often for medical reasons or to receive specialised treatment.
- Costs of having an accompanying person during the project (see the European Solidarity Corps Guide).
- Hiring reinforced mentoring, if the person needs more frequent support or support from someone with specific mental health training.
- Requesting coverage for psychotherapy not included in the European Health Insurance Card, through the Henner insurance. This can cover up to 30 therapy sessions or 30 consecutive days of hospital treatment (see the Insurance Plan Guide).
- If you anticipated working with a person with mental health challenges, you may have included an advance planning visit in the project application, which allows a visit to the place before starting, reduces anxiety and allows necessary adjustments (see the European Solidarity Corps Guide).

External and professional support outside the ESC

Sometimes it may be necessary to turn to resources outside your organisation's support system or the ESC itself. Ideally, you will have mapped resources in your local community beforehand, such as organisations, institutions or professionals who can help when needed.

Useful resources to have identified:

- Psychologists or psychiatrists in public or private health centres, who can make diagnoses or prescribe medication.
- Psychiatric institutions offering emergency care.
- NGOs that provide psychological guidance or brief therapy.
- Private therapists who work with young people or volunteers.
- Public health centres with comprehensive mental health services.
- Support groups on specific topics (anxiety, grief, trauma).
- National organisations or networks that intervene in psychological crises (psychological first aid), especially in situations such as self-harm or suicide attempts; physical or sexual assault; serious accidents or sudden deaths; natural disasters or violent conflicts.

These interventions are designed to stabilise the people affected emotionally and cognitively and to prevent long-term psychological consequences.

Once the needs have been identified, a clear plan is designed with defined roles. Being clear about who does what avoids confusion and eases tension:

- **Volunteer:** says what they need and accepts the support offered.
- **Mentor:** listens, accompanies and facilitates access to other support. Is NOT a therapist.
- **Hosting organisation:** adapts tasks if necessary and ensures safety.

- **Sending organisation:** activates specific resources (Henner, professionals, etc.).
- **External professionals:** provide professional psychological or medical support.

2. We activate or reinforce the individual support system for those who accompany

Who is supporting the volunteer, and what additional support does that person need?

In difficult times, we tend to focus on the person going through the crisis. But we cannot neglect those who accompany that crisis. The support system for the team should exist from the start of the project, but it may not be enough in complex situations.

Some key questions for mentors:

- How do you feel after this process?
- What would you need to feel more supported?
- Who can you turn to for support, training or containment?

Examples of useful support for the mentor:

- Talking to a trusted colleague after an emotionally intense situation.
- Consulting professionals on topics you are unfamiliar with (for example, anxiety or panic attacks).
- Looking for specific training or reading on developing emotional skills.
- Asking for external supervision or setting up a peer supervision group with colleagues (intervention).
- Talking to a therapist if you notice that your personal history, your limits or your self-confidence are being affected by accompanying the volunteer.
- Connecting with communities such as MUC – Mentoring Under Construction, which offers training resources, regular meetings and spaces for the growth of people who mentor volunteers.

Step 3: We follow the process and regularly assess whether the support system is enough to continue the volunteering activity

Is the process healthy and manageable for everyone involved?

Once a support system has been activated, putting it in place is not enough: we need to keep observing, assessing and adjusting. The plan may work perfectly, or it may need adjustments along the way. We may also conclude that continuing the volunteering activity is no longer the most beneficial option for anyone.

This step means regularly reassessing from an overall perspective, asking:

- Is the volunteer safe and benefiting from the experience?
- Are the other volunteers safe and fully participating?
- Can the people providing support continue to do so without putting their own mental health at risk?

- Is the situation affecting the functioning, image or values of the project, or its beneficiaries?

If the answers suggest the system isn't working, you can go back to Step 2 (adjusting the system) or move to Step 4 (ending the activity).

Step 4: We end the volunteering activity

What kind of support does the volunteer need in the process of ending their volunteering?

Although ideally the project will come to a natural end, there may be situations in which ending early is the best or only viable option. Ending does not mean failing. It is an act of care when the experience is no longer safe, healthy or constructive.

This moment can trigger intense emotions in everyone involved: sadness, guilt, frustration, a sense of loss or of not having done enough. That is why it is crucial to give it a conscious, humane and restorative closure.

Questions to facilitate closure:

- How do we want to say goodbye? Who should be present?
- Is there guilt, shame or resentment that we need to name and work on?
- What support will the volunteer need when they return home?
- Who can support their reintegration, and who needs to be informed?
- Does the volunteer know that their Henner insurance covers assistance for two months after their return?
- How can we stay in touch and remain available if they need it?
- What has our organisation learned from this experience? What can we improve? What are we proud of?

If the ending was abrupt or due to an emergency, the volunteer may not have had the chance to say goodbye. In that case, we can get back in touch later, when they are ready to close the cycle emotionally.

Key points for the mentor: the support pathway

Here are the essential steps to follow when a volunteer is going through difficult times.

1. Observe and name. Notice changes and open the conversation sensitively. You pay attention to significant changes in the volunteer's behaviour and start the dialogue from empathy. Keys: active listening, not judging, validating emotions. *Examples:* "You've seemed a bit low lately. Would you like to talk?" "You seem different. Would you like to talk about what's going on?"

2. Listen and understand. Ask open, non-judgemental questions to understand the situation. Explore past experiences, inner resources and current fears. *Examples:* "How are you feeling? How long have you felt this way?" "Have you been through something similar before?" "What would help you right now?"

3. Design a plan together. Build the support network together. Collaborate on creating a personalised support system, involving key people and ESC structures. You define roles, resources and next steps together. *Examples:* "What can we do from now on? Who could help you?" "How would you feel about your mentor talking to...?" "Can we think together about who else could help you?"

4. Review and adapt. Assess how things are going and adjust if needed. Reassess the plan regularly; if it isn't working, change the approach. Also assess the impact on the environment and on yourself as a mentor. *Examples:* "How is the plan working for you? Do we need to change anything?" "How has your week been with this new support?" "Do you feel something should change?"

5. Close and accompany. If the project ends, give it a dignified closure and support the transition. If the experience ends earlier than planned, you accompany the closure; if it ends as planned, you ensure a dignified and conscious ending. You keep open the possibility of follow-up after their return. *Examples:* "How are you now? Would you like us to stay in touch?" "How would you like to close this cycle?" "Remember that your insurance is still active for two more months."

A key reminder for mentors. You are not alone: ask for help and activate internal and external networks. Looking after yourself is also part of accompanying. You are here to support, not to rescue. Emotions are part of the process, including yours. Every volunteer needs a unique plan.

4. Psychological First Aid in volunteering contexts (ESC): the PFA protocol

What is PFA and why is it relevant in the ESC?

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a humane and practical approach to supporting people in situations of emotional crisis or high psychological distress, especially after a stressful, unexpected or overwhelming experience.

It is based on the idea that, just as physical first aid can relieve and contain a medical emergency, PFA makes it possible to accompany someone emotionally at the moment they need it most, without clinical training.

In the European Solidarity Corps, where volunteers may face adaptation processes, loneliness, conflict or personal crises far from home, the mentor plays a key role: they are often the first accessible adult figure, and their presence can make the difference between feeling accompanied and feeling abandoned.

The PFA protocol offers a structured, respectful and safe way for ESC mentors to act with empathy and without intruding, knowing what to do, what to say and when to refer.

Origin and foundations of PFA

The Psychological First Aid approach emerged in response to the need for early, non-clinical interventions for people exposed to crises, disasters or emergencies.

Initially developed by the WHO, the IFRC, the International Rescue Committee and other humanitarian agencies, it has been widely adopted by international bodies in contexts of natural disasters, armed conflict and forced migration, and now also in educational, youth and community settings.

Its best-known version is the one proposed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), also adapted by the World Health Organization (WHO) in its manual *Psychological First Aid: Guide for field workers* (2011).

In Europe it has been adapted for educational, intercultural and volunteering contexts, so that it can be applied without clinical training, as long as the limits of the role are respected.

What is it for?

The PFA protocol is a simple, humane tool for supporting a person going through intense emotional distress, without needing to be a therapist. Its aim is to contain, stabilise and connect with the person, not to diagnose or solve.

Why is it useful for ESC mentors?

- You are in close contact with young people going through emotional adaptation.
- You may be the first person to notice warning signs.
- Your role is to accompany with presence, listening and clear limits, not to intervene clinically.

The structure of PFA: five key steps

1. Prepare

- Calm your own state before intervening.
- Observe without assuming or rushing.
- Make sure the environment is safe (no audience, no pressure).

2. Approach with care

- Approach respectfully and with a calm tone.
- Ask permission to talk: "Is it OK if I stay with you?"
- Make sure the person doesn't feel invaded.

3. Listen actively

- Don't interrupt or look for quick solutions.
- Use silences, attentive eye contact and open body language.
- Accept whatever emotion arises, without judging.

4. Reassure and contain

- Validate what the person feels: "It makes sense that you feel this way."
- If there is dysregulation (anxiety, confusion), offer anchors: slow breathing, water, sitting down.

- Don't force them to talk or to "do something right now".

5. Connect with support

- Help identify a safe next step (talking to someone, resting, writing, accompanying them to the doctor).
- Don't leave without closing: "If you need anything, I'll be nearby."
- If necessary, inform the team or the person in charge at the organisation.

Very important. You are not alone: if the situation is too much for you, ask for help. If there is a serious risk (self-harm, suicide, severe dysregulation), refer immediately. The best support begins with a human, empathetic, non-judgemental presence.

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MODULE 06

Coping Mechanisms in the ESC Framework

1. Introduction

What are coping mechanisms?

Coping mechanisms are strategies people use to deal with stress, difficult emotions and complex situations in everyday life. They are not magic solutions, but learned responses aimed at reducing emotional distress or restoring some inner balance.

These mechanisms can be conscious or unconscious, and how well they work depends on many factors: the situation, the personality, the environment and the person's history. What works for one person in one context may be harmful for another person, or at another time.

Why do they matter in the ESC context?

Volunteering in the European Solidarity Corps offers young people an intense experience of personal and community growth, but it also involves sudden changes, intercultural challenges, emotional pressure and many adjustments.

In this context, the coping mechanisms each volunteer brings with them, and those they develop during their stay, can make the difference between a healthy experience and a situation of psychological risk.

As a mentor, understanding, identifying and accompanying these mechanisms is essential in order to:

- Recognise early signs of distress.
- Promote healthy strategies.
- Intervene preventively.
- Model coping tools through your own example.

Coping is not avoiding: redefining expectations

It is key to understand that coping doesn't mean "solving" a problem straight away, but finding functional ways to hold emotionally what is happening while a solution is sought. Sometimes coping means crying, asking for help, resting, or simply stopping.

That is why it is worth avoiding phrases like:

- "You have to be strong."
- "Don't think about it."
- "Everything happens for a reason."

and replacing them with more empathetic attitudes such as:

- "What are you feeling right now?"
- "Is there anything that has helped you in similar situations?"
- "I'm here. You don't have to go through this alone."

The mentor's role with healthy and unhealthy mechanisms

Your task is not to judge how volunteers cope with their situations, but to accompany, open honest conversations and help them become aware. Sometimes a volunteer:

- Doesn't realise their mechanism is harmful (for example, using work to avoid feeling sad).
- Knows it is, but can't find an alternative.
- Believes that what they do "doesn't affect anyone" (for example, isolating themselves or drinking alcohol frequently).

Your role is to hold the complexity without imposing solutions. As a reference figure, your example and the way you regulate yourself also influence how others learn to cope.

2. Types of coping mechanisms

Coping mechanisms can be classified into several categories depending on their aim: solving a problem, managing an emotion, finding meaning in the experience, or avoiding distress. Below we explore the most relevant types in the context of volunteering.

2.1 Problem-focused coping

This type of coping focuses on directly addressing the cause of stress. The person identifies the problem and acts to change or eliminate it.

Healthy examples:

- Making a study plan to manage time better.
- Talking to the project coordinator to redefine unclear tasks.
- Looking for language classes if the language barrier is causing frustration.

Risks if it gets out of balance:

- Hyper-efficiency that leads to exhaustion (burnout).
- Excessive perfectionism.
- Not asking for help because of wanting to solve everything alone.

2.2 Emotion-focused coping

When the external situation can't be changed, this type of coping seeks to regulate the inner emotional reaction that the stress produces.

Healthy examples:

- Practising breathing techniques or mindfulness.
- Keeping a journal to process emotions.
- Talking to someone they trust to let off steam.

Risks if it gets out of balance:

- Repressing emotions instead of working through them.
- Denying distress ("it's nothing") without attending to it.
- Depending on others to constantly validate their emotions.

2.3 Meaning-focused coping

This approach seeks to make sense of the stressful experience and reframe it as an opportunity for learning, growth or transformation.

Healthy examples:

- Seeing cultural challenges as ways of broadening one's perspective.
- Reflecting on how a difficulty made you stronger or more empathetic.
- Seeking spiritual or philosophical support.

Risks if it gets out of balance:

- Minimising pain ("everything happens for a reason") without accepting what happened.
- Using spirituality to avoid real emotions.
- Creating pressure to "get something positive" out of everything that happens.

2.4 Avoidant coping

This mechanism consists of actively avoiding the stressful situation or emotion, whether by ignoring it, distracting oneself or suppressing it.

It can be useful in the short term:

- Taking a breather before a difficult conversation.
- Watching a film to switch off for a while after a stressful day.

But if it becomes the main mechanism:

- Putting off important conversations until the conflict gets worse.
- Overusing social media, substances or sleep as a way of escaping.
- Chronic avoidance that perpetuates stress and disconnection.

Dysfunctional coping mechanisms: when do they become harmful?

There is no rigid rule. What makes a mechanism dysfunctional is not the mechanism itself, but:

- How often it is used.
- The context in which it is used.
- Whether it blocks action or self-care.
- Whether it harms the person or those around them.
- Whether it prevents learning or adaptation.

So it is often not black and white. The same mechanism can be adaptive at one moment and maladaptive at another. What matters is how it is used, and with what awareness.

3. Criteria for distinguishing healthy from unhealthy coping

No coping mechanism is positive or negative in itself. What really matters is the effect it has in the short and long term, and the level of awareness with which it is used. In this section we offer tools to identify when a strategy is functional... and when it stops being so.

How can you tell whether a strategy helps or harms?

Here are some key criteria:

Criterion	Healthy coping	Unhealthy coping
Aim	Addresses the root of the problem or manages the emotion in order to move forward.	Avoids the problem or numbs the distress.
Short-term result	Reduces anxiety, creates a sense of agency.	Gives momentary relief, but the distress returns.
Long-term result	Promotes autonomy, wellbeing and learning.	Reinforces dependence, isolation, dysregulation.
Impact on body and emotions	Connects with the body and allows feeling.	Disconnects from the body; may cause psychosomatic symptoms.
Level of awareness	Chosen with intention; acknowledged.	Automatic or denied ("I don't do that").
Impact on relationships	Improves communication and empathy.	Increases conflict, avoidance or aggressiveness.

A comparative example:

- Sleeping well to recharge = healthy.
- Sleeping all day so as not to think = dysfunctional avoidance.

Personal, cultural and situational factors to consider

It is essential to remember that there are no universal recipes. Something that seems clearly avoidant to you may be the only tool another person has available at that moment. In addition:

- Some cultures promote silence or self-control as valid ways of managing emotions.
- Personal histories (trauma, loss, violence) influence how a person copes with life.
- The level of trust with those around them affects their willingness to share or ask for help.

Your role as a mentor is not to correct, but to **understand, accompany and widen the possibilities**.

The blurred line between adaptation and avoidance

Many mechanisms are in a grey area, where their impact depends on how, how much and why they are used. Here are some examples:

Mechanism	Healthy when...	Unhealthy when...
Social media	It is used to keep in touch, have fun or learn.	It is used to avoid all interaction or to procrastinate constantly.
Silence or withdrawal	It is a conscious form of temporary self-regulation.	It becomes prolonged disconnection, sadness or self-denial.
Physical activity	It releases tension and improves mood.	It is used to avoid emotions or becomes compulsive.
Humour	It helps to put things in perspective and connect.	It is used to cover up pain or avoid deep conversations.

What matters is **looking at the pattern, not the isolated event.**

4. Examples of coping in ESC volunteers (Level 1: mental health within the healthy range)

When we talk about volunteers whose mental health is within a functional range, we mean people who may experience distress or stress but keep a certain capacity for regulation, self-awareness and adaptation. Even so, it is important to observe how they manage their emotions and what mechanisms they use.

Situation 1: Homesickness

Healthy coping:

- Keeping in regular contact with family by video call.
- Creating a corner with personal objects that remind them of home.
- Taking part in local activities to build new networks.

Unhealthy coping:

- Withdrawing from the group and avoiding all contact with the new environment.
- Spending all their free time on social media or watching series to "switch off".
- Neglecting tasks or responsibilities because of obsessive thoughts about home.

Situation 2: Difficulties adapting to the culture

Healthy coping:

- Taking part in cultural exchange workshops.

- Making friends with local people.
- Practising observation without judgement, with openness and patience.

Unhealthy coping:

- Making negative generalisations about the host culture ("these people are cold").
- Seeking only "safe" or familiar experiences.
- Reacting with hostility or sarcasm to what is different.

Situation 3: Language barriers

Healthy coping:

- Signing up for language classes.
- Using visual or technological tools to communicate.
- Laughing at mistakes and trying again.

Unhealthy coping:

- Avoiding all verbal interaction.
- Depending entirely on others to translate or speak for them.
- Internalising self-rejecting messages ("I'm useless", "I'll never manage").

Situation 4: Stress from workload

Healthy coping:

- Making a calendar of priorities and tasks.
- Asking the mentor or other volunteers for help.
- Taking active breaks or scheduled rest.

Unhealthy coping:

- Accepting unlimited tasks for fear of saying no.
- Putting off key tasks until the last minute.
- Overusing caffeine or other substances to "perform better".

Situation 5: Interpersonal conflicts

Healthy coping:

- Expressing how they feel assertively.
- Listening actively to the other person.
- Asking for support to facilitate a conversation if necessary.

Unhealthy coping:

- Avoiding the problem in the hope it will resolve itself.

- Talking badly about the other person behind their back (gossip).
- Responding with aggressiveness or sarcasm.

In all these cases, healthy mechanisms strengthen the volunteer's autonomy, learning and integration, while unhealthy ones, even if they offer temporary relief, prolong or worsen the distress and make the experience harder.

5. Examples of coping in volunteers with mental health challenges (Level 2: risk or significant impact)

In these cases, the coping mechanisms used may be more dysregulated or insufficient, and may require professional intervention in addition to mentoring support.

Situation 1: Homesickness with depressive symptoms

Healthy coping:

- Seeking therapeutic support to talk about the pain.
- Establishing a routine with enjoyable, structured activities.
- Contacting support groups (other volunteers, networks from their home country).

Unhealthy coping:

- Total isolation, with no contact with the group or environment.
- Neglecting personal hygiene, eating or sleep.
- Expressing persistent feelings of emptiness, worthlessness or not wanting to go on.

Situation 2: Cultural difficulty with severe anxiety

Healthy coping:

- Working with a therapist on strategies for gradual exposure to what is new.
- Practising relaxation exercises such as deep breathing or mindfulness.
- Asking someone to accompany the volunteer in new experiences until they feel more confident.

Unhealthy coping:

- Avoiding all contact with people from the host country.
- Having panic attacks in response to social or cultural stimuli.
- Showing symptoms of generalised anxiety or agoraphobia.

Situation 3: Language barriers with social phobia

Healthy coping:

- Taking part in small groups to practise the language with less pressure.

- Using cards or visual resources that reduce anxiety in interactions.
- Combining language learning with emotional work on self-esteem.

Unhealthy coping:

- Total silence and systematic avoidance of group spaces.
- Constant self-referential thoughts ("they're making fun of me").
- Disconnecting from all activity for fear of speaking.

Situation 4: Chronic work stress with burnout

Healthy coping:

- Reducing the workload together with the mentor.
- Reorganising schedules with real rest breaks.
- Seeking psychological help to work on symptoms of emotional exhaustion.

Unhealthy coping:

- Showing indifference or cynicism towards the project or other volunteers.
- Persistent physical problems: insomnia, pain, extreme tiredness.
- Substance misuse (alcohol, energy drinks, tranquillisers) to keep "performing".

Situation 5: Interpersonal conflicts that activate trauma

Healthy coping:

- Going to psychotherapy sessions to reframe the conflict.
- Working on personal limits and emotional regulation skills.
- Doing emotional expression exercises (art, writing, body work).

Unhealthy coping:

- Disproportionate reactions such as outbursts of rage or uncontrollable crying.
- Self-harm or self-destructive thoughts as a way of calming the pain.
- Reliving past episodes (flashbacks, dissociation) in tense situations.

Attention. In all these cases, your role as a mentor is to accompany without intruding, validate without diagnosing, and support without taking the place of a professional. Above all, activate the support network as soon as possible.

6. How to accompany volunteers through mentoring

In your role as an ESC mentor, you are not a therapist, but you are a figure of reference, listening and guidance. Your presence, attitude and emotional availability can make a difference to how a volunteer goes through difficult moments and learns to take better care of themselves.

6.1 How to spot unhealthy mechanisms

You don't need to be a specialist to notice certain warning signs. Pay attention if you observe:

- Drastic changes in behaviour (isolation, irritability, frequent crying).
- Phrases that reveal hopelessness or emotional disconnection ("whatever", "I don't care any more").
- Systematic avoidance of situations, people or responsibilities.
- Physical reactions to emotional situations (aches, fatigue, insomnia).

Ask yourself questions like:

- Is this behaviour really helping them?
- Do they feel better after doing this, or does it make things worse?
- Is it a one-off or a repeated pattern?

6.2 How to talk about it with the volunteer without judgement

Opening a conversation about how someone manages their distress can be delicate. Language matters. Here are some key principles.

Ask open questions: "What do you usually do when you feel like this?" "Does that help you, or does it leave you the same?"

Show curiosity without diagnosing: "I've noticed you've been quieter lately. Would you like to talk about it?"

Use validating phrases: "It makes sense that you feel this way in a new situation like this."

Avoid:

- Generalisations: "You always do the same thing."
- Comparisons: "I went through that too, but I got over it."
- Corrections: "You shouldn't feel like that."

6.3 How to help them identify their own patterns

Many volunteers are not aware of their coping mechanisms. You can help them identify them with activities such as:

- **Emotion journal:** noting down what they feel, what they do at those moments and how they feel afterwards.
- **Coping wheel:** visualising their reactions to different kinds of stress.

- **Guided conversation:** "What has helped you at other difficult times?" "What do you do when you want to calm down, and what effect does that have on you?"

This process encourages self-knowledge and emotional self-responsibility, without imposing a single "right way" to manage distress.

6.4 Promoting alternatives: simple, effective tools

Once the volunteer recognises what isn't working for them, you can suggest accessible alternatives, such as:

- Box breathing (4-4-4-4).
- The 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique.
- An emotion journal.
- Regular physical activity.
- Contact with nature.
- Weekly follow-up conversations.
- Peer listening circles.

The aim is not to impose, but to widen the range of resources available.

6.5 Modelling healthy coping strategies as a mentor

The way you manage stress, talk about your emotions and set limits also teaches. Some ways of modelling:

- Sharing (without overexposing yourself) how you manage stress: "When I feel overwhelmed, going for a walk helps me."
- Showing real self-care: taking breaks, saying no, managing your schedule.
- Naming your emotions naturally: "I'm a bit frustrated today; I need a moment to think more clearly."

Remember: we teach more by what we do than by what we say.

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MODULE 07

Managing Anxiety and Panic Attacks in the ESC

1. Introduction

Why address anxiety in the ESC context?

In the European Solidarity Corps, volunteers live through transformative but emotionally intense experiences. Adapting to a new country, living with strangers, facing social or personal challenges and managing their own growth process can all support development... but they can also create stress, vulnerability or emotional dysregulation.

In this context, it is likely that as a mentor you will find yourself accompanying young people who experience anxiety, some for the first time and others as a reactivation of previous experiences. Being prepared to recognise an anxiety crisis or a panic attack, knowing how to act and knowing your limits is key to ensuring the wellbeing of everyone involved.

This dossier aims to give you concrete, clear tools adapted to your reality as a mentor. Not so that you "solve" a crisis (you are not a mental health professional), but so that you know how to be there, contain, act without causing harm, and activate support networks if necessary.

What is an anxiety crisis or panic attack?

A panic attack is a sudden reaction of intense fear or distress that **peaks within a few minutes** and comes with several physical and cognitive symptoms, such as:

- Palpitations, sweating, trembling.
- Difficulty breathing, a feeling of choking.
- Chest pain or discomfort.
- Nausea, dizziness or fainting.
- Chills or sudden heat.
- Fear of losing control.
- Fear of dying.

Many people describe this experience as "feeling like I'm going to die", "feeling trapped", "feeling I can't escape".

Although the symptoms are intense and frightening, **a panic attack is not dangerous in itself**. What it does require is **empathetic, steady, non-judgemental support** so that the person doesn't feel more alone or stigmatised.

What a panic attack is NOT. It is important to be clear about what does NOT constitute a panic attack, to avoid misinterpretation, over-intervention or even invalidation. A panic attack:

- Is not faked or exaggerated.
- Is not a way of "seeking attention".
- Is not resolved with phrases like "calm down" or "relax".
- Does not always have a clear or immediate cause.
- Is not a sign of weakness or immaturity.

- Does not mean the person "is crazy".

Being informed prevents stigma. Validating the experience is a form of care.

2. Emotional first aid in an anxiety crisis

When a volunteer is going through an anxiety crisis or a panic attack, it is essential that the person accompanying them doesn't panic as well. The mentor's role is not clinical; it is about containment, presence, clarity and activating the support network.

The mentor's role in acute situations. In a crisis, your role is not to solve, diagnose or analyse. Your presence should be:

- **Safe:** the person should feel they can be with you without being judged.
- **Stable:** you are an anchor in the middle of emotional chaos.
- **Connected:** you don't need to have all the answers, just to be present with empathy.

Remember: being with someone at a moment when they are overwhelmed is already a powerful form of help.

Guidelines for acting during a crisis

What you CAN do:

- Approach calmly, without invading their personal space.
- Ask in a soft voice: "I'm here. Would you like me to stay with you?"
- Avoid touching without permission.
- Invite slow breathing, without forcing it: "Let's try breathing together. Breathe in with me... now breathe out."
- Offer anchors to the present: "Look around and tell me five things you can see."
- Make sure the person is in a safe place (not next to a road, for example).
- Stay close and available, even if there is no conversation.

What to avoid:

- Saying things like "Calm down", "It's not that bad", "Everything's fine", "You have to be strong".
- Asking rapid or technical questions: "What happened? Why is this happening to you? What caused it?"
- Invading their physical space without consent.
- Minimising the experience: "That happens to me sometimes too. It's nothing."
- Forcing them to talk or rationalise.
- Making decisions for the person without asking them.

At moments of high vulnerability, less is more. Your attitude matters more than your words.

Grounding technique

One of the most useful strategies at moments of acute anxiety is grounding, or anchoring in the present. It is a simple, non-invasive way of helping the person out of the state of panic by connecting with their immediate surroundings.

Quick technique (5-4-3-2-1). Ask the volunteer to name:

- 5 things they can see.
- 4 things they can touch.
- 3 things they can hear.
- 2 things they can smell.
- 1 thing they can taste.

This helps "unhook" the nervous system from its internal alarm and return to the here and now.

3. Techniques for immediate emotional regulation

In the middle of an anxiety crisis, the person temporarily loses their capacity for self-regulation. Their nervous system is in alarm mode: it doesn't reason, it only reacts. The aim of these techniques is to recover a minimal sense of control through the physical and the sensory.

These tools don't replace professional intervention, but they do help manage the peak of anxiety and prevent the situation from escalating or becoming chronic. Ideally, apply them when the person gives consent and if the context allows.

Box breathing

A simple and powerful technique to stabilise the breathing rhythm and, with it, the emotional state. It is used even by emergency services in critical situations.

How is it done? Ask the person to:

1. Breathe in through the nose for 4 seconds.
2. Hold the breath for 4 seconds.
3. Breathe out through the mouth for 4 seconds.
4. Keep the lungs empty for another 4 seconds.

Repeat for 2–5 minutes.

"Let's breathe together. As if we were drawing a square: breathe in... hold... breathe out... and stay there for a moment."

It can be done with eyes closed or while looking at a drawing of a square that represents it visually.

The 5-4-3-2-1 technique (sensory anchoring)

Already mentioned as grounding, it can also be used as a regulation tool. It is particularly useful when the person feels "out of their body" or dissociated.

Ask them to name out loud:

- 5 things they can see (colours, objects, people).
- 4 things they can touch (clothes, chair, floor).
- 3 things they can hear (voices, sounds, nature).
- 2 things they can smell (if they can't smell anything, they can say so).
- 1 thing they can taste, or imagine the taste of something familiar.

Repeat if necessary. This technique redirects the focus from the agitated mind towards the body and the present.

Safety statements

When fear takes over the body, it is important to say out loud that the danger is not real, even though the distress is. The point is to remind the mind that it is safe.

Some phrases the person can repeat out loud or silently:

- "I'm having an anxiety attack. This will pass."
- "My body is setting off an alarm, but there is no real danger."
- "This has happened before, and it passed."
- "I am safe here and now."

You can say: *"If you like, let's try this phrase: 'This is just anxiety. I'm safe. It will pass.' Shall we say it together?"*

Pressure and regulating physical contact

Sometimes the body needs to feel physically contained, especially if there is trembling, hyperventilation or disorientation. These techniques should only be used if the person consents or asks for them, and they must respect cultural, personal and gender boundaries.

Simple techniques:

- Crossing the arms tightly over the chest, as if giving oneself a hug.
- Pressing one palm firmly against the other for 10 seconds.
- Placing a blanket or jacket over the shoulders as a "gentle weight".
- Sitting against a wall or on the floor to feel the body's contact with a firm surface.

These actions help the person find the physical boundaries of their body again and step out of the mental whirlwind.

4. Communicating with the volunteer after a crisis

Once the intensity of the anxiety or panic attack has passed, it is important to open a space for post-crisis support, adapted to the volunteer's pace and willingness. This is not the moment for in-depth analysis, but for validating what happened, caring for the relationship and offering safe listening.

Spaces for integration and reflection (without intruding)

Each person needs a different amount of time to process a crisis. Some will want to talk straight away; others will need silence or distance. The mentor's role here is to offer without imposing.

You can say:

- "Would you like to talk a bit about what happened, later on?"
- "I'm available if at any point you want to share how you felt."

If there is no openness to talk, silence is also a form of care, as long as it comes with emotional availability.

How to validate the experience and reduce stigma

Many people feel ashamed, guilty or weak after a crisis. They may play it down, apologise or avoid the subject. Your role is to break with these negative narratives without infantilising or exaggerating.

Useful phrases:

- "What you felt was real. You're not exaggerating."
- "You didn't do anything wrong. Your body reacted the best way it could."
- "Thank you for letting me be with you."
- "You're not alone. There are ways to learn to manage this."

Validating is NOT dramatising. Validating means acknowledging what happened, without judgement and with humanity.

How to ask without interrogating

Sometimes we want to understand more in order to help, but we can fall into questions that pressure, make the person uncomfortable or reopen the pain.

Prefer	Avoid
"Is there anything you think would help if it happens again?"	"What triggered it?"
"What do you need from me right now?"	"Did this happen to you again?"
"Is there anything you'd like me to know, or would you rather leave it here for now?"	"Weren't you doing better?"

Make it clear that talking is a possibility, not an obligation.

5. When and how to refer

As a mentor, your function is to accompany, contain, listen and guide. But you are not a psychologist, a therapist or a health professional. Knowing when to step aside and refer to specialised professionals is an essential part of ethical and healthy support.

Signs that external or professional support is needed

Here are some warning signs that indicate it is advisable or necessary to seek specialised help:

- Anxiety crises are very frequent or intense, prevent the volunteer from carrying out daily activities, or affect their safety.
- The volunteer expresses thoughts of death, extreme hopelessness or suicidal ideation.
- There is physical self-harm or repeated mention of wanting to hurt themselves.
- Symptoms of disconnection from reality appear (depersonalisation, delusions, hallucinations).
- There are physical symptoms that need medical attention (severe tachycardia, fainting, severe hyperventilation).
- The volunteer was already in treatment and has stopped it without follow-up.
- Possible situations of complex trauma, abuse, violence, recent bereavement or problematic substance use are identified.

Don't wait until you are overwhelmed. Consulting in time doesn't weaken your role; it strengthens it.

What if the person refuses help?

It is common for a volunteer to feel fear, shame or resistance to seeking outside help, especially if there is stigma around mental health in their culture or environment.

Strategies for accompanying that resistance:

- **Validate their fear:** "I understand this idea makes you uncomfortable. That's normal."
- **Suggest intermediate steps:** "You don't have to see a psychologist right away. How would you feel about talking to someone from the support team first?"

- **Explain clearly that asking for help is not giving up:** "Looking for help isn't a sign of weakness. It's a way of taking care of yourself and being responsible with yourself."

If there is a risk to the person's safety or that of others, a unilateral decision to intervene can be made, but only in extreme cases and prioritising safety.

Activating support networks in the ESC

The European Solidarity Corps programme has specific tools you can activate.

Henner – ESC health insurance

- Covers up to 30 psychotherapy sessions or 30 consecutive days of psychiatric admission, if there is a clinical diagnosis.
- Can be requested through the sending or hosting organisation.
- Coverage remains active for up to two months after the end of the project.

Reinforced mentoring

- You can request additional support to accompany a volunteer more closely.
- This may include support from a person with mental health training, or more frequent sessions.

Sending organisation

- May have relevant information about the volunteer (previous history, support networks, language).
- Can help contact professionals in the home country.

Local contacts

- If there are no professionals in the team, you should know local psychologists or mental health centres you can refer to.
- Set up agreements or informal contacts in advance if possible.

Make sure the volunteer knows they are not alone and that there is a system designed to protect them. Involve them in every step of the process.

6. Resources and bibliography

Resources marked (ES) are in Spanish.

On anxiety crises and panic attacks

- **Guide to anxiety crises and panic attacks (ES).** Detailed information on symptoms and how to act in these situations. <https://www.clinicamoreno.com/crisis.pdf>
- **Panic Disorder: When Fear Overwhelms – National Institute of Mental Health.** Information on panic disorder (this link is to the Spanish version; the NIMH also publishes it in English). <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/espanol/trastorno-de-panico-cuando-el-miedo-agobia>
- **Panic attacks and panic disorder – HelpGuide.org.** A guide to panic attacks, their symptoms and treatment (Spanish-language page; also available in English). <https://www.helpguide.org/es/ansiedad/ataques-de-panico-y-trastorno-de-panico>

Box breathing

- **Healthline.** Explains how box breathing can relieve anxiety and stress (ES). <https://www.healthline.com/health/es/respiracion-del-cuadrilatero>
- **Medical News Today.** A step-by-step guide to practising box breathing (ES). <https://www.medicalnews-today.com/articles/es/respiracion-del-cuadrilatero>

The 5-4-3-2-1 technique (sensory anchoring)

- **Glamour España.** Describes the 5-4-3-2-1 method as a grounding technique to calm anxiety (ES). <https://www.glamour.es/articulos/metodo-5-4-3-2-1-ansiedad>
- **Verywell Mind.** Explains how the technique helps relieve anxiety by anchoring people in the present moment. <https://www.verywellmind.com/5-4-3-2-1-grounding-technique-8639390>

Safety statements

- **Desansiedad.** Positive affirmations to reduce the symptoms of anxiety (ES). <https://www.desansiedad.com/psicologo-online/afirmaciones-positivas-ansiedad>
- **Crisis Text Line.** 100 positive affirmations to improve your self-care routine (ES). <https://www.crisis-textline.org/es/2024/01/26/100-afirmaciones-positivas-para-mejorar-tu-rutina-de-autocuidado/>

Emotional first aid in anxiety crises

- **Practical guide to applying psychological first aid – UNFPA Costa Rica (ES).** Includes strategies for emotional containment and how to act in crisis situations. https://costarica.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/guia_practica_de_aplicacion.pdf
- **Manual for applying emotional first aid (ES).** Practical tools for accompanying people in crisis scenarios. <https://eirenesuisse.ch/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Manual-de-Aplicacion-de-Primeros-Auxilios-Emocionales-2020.pdf>

European Solidarity Corps resources

- **European Youth Portal.** Official information on the European Solidarity Corps and how to take part. https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity_en
- **INJUVE – Mental health and wellbeing in the ESC (ES).** Resources and training for mentors on mental health in the ESC. <https://programaseuropeos.injuve.es/formacion/actividades-net/salud-mental-y-bienestar-en-el-cuerpo-europeo-de-solidaridad>
- **IVAJ – Generalitat Valenciana (ES).** Information on ESC volunteering activities in the Valencia region. <https://ivaj.gva.es/es/servicio-de-voluntariado-europeo>

MODULE 08

Mentoring and Mental Health Promotion in the ESC

1. Introduction

The support provided through mentoring is usually in the hands of a group of people who share responsibility for making sure volunteers receive all the support they need. In the context of mental health, everyone involved plays a crucial role: promoting emotional wellbeing, fostering mental health competences, and creating a living and working environment that is healthy and supportive for volunteers.

In practical terms, this means:

- Establishing an open, supportive relationship in which volunteers feel safe to talk about their mental health.
- Starting conversations on the subject, inviting volunteers to reflect regularly on their own emotional self-care practices.
- Empowering them to deal constructively with challenges that affect (or could affect) their mental health.
- Supporting the development of mental health competences, both in volunteers and in the team.
- Organising and offering specific activities or exercises aimed at promoting mental wellbeing.
- Exploring new forms of support for volunteers and providing additional mechanisms when needed.
- Watching for signs of possible emotional difficulties, talking naturally about the importance of asking for help, and accompanying them if professional support is needed.
- Cultivating a healthy, caring and positive volunteering environment.

2. Building a safe learning environment and relationships of trust: a prerequisite for addressing mental health

An open relationship based on mutual support is fundamental in any mentoring process. When it comes to mental health, it goes beyond important: it is absolutely essential. Without this foundation of trust, volunteers will probably not feel comfortable sharing sensitive information. They may have experienced stigma or discrimination in the past when talking about their mental health, or they may simply see the subject as too vulnerable, intimate or even shameful.

It is therefore vital to keep in mind that the relationship with the mentor must be well established before starting any conversation about emotional wellbeing.

An invitation to reflect. Pause and think about your own mental health, especially at times when it wasn't at its best. Ask yourself: When did you feel truly ready to talk about it? Who did you decide to share it with? What kind of relationship did you need in order to feel safe talking about it?

There are several fundamental requirements for opening conversations on this subject.

A relationship based on trust. The volunteer should feel safe, understood and recognised. The relationship should have clear boundaries, be ready to handle conflicts or difficult topics, and offer a solid sense of emotional safety.

The mentor's qualities. The profile of a mentor who facilitates this kind of process includes qualities such as genuine interest, absence of judgement, availability, inclusiveness, experience, curiosity, open-mindedness, approachability, empathy, patience, flexibility and resilience. They should also be a good role model.

A structured but flexible mentoring process. Structure provides security (for example, regular one-to-one meetings at set times), but it should coexist with some freedom (such as flexibility for additional meetings when needed).

Practical recommendation

Invest in building solid relationships with volunteers. Show them from the start that talking about mental health is not taboo. When these conversations are normalised from the beginning, it is much easier to address any difficulties that arise during the project.

A good practice is to talk openly about the following topics:

- How does your organisation approach mental health in general, and specifically with volunteers?
- What are the volunteer's emergency contacts and social support networks, in case they need to be involved?
- What is the volunteer's attitude towards seeking and accepting professional help?
- What do you, as a mentor, think about mental health, and how do you manage it personally?
- What specific support measures exist within the European Solidarity Corps programme?

In this respect, the ESC Info Kit for Volunteers contains an excellent paragraph for opening this kind of conversation during the selection or preparation phase:

Do you need anything? Are you facing any social, economic, health, educational or other obstacle? The programme offers additional financial support to organisations so they can better adapt to your needs, as well as a range of support measures (for example, reinforced mentoring, an accompanying person, etc.) to enable you to take part on an equal footing. Feel free to inform the hosting and support organisations of any circumstance that could affect your ability to carry out the tasks, and share with them any special needs that require assistance. If necessary, you should also provide accurate information about your health-related needs. You can also take part in an advance planning visit to the place of the volunteering activity before it begins, so that you can be involved in designing the activity and make sure your needs are taken into account from the start.

(Translated from the Spanish edition of the Info Kit.)

3. Prevention and promotion of mental health through mentoring

First of all, it is essential to stress that addressing mental health with volunteers goes far beyond acting only when problems arise. Most mentoring work actually focuses on prevention and the promotion of mental wellbeing, not on reacting to crises.

This means we focus on identifying which factors may put volunteers' health at risk and, from there, intervene to reduce those risks and strengthen protective factors. At the same time, we work to:

- **Strengthen volunteers' resilience**, that is, empower volunteers to look after their mental health and develop useful competences.
- **Create healthy conditions** in the environments where they live and volunteer.

A powerful strategy for promoting mental health is to invite volunteers to reflect on their daily routines: sleep and rest, eating habits, relationships and emotions, exercise and mindfulness, creativity and sources of joy.

A practical suggestion for mentors. When volunteers become aware of these aspects, put them into words and reflect consciously on which daily practices contribute to their wellbeing, they are actively developing their mental health competences. Visual tools can help facilitate this process.

Looking after mental health in daily life allows people to widen their window of tolerance.

What is the window of tolerance?

It is a concept describing the mental state in which a person can handle intense situations (stressors) without feeling emotionally overwhelmed. Within this "window", we are able to function clearly, react effectively and self-regulate. We are not simply reacting on impulse; we have the capacity to choose how to respond to what is happening.

The mentor's role: to help volunteers widen this window by working on all the dimensions mentioned above, and to accompany them in applying coping mechanisms when they feel dysregulated.

To learn more about this concept, you can visit resources such as the NICABM website.

3.1 Stressors that make mental health harder

Talking about mental health, or reflecting on the volunteering experience in general, can bring to light **stressors** that dysregulate volunteers emotionally and take them out of their "window of tolerance".

A **stressor** is any internal or external event, condition or factor that a person **perceives as dangerous or disturbing**, or that demands more of them than they believe they can cope with. These events trigger a **stress response** in the individual, which can show up in different ways:

Behavioural changes

- Excessive dependence on others
- Defensive or aggressive behaviour
- Isolation or avoidance of social contact
- Difficulty working effectively
- Feeling unable to solve even small problems
- Loss of appetite or compulsive eating
- Sleeping problems
- Frequently losing personal belongings
- Excessive consumption of coffee, alcohol, tobacco, etc.

Emotional reactions

- Anxiety
- Anger
- Restlessness
- Frustration
- Fear
- Resentment
- Impatience
- Irritability
- Guilt
- Apathy
- Hypersensitivity
- Sudden mood swings

Cognitive problems

- Memory difficulties
- Concentration problems
- Confusion
- Indecision
- Changes in how they see the future
- Catastrophic thinking

Physical reactions

- Weight changes (gain or loss)
- Headaches
- Gastrointestinal complaints, ulcers
- High blood pressure
- Asthma or allergy flare-ups
- Changes in the menstrual cycle
- Mild muscle pain

An important note. The same event will not be equally stressful for everyone. Stress is a **subjective** experience, and only by talking with a particular volunteer can we know whether an event was stressful for them or not.

However, getting a clearer picture of **what volunteers in our organisation and community find stressful** can help us be more attentive and sensitive. This understanding also allows us to **review and possibly remove recurring stressors** that frequently affect volunteers, such as:

- Inadequate living conditions.
- Poorly defined or very demanding tasks.
- Communication styles that lack empathy.
- Cultural or structural aspects of the organisation.

Suggested activities for understanding stressors from the volunteers' perspective

1. One-to-one interview with an ESC volunteer. Have an open, friendly conversation with a volunteer about their experience of mental health during their time in the programme. Ideally, choose someone you have not mentored directly and who has some experience of volunteering, so they can offer a broader, richer perspective.

Suggested questions:

- How would you describe your mental health during your volunteering?
- How did you feel in general? Were there moments that made you feel proud, happy or fulfilled?
- What helped you stay strong and look after yourself when things were difficult?
- Did you experience stress or difficult moments? How did you manage them?
- Did you need any kind of support that you didn't receive? What would have made a positive difference?
- What can mentors do to help volunteers stay positive, motivated and resilient?
- What advice would you give mentors on supporting volunteers both in hard times and in times of celebration?

After the interview, reflect on what you learned and think about how you could apply it in your work as a mentor.

2. Empathy exercise: put yourself in the volunteers' shoes. Reflect on what a volunteer in your organisation and community might feel. Imagine that you are the one going through the following stages of the experience:

- Before starting: what kind of person are you, and what motivates you to volunteer?
- Making the decision to start this adventure.
- Arriving in a new country and living your first day as a volunteer.
- The first 4 weeks: adapting, emotions, doubts.
- An ordinary working day after 8 months.
- Your free time after 2 months.
- Living with other volunteers after 3 months.

- Important dates in your country (birthdays, Christmas, etc.).
- Reaching 6 months in a new culture.
- Taking part in the project's mid-term meeting.
- The day you complete your Youthpass.
- The day of your farewell.
- The week after the project ends.

Tip: note down the stressors and your emotional responses at each stage. This experience will give you more clarity for empathising with the people you accompany.

3.2 Coping mechanisms

Once the stressors that can lead to emotional dysregulation have been identified, it is essential for mentors to help volunteers discover and apply effective coping mechanisms that allow them to return to their window of tolerance and regain emotional balance.

How to begin?

For example, if a volunteer feels anxious before giving a public presentation, the mentor can ask whether they already have a technique they use to calm down (such as deep breathing, positive self-talk or affirmations), and also suggest other strategies such as brief mindfulness exercises or visualising places or people that give them a sense of safety.

Exploring what is already there

A good practice is to start conversations by asking which coping mechanisms the volunteer has already developed, in which contexts they have worked, and how they could apply the same strategies to new situations. You can also explore new possibilities with them, showing them other options.

A practical example: a volunteer suffering from homesickness could benefit from:

- Scheduling regular video calls with loved ones.
- Creating a "comfort corner" in their room, decorated with photos, letters or personal items that give them a sense of home.

Types of coping mechanisms

Coping mechanisms are very diverse and can focus either on influencing the stressor (for example, avoiding or better managing a situation) or on modulating the emotional response to it. They can be grouped into different categories:

- **Psychological:** keeping a journal, reframing negative thoughts.
- **Intellectual:** finding out or researching about topics that cause anxiety or uncertainty.
- **Spiritual:** practices such as daily meditation, mindfulness, connecting with personal beliefs.
- **Creative:** activities such as painting, writing poetry, playing music, cooking mindfully.
- **Emotional:** identifying and expressing what one feels through the spoken or written word.
- **Social:** asking for help, spending time with friends, going to a support group or to the mentor.

A useful tool: you can use a coping skills poster to make this conversation visual and interactive.

The BASIC Ph model

A tool for strengthening coping strategies. Professor Mooli Lahad developed a very useful model for widening and strengthening coping skills in situations of trauma and stress. The model is called BASIC Ph and proposes six main channels through which people deal with difficulties:

- **B – Belief:** encourage volunteers to reflect on their purpose in life. Invite them to share what they firmly believe in and what they are grateful for.
- **A – Affect:** encourage volunteers to express their emotions and validate them, and share your own emotional experiences too. This helps them feel understood and accompanied.
- **S – Social:** explore their support network with them. Who do they turn to when they need it? What does giving and receiving support mean to them?

- **I – Imagination:** invite volunteers to express themselves creatively: drawing, writing, theatre, music... Imagination can be a great ally for understanding and transforming emotions.
- **C – Cognitive:** support volunteers in developing problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills. Invite them to come up with several ways of approaching a specific challenge.
- **Ph – Physical:** suggest physical activities that help channel stress through the body: walking, dancing, exercise, stretching, outdoor games...

Strengthen resilience with a diverse toolbox. Familiarising volunteers with a wide range of coping mechanisms not only strengthens their mental health competences but also widens their personal repertoire of resources. This matters because:

- A mechanism that works at one moment may not be useful at another.
- What helps one person may not work for another.
- The point is to try, experiment and adjust according to the moment and the needs.

For example, a volunteer may discover that listening to music calms them, but at other times distracts them. In that case, they can try a short walk, writing down what they feel or calling someone they trust.

The essentials: assess whether a particular strategy suits the situation and the person, and encourage the autonomy to choose consciously.

4. Mentoring interventions that support mental health

Once we understand better the stressors that can affect volunteers' mental health during their European Solidarity Corps experience, we can design mentoring interventions that act both on the volunteers and on their environment.

These interventions can be preventive, or they can serve to accompany and support the person at difficult times. There are many common stressful situations at the different phases of a volunteering project, as well as useful interventions that mentors can carry out to manage them.

Below are real examples. Bear in mind that this is not a closed list. Each mentor should adapt these ideas to:

- The volunteer's personality and circumstances.
- The context of the organisation and the local community.
- Their own style of accompaniment.

Before the project and arrival day

Possible stressors at this stage

- Uncertainty about going to an unknown country, without knowing anyone, the language or the culture.

- Disapproval from friends, partner or family.
- Emotional difficulty saying goodbye.
- Organising the journey.
- A deep wish to "do something important" and fear of not achieving it.
- The need to change in order to develop new skills.
- Doubts about the decision taken.

Recommended mentoring interventions

- Organise an advance planning visit (APV) with the volunteer and a representative of the supporting organisation, especially if the volunteer has fewer opportunities.
- Find out about the volunteer's support network: who are their reference people? Who should be contacted in an emergency? Use tools such as the "Safety net map" poster.
- Prepare the volunteer's workspace, including visual materials highlighting the importance of mental health.
- Provide detailed information on: (1) support mechanisms available through the ESC, the organisation and the local community (for example, reinforced mentoring, psychological counselling or psychotherapy covered by the Henner insurance); (2) the accommodation and the people they will share it with; (3) the local community, leisure activities, traditions and customs; (4) food options and common habits.

First months of the project

Frequent stressors at this stage

- Nobody at the station to meet them on arrival.
- Inadequate accommodation, lack of privacy.
- Problems living together.
- Different food, difficulty cooking.
- Lack of money.
- A language barrier that makes it hard to express needs or emotions.
- Feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- Missing friends and family.
- Fear or insecurity about what is new.
- Religious differences.
- Adapting to the climate.
- Culture shock.
- A mismatch between expectations and reality.
- Traumatic or difficult situations.
- Difficulty organising daily time.
- Tiredness from new tasks.
- Not establishing a smooth relationship with the mentor.
- Lack of clear communication with the organisation.

- Negative news in the media (for example, wars).

Recommended mentoring interventions

- Ensure good living and working conditions.
- Organise local language classes.
- Create a welcoming environment: meet volunteers personally on arrival; organise a welcome party or informal get-together; provide a welcome kit; introduce the team and all the key people.
- Support integration into the community: explore the neighbourhood together; connect with social or leisure activities.
- Schedule regular meetings focused on:
 - Identifying which situations are perceived as stressful and how they are dealing with them (you can give them the *Volunteers & Stress* document and ask them to create a mind map of stressors and coping mechanisms).
 - Talking about fears, personal limits, doubts, vulnerability and culture shock.
 - Co-creating safe spaces, defining what they need to feel protected.
 - Introducing visual and/or interactive tools to facilitate your conversations.
 - Clarifying goals, expectations and competences developed, and adjusting tasks if necessary.
 - Agreeing on preferred communication channels.

During the volunteering activity

Stressors that may affect volunteers at this stage

- Poorly defined or confusing roles, tasks and expectations.
- An unclear or excluding organisational culture.
- Lack of feedback on achievements and next steps.
- Conflicts and disagreements.
- Excessive workload or very tight deadlines.
- Personal experiences of the volunteer that resemble those of the service users they work with.
- Risk of physical aggression or injury.
- Lack of the necessary work tools.
- Problems in personal or romantic relationships.
- Low self-esteem or loss of confidence.
- Missing important celebrations in their home country.
- Discovering discrepancies with ESC rules at the mid-term evaluation.
- Feeling excluded from the group or wanting to leave the project.

Recommended mentoring interventions

- Maintain and strengthen communication with the supporting organisation.

- Set up a feedback channel where volunteers can express difficulties anonymously (for example, a suggestion box or an "evaluation tree").
- Foster a sense of community through celebrations (birthdays, holidays, achievements), social activities such as board-game nights or group activities, and opportunities for peer support.
- Schedule regular mentoring meetings, adjusting their frequency to needs. In these meetings, it is recommended to:
 - Do emotional check-ins: talk about how they have been feeling and how they are handling recent events. Suggested tools: emotion journal, "emotional rollercoaster" chart.
 - Facilitate reflection and learning on: self-knowledge and emotional skills; coping strategies; vulnerability; handling failure and tolerating ambiguity; motivation; work-life balance; daily routine, rest and relaxation, physical activity, contact with nature; healthy eating; knowing how to ask for help and offer support to others.
 - Address the volunteer's personal goals and projects, and recognise their achievements.
 - Spot signs of stress or emotional difficulty. If you notice changes in behaviour, open the dialogue and offer space to talk about mental health in more depth.
 - Accompany them at difficult times and support them in situations of suffering.
 - Model good practice: show through your example the importance of self-care, emotional expression, vulnerability and asking for help.

A few months before departure

Common stressors at this stage

- Uncertainty about the future, lack of plans.
- Sadness about goodbyes.
- A feeling of loneliness, having no one to talk to.
- Becoming aware that the experience is coming to an end.
- Fear of returning to past circumstances.
- Feeling out of place in the last days, regret at not having been more involved.

Recommended mentoring interventions

- Organise a closing ceremony or farewell party, with symbolic gifts or closing sessions with everyone involved in the project.
- Inform the supporting organisation about the volunteer's return, especially if there were difficulties and follow-up may be needed.
- Intensify mentoring sessions, focusing on:
 - Future plans, possible stressors, resources and support network on returning.
 - Drawing up a "Safety net map" with the volunteer for after the project.
 - Exploring the possibility of extending their stay, taking part in new projects, or getting involved as ESC mentors or ambassadors.
 - Reviewing achievements and expectations met, identifying unresolved aspirations (for example, attending a pending event or project) and encouraging them to bring these to a close.
 - Explaining the Henner insurance cover once they are back in their country.

- Collecting final impressions and evaluations.

After departure

Frequent stressors after the project ends

- Reverse culture shock.
- Difficulty finding job or study opportunities.
- Moving back in with their family.
- Losing touch with friends from the project.
- Missing even things that used to annoy them (like the sound of church bells).

Recommended mentoring interventions

- The supporting organisation organises a follow-up meeting in the volunteer's home country. This session can focus on:
 - Collecting feedback on the experience.
 - Exploring whether the volunteer wishes to stay involved with the ESC as an ambassador or mentor, or in local or international projects.
 - Identifying any additional support they may need.
- Make proactive post-project contact to:
 - Ask how the return went and how they feel now.
 - Offer support if they need it, even if they just want to talk.

5. Environments that promote mental health in the ESC

Talking about mental health in the context of volunteering is not only a matter of prevention or intervening in a crisis. It is also, and above all, a matter of environment. The context in which a volunteer lives, learns, works and relates to others has a deep influence on their emotional wellbeing.

Creating environments that promote mental health doesn't require large financial resources, but mainly intention, sensitivity and consistency. Below are the key features of a healthy environment and steps any organisation can put into practice day to day.

Features of an environment that is healthy for mental health

Psychological safety. A space where volunteers feel safe to express what they think and feel without fear of being judged, ignored or punished.

Normalising emotional dialogue. Mental health is not treated as taboo, but as a natural dimension of being human. Emotions, vulnerability and needs are talked about openly.

Flexibility and adaptation. It is recognised that each volunteer is different and that what works for one person may not help another. Tasks, schedules, dynamics or spaces can be adjusted to personal needs.

Active participation. Volunteers are encouraged to take part in decision-making, in designing their projects and in building the environment together.

Constant recognition. Effort, progress, dedication and achievements (big and small) are seen, valued and celebrated.

Time and space for care. Moments and spaces are set aside for rest, reflection, creativity, silence and genuine connection between people.

Access to support resources. There is clear, accessible information about the available channels of help (psychological, medical, practical or emotional), both inside and outside the organisation.

Concrete practices to foster these environments

- Include mental health as a cross-cutting theme in all activities and phases of the project.
- Have a physical space that is comfortable and welcoming, with materials that invite emotional care: books, cushions, relaxing music, soft lighting.
- Offer specific training for the team (staff, mentors, coordinators) in active listening, non-violent communication and psychological first aid.
- Establish regular rituals such as emotional check-in circles; "coffee with no agenda" (informal meetings to talk freely); shared gratitude journals; open spaces for creative self-expression (murals, music, spontaneous theatre).
- Create a clear, accessible and understandable protocol for responding to emotional crises.
- Incorporate an ecopsychology approach: connection with nature, outdoor activities, contact with the surroundings.

Evaluate and improve continuously

A healthy environment is not created by decree: it is built and reviewed constantly. That is why it is key to include participatory evaluation mechanisms such as:

- Regular anonymous questionnaires.
- Collective feedback meetings.
- Emotional evaluation rounds ("what's your inner weather like this week?").
- Spaces for proposals and improvements run by the volunteers themselves.

Remember: every small change counts. You don't need to transform your whole organisation at once. Start with everyday gestures that are consistent, conscious and human. Being a mentor is not being a therapist, but you can be a point of reference for care, a safe presence and an open door to better emotional health.

6. Bibliography

Below is a list of resources and bibliography on mentoring and mental health promotion in the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). Resources marked (ES) are in Spanish.

Mentoring Life – Mentor's Guide (Erasmus+) (ES). A practical handbook on the mentor's role in accompanying young volunteers, including strategies for caring for mental health and emotional wellbeing. https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/project-result-content/a9075cec-55e9-4883-a97d-dfbb8a240a43/Mentoring_Life_Mentor_s_Guide_spanish.pdf

Mentoring resources – SALTO-YOUTH. A collection of tools and materials designed to support ESC mentors, making it easier to accompany volunteers and promote their emotional wellbeing. <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/solidarity/training-support-community/mentoring/resources/>

La mentoría como herramienta de acompañamiento para la inclusión – doctoral thesis (ES). Academic research analysing how the availability of social support in the mentoring relationship strengthens mental health and reduces psychological symptoms of stress in young people. <https://www.tdx.cat/bitstream/handle/10803/675951/TESI%20Anna%20Maria%20S%C3%A1nchez%20Arag%C3%B3n.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1>

Crecimiento personal y buenas prácticas comunitarias – ResearchGate (ES). A book on developing individual and social wellbeing through strategies for promoting mental health, resilience and community cohesion, with an integrative approach based on theoretical models. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/389917475_Crecimiento_personal_y_buenas_practicas_comunitarias/download

Guidance on community mental health services – PAHO/WHO. A document promoting person-centred, rights-based approaches to community mental health services, with examples of good practice and recommendations for implementation (Spanish edition linked; also published in English by the WHO). https://iris.paho.org/bitstream/handle/10665.2/56176/9789275325933_spa.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=5

ESC Info Kit for volunteers (ES). https://programaseuropeos.injuve.es/sites/main/files/2025-03/kit%20de%20informaci%C3%B3n%20para%20voluntarios%2C%20versi%C3%B3n%202024%20%28espa%C3%B1ol%29_5.pdf

MODULE 09

Guide for the Initial Interview with ESC Volunteers

Aims of the initial interview

1. Get to know the person beyond their CV: their story, motivations, way of relating to others, and view of volunteering.
2. Detect possible emotional or support needs.
3. Assess emotional maturity, flexibility and willingness to live and work with others.
4. Establish a relationship of trust from the start.

Key topics to cover

Personal motivations and expectations

Attitudes towards what is new, change and frustration

Emotional and relational history

Previous experiences of living with others

Personal limits, habits, ways of looking after oneself

Personal interests, strengths, things they enjoy

Special needs or support

Examples of inspiring questions

Motivation and purpose

- What motivated you to volunteer in another country?
- What do you hope to learn or experience during this process?
- What would you like us to know about you, beyond your CV?

Relationship with change

- What do you think will be easy? And what makes you a little afraid?
- How do you react when you face something new or unfamiliar?
- What do you need in order to feel accompanied?

Values and relationships

- Which values or attitudes are important to you in a team?
- Have you had any intercultural experience before? How was it?
- How do you usually resolve conflicts when they arise?

Emotional wellbeing and self-regulation

- What do you usually do when you feel stressed or overwhelmed?
- Have you found it hard to adapt to new contexts in the past?

- Is there anything you'd like us to know so we can support you better?

Tips for the interviewer

- Listen with empathy, without judgement or haste.
- Pay attention to what is not said as much as to what is said.
- Keep a calm, approachable presence.
- Pick up clues about possible factors of emotional vulnerability, but without probing too much.
- Close by thanking them for their honesty, offering support and making it clear that this is not an assessment but a way of getting to know each other better.

Interview block: the cultural dimension and intercultural adaptation

Aims

- Learn about the volunteer's relationship with their culture of origin.
- Identify previous experiences (positive or difficult) in multicultural contexts.
- Explore expectations and possible culture clashes.
- Detect needs related to language, identity or sense of belonging.
- Anticipate challenges in living together and encourage an open attitude to cultural exchange.

Examples of open questions

These questions can be asked as a relaxed conversation and adapted to the volunteer's age, language or style.

1. About their culture of origin

- Which customs, values or ways of life from your country are most important to you?
- Is there anything you would like to keep doing or have during your time on the project (food, celebrations, routines, language)?

2. About their relationship with other cultures

- Have you had any previous experience in a multicultural environment? What did you learn from it?
- How do you usually react when something is done very differently from what you are used to?

3. Expectations about adapting

- What do you think might surprise you, bother you or be hardest about living in another country with people from different cultures?
- What would you like the host group to know about the way you communicate, express emotions or live day to day?

4. Cultural identity and inclusion

- How do you like to share your culture with others? What would you like to teach or contribute?
- Is there anything you fear others won't understand about your culture, religion, identity or personal history?

Tips for the interviewer

- **Listen beyond the "exotic":** don't look for folklore; try to understand how the person lives their identity.
- **Avoid stereotypes:** every person is more than their nationality.
- **Be curious and show sincere respect:** model an intercultural attitude.
- **Offer examples of support** in case of cultural difficulty (misunderstandings, discrimination, feeling isolated).

MODULE 10

Self-Care for ESC Mentors

1. Introduction

In the European Solidarity Corps, mentors play a fundamental role: they accompany, support, listen to, guide and often emotionally contain young volunteers who are going through an intense, challenging and deeply transformative life experience. Yet the impact this role has on those who carry it out is rarely discussed in the same depth.

Why is it urgent to talk about self-care in mentoring?

Caring for volunteers is a priority in mobility programmes. But for that care to be effective, sensitive and ethical, it needs to be held by an adult figure who is also cared for. The mentor's self-care is neither a luxury nor an individualistic practice: it is a basic condition for carrying out the role with presence, clarity and sustainability over time.

The relationship between a mentor and a volunteer is deeply human. Life stories, expectations, conflicts, doubts, frustrations, achievements, joys, migration processes, cultural discoveries and, in some cases, emotional wounds all come together in it. Faced with this, the mentor is not neutral: they get involved, they are moved, they get worn down.

Not taking care of this wear and tear puts at risk not only the mentor's mental health, but also the quality of the support, the climate of trust and the emotional safety of the volunteers.

Mentoring and wellbeing: a direct relationship

A mentor who is in balance can:

- Listen empathetically without absorbing other people's pain.
- Set limits without guilt.
- Hold the other person's uncertainty without being overwhelmed.
- Model healthy, respectful and caring ways of being through their example.

When the mentor is saturated, tired or emotionally overwhelmed, it becomes harder to:

- Distinguish what is theirs from what belongs to the other person.
- Regulate their own emotions at tense moments.
- Make decisions clearly.
- Look after the quality of the relationship.

The mentor's role in the ESC emotional support ecosystem

In the ESC, the mentor is not (and should not be) a psychologist, a therapist or the solver of every problem. But they are a key figure in the project's emotional safety net.

They are the one who can notice the first signs of distress, who offers non-judgemental listening, who validates emotions and accompanies personal processes. That is why the more connected they are with their own emotional state, the more available they will be to recognise and accompany that of others.

Talking about self-care in mentoring is not a whim. It is a prevention tool, an act of professional responsibility and a way of humanising educational and social work.

2. What do we mean by self-care?

At first sight, self-care may sound like a simple or even trivial concept. In recent years it has become popular on social media and in the press, often reduced to superficial ideas like "taking a hot bath" or "switching off with a series". But in the context of mentoring in projects such as those of the ESC, self-care has a much deeper, ethical and strategic dimension.

A comprehensive definition. Self-care is a person's capacity to detect their own physical, emotional, mental and relational needs and, from there, develop conscious, sustainable and realistic practices to stay in balance.

It is an active process that involves:

- Listening to oneself.
- Recognising one's own vulnerability.
- Setting limits.
- Asking for help.
- Cultivating personal and relational resources.
- Restoring energy after wear and tear.

It is not just about "doing things I like" (although that counts too), but about creating the conditions to be well while I carry out my role of accompanying others. And, above all, doing so regularly, not only when "I can't take any more".

Common myths about self-care

It is important to dismantle some mistaken ideas that can get in the way of real self-care, especially in educational, social or volunteering contexts.

"It's selfish to think about myself when I have to look after others." Self-care is not selfishness. It is a way of caring for others from a more whole and genuine place.

"I don't have time for self-care." It's not about free time, but about making more conscious choices even within daily routines.

"Self-care is something I do when I'm already unwell." Waiting until you are in crisis to look after yourself is like filling up the car when you've already broken down by the roadside.

"I have to be strong; I can't afford to stop." Recognising tiredness is a sign of maturity and responsibility, not weakness.

Self-care as an ethical practice and a responsibility

In the ESC, where we accompany young people in processes of growth, adaptation, questioning and change, it is essential for the mentor to be consistent between what they say and what they model.

Talking to a volunteer about the importance of their wellbeing, rest or limits while not looking after oneself is contradictory and, over time, erodes the relationship and one's credibility.

Self-care also has a political dimension: it is a way of resisting the logic of sacrifice, of "I always have to be available", of "if I'm not breaking inside, I'm not doing my job properly". These ideas are deeply rooted in many social and educational settings, but they harm us.

Looking after yourself is an act of mental health, and also of dignity at work.

3. Risk factors for the mentor's mental health

The mentor's role within the ESC programme carries a heavy emotional load. It is not only about giving information or accompanying administrative processes: it is a human, relational bond that demands presence, empathy, patience and containment, and often dealing with complex situations for which one doesn't always have enough training or backing.

Although this role can be deeply rewarding, it also carries risks for the mentor's emotional balance. Recognising these factors is not playing the victim or dramatising the work, but accepting with maturity that those who accompany also need to be accompanied and cared for.

Accumulated emotional load. Listening to stories, supporting processes, containing intense emotions, responding to crises... All of this leaves a mark. When there is no space to process these experiences, they build up. That accumulation can show up as exhaustion, irritability, discouragement, emotional numbness or physical symptoms.

Blurred limits in the accompaniment. In the mentor–volunteer relationship it is easy to fall into emotional over-involvement: wanting to solve everything, always being available, taking on responsibilities that aren't ours. This usually comes from a genuine wish to help, but it ends up causing wear and tear, frustration or even emotional dependence.

Unrealistic expectations and internal pressure. Mentors often feel they have to be a role model, always be "fine", and have answers for everything. This pressure may come from the environment or from oneself, and when it isn't met, it creates guilt, self-demand and a sense of failure.

Professional isolation or lack of institutional recognition. In many projects, the mentor's role is solitary and barely visible. There are not always spaces for supervision, teamwork or recognition of the emotional effort that accompanying involves. This can lead to loneliness, loss of motivation or feeling undervalued.

Three conditions that can deeply affect the mentor

Vicarious trauma

The emotional impact a person experiences from repeatedly hearing or witnessing other people's stories of pain, suffering or trauma. You don't need to live through the traumatic event yourself to be affected; constant contact with intense experiences is enough.

Frequent symptoms:

- Nightmares or intrusive thoughts.
- Excessive sensitivity to certain stories.
- Avoiding certain situations or people.
- Changes in how one sees the world (as dangerous or unsafe).

Compassion fatigue

The emotional exhaustion that results from constantly caring for and supporting others, especially when they are in vulnerable situations. It occurs when the genuine wish to help is not sustained by self-care practices.

Frequent symptoms:

- Physical and emotional exhaustion.
- Emotional disconnection (apathy, irritability).
- Loss of meaning in the work.
- Difficulty empathising with new cases.

Burnout

A state of deep exhaustion linked to the work context, combining emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and low personal accomplishment. In mentoring, it can show up as cynicism, a sense of ineffectiveness and a wish to leave the role.

Frequent symptoms:

- Chronic tiredness.
- Lack of motivation.
- Emotional distance from the people one accompanies.
- Feeling useless or a failure.

Feature	Vicarious trauma	Compassion fatigue	Burnout
Origin	Indirect exposure to other people's trauma	Exhaustion from caring	Overload from the work context
Emotional focus	Impact of the other person's pain	Loss of energy and empathy	Generalised loss of motivation
Onset	Can be rapid after exposure	Gradual over time	Prolonged and cumulative
Prevention and response	Supervision, spaces to process	Self-care, rest, support	Reducing workload, recognition, structural changes

4. Indicators of emotional wear and tear

Recognising that we are starting to wear down is not always easy. The signs often appear subtly, disguised as "bad days", ordinary tiredness or passing irritability. However, learning to identify early signs of overload is essential in order to act in time and prevent more serious consequences such as burnout or emotional disengagement.

Early warning signs

The following signs don't necessarily mean you are "unwell", but they do mean your body, mind or emotional system is trying to tell you something. Paying attention to them is an act of care.

Physical

- Persistent fatigue, even after sleeping.
- Muscle tension, headaches or back pain.
- Digestive problems or changes in appetite.
- Sleep disturbances (insomnia or excessive sleep).

Emotional

- Irritability for no apparent reason.
- A sense of emptiness or apathy.
- Prolonged or unexplained sadness.
- Emotional hypersensitivity.
- A need to isolate oneself.

Cognitive

- Difficulty concentrating or making simple decisions.
- Repetitive, catastrophic or self-critical thoughts.
- Loss of motivation, lack of interest in things you used to enjoy.
- A feeling of being "on autopilot".

Relational

- Impatience with others.
- Difficulty setting limits.
- A feeling that "everyone needs something from me".
- Emotional disconnection or avoiding contact.

How to assess yourself without judgement or guilt

Noticing wear and tear is not a sign of weakness, but of mature self-listening. Instead of denying it, we can ask ourselves honestly:

- How long has it been since I had a truly restorative day?
- Am I functioning from pleasure or from obligation?
- When did I last feel connected with myself and with my role?
- Am I looking after my personal relationships as much as I accompany other people?
- Am I giving myself permission to feel and to rest?

A practical suggestion: keep a weekly record, even a brief one, of how you feel physically, emotionally and mentally. Not to control yourself, but to notice before you reach your limit.

The aim is not to alarm you, but to offer you a compass so you can act before your body or mind says "enough". Nobody cares well from exhaustion; we all deserve support, even (and especially) those who support others.

5. Personal self-care strategies

Personal self-care is neither a luxury nor a reward that comes once we have done everything. It is a basic need that, when cultivated, becomes a source of energy, clarity and balance. For those who accompany through mentoring, looking after themselves is not optional: it is what allows them to be emotionally available without losing themselves in the process.

Sustainable care routines. Unlike occasional care that kicks in when we are already at our limit, sustainable routines are small, constant practices adapted to your daily reality. They work as "maintenance doses" that prevent emotional or physical collapse.

What makes a routine sustainable?

- **It is realistic:** you can keep it up even on intense days.
- **It is meaningful:** it genuinely gives you something.
- **It is adaptable:** it can change with your circumstances.
- **It is conscious:** not one more obligation, but a choice that comes from caring for yourself.

Examples:

- Setting aside 10 minutes a day to be in silence or away from screens.
- Having a fixed weekly moment to do something purely for pleasure (with no productivity).
- Eating without your phone in your hand, paying attention to the act of nourishing yourself.
- Walking every day, even just round the block, without headphones, breathing attentively.
- Saying "no" to unnecessary commitments to protect your energy.

Stress regulation techniques

Stress can't always be avoided, but it can be managed. Having tools to regulate your nervous system allows you to respond in a calmer, clearer and more sustainable way.

Conscious breathing

One of the simplest and most powerful tools. It helps activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which brings on relaxation.

Example: breathe in deeply through the nose counting to 4, hold the breath for 2 seconds, and breathe out slowly through the mouth counting to 6. Repeat several times, ideally with your eyes closed.

Mindfulness

Being present without judging what is happening inside or outside you. You don't need a class to start: it's enough to stop for a moment and observe your breathing, your bodily sensations or your surroundings without trying to change anything.

Example: each time you move from one activity to another, pause for 30 seconds to notice how you are and connect with yourself.

Reflective writing (journaling)

Writing lets you put what you feel into words, clarify thoughts, recognise achievements or let off steam.

Suggestion: you can start with phrases such as "Today I feel...", "What I need most is...", "Something I don't want to forget..."

It's not about writing beautifully or correctly. It's about giving yourself space to listen to yourself without filters.

Remember: these strategies are not meant to make you "function better", but to help you live in a kinder, more conscious way. As a mentor, you deserve to feel well, not just to perform.

6. Relational and professional self-care

Self-care doesn't end at the individual level. In fact, what affects us most is often not what happens to us, but how we relate to others while it is happening. That is why self-care must also include strategies for managing our relationships and work dynamics from a healthier, more balanced place.

Assertive communication and healthy limits

Knowing how to say "no", express needs and set limits, and doing so with respect and clarity, is one of the most protective skills you can develop as a mentor. Emotional overload often doesn't come from what is asked of us, but from our difficulty in marking how far we are available.

What is a healthy limit? A healthy limit is a clear and flexible boundary that protects your well-being while still caring for the relationship with others. It is not a barrier or an imposition: it is a way of sustaining your energy, your attention and your emotional health.

Examples:

- Agreeing times and ways of getting in touch (and respecting them).
- Not answering messages outside working hours, except in emergencies.
- Being honest if a topic is beyond you or you need to consult someone.
- Communicating clearly when something feels difficult, unfair or confusing to you.

Remember: a limit doesn't need to be justified or argued: it is communicated with firmness and empathy. It is better to set a clear limit than to sustain forced availability that eventually leads to frustration or irritation.

Supervision and spaces to let off steam

No mentor should be alone in their role. Working with people requires spaces to review what we feel, think, project and absorb, especially when dealing with complex or high-impact emotional issues.

What do we mean by supervision? Supervision is not control or inspection. It is a safe space to review the relational processes we experience in mentoring and to share ethical doubts, intense emotions or difficult experiences.

- It can be individual or in a group.
- It can be facilitated by an external person or by an experienced peer.
- Its aim is to help you think about and feel your role from a clearer, better cared-for place.

If there is no formal supervision space in your project, you can propose one or create it yourself as a community of mentors.

Communities of practice and support networks among mentors

Accompanying other people without a network to support you is a sure recipe for burnout. That is why a powerful professional self-care strategy is to build community with others who share your role.

What does a network of mentors offer?

- A sense of belonging.
- Exchange of experiences, doubts and learning.
- A place to let off steam without judgement.
- Validation of what we feel and do.
- Support at critical or confusing moments.

You can create something informal (a WhatsApp group or a monthly meeting with colleagues) or structured (reflection circles, themed virtual coffees, etc.). What matters is not isolating yourself.

7. Self-care applied to the ESC mentoring role

Looking after yourself as a mentor in the ESC programme is not a generic task. It requires adapting self-care to the specific features of your role, to the volunteering cycle and to the complex, multi-cultural realities that are often part of these contexts.

Practical cases and situational examples

Situation 1: A volunteer struggling to adapt in the first months. The mentor is accompanying a person who expresses anxiety, loneliness and doubts about their decision to start the project.

Risk for the mentor: excessive emotional involvement, a feeling of "having to rescue" the person, exhaustion from trying to keep them motivated.

Self-care strategy:

- Remember that the aim is not to prevent the volunteer's distress, but to accompany their process.
- Refer to other resources if what they need goes beyond the mentoring role.
- Share the emotional load with a colleague or supervisor.

Situation 2: A volunteer who places high personal expectations on the mentor. The volunteer expects their mentor to be always available, turns to them for everything and develops a relationship of dependence.

Risk for the mentor: saturation, loss of limits, emotional tiredness, guilt at "not always being there".

Self-care strategy:

- Set clear, explicit limits on times, channels and topics of support.
- Encourage the volunteer's autonomy from the start.

- Use phrases such as: "I'm here to support you, but there are things you need to work out yourself with your own resources."

Situation 3: Accompanying a moment of emotional or personal crisis. The volunteer is going through bereavement, a break-up, a traumatic memory or an extreme situation.

Risk for the mentor: emotional overload, exposure to vicarious trauma, guilt at not being able to help enough.

Self-care strategy:

- Listen without absorbing; contain without solving.
- Remember: "I'm here to accompany, not to rescue."
- Ask for support from an external professional, and ask for help yourself if you feel affected.

Self-care in multicultural and emotionally complex contexts

ESC mentors work with people from diverse cultures, with different values, ways of expressing emotions and emotional languages. This environment is enriching, but it can also be draining if it isn't handled with cultural awareness and self-compassion.

Key strategies:

- Don't take culture clashes personally.
- Learn to distinguish between what is yours and what belongs to the other person.
- Accept not understanding everything: diversity sometimes means opacity.
- Celebrate your limits as part of mutual respect.

Looking after yourself in this context also means learning to navigate the ambiguous, the uncertain and the emotional without losing yourself in the process. A mentor who looks after themselves is clearer, more empathetic and more human.

8. Practical exercises and tools

Self-care is not an abstract concept: it needs to be brought down to everyday life with clear, applicable tools suited to each mentor's reality. Below is a series of exercises you can incorporate, adapt or transform according to your needs and lifestyle.

A personalised self-care plan

Drawing up a self-care plan doesn't mean creating an endless list of things you "should" do. It is a flexible map, built from awareness of your own limits, resources and wishes.

How to design it

1. Scan your key areas:

- *Physical:* rest, food, movement.
- *Emotional:* relationships, expressing emotions, spaces to release tension.

- *Mental*: stimulation, cognitive rest, organisation.
- *Social*: supportive relationships, community, sense of belonging.
- *Spiritual or existential*: meaning, purpose, inner connection.

2. **Identify your current needs** in each of these areas.

3. **Choose concrete, realistic practices** to look after yourself in each dimension (one per area is enough to start).

4. **Define your personal warning signs** (how will you know you need to readjust your plan?).

5. **Set times to review it** (every two weeks, at the end of the month, after an intense situation, etc.).

Remember: the plan should serve you, not create pressure. If it doesn't fit, change it. Self-care isn't imposed; it is built with compassion.

Weekly wellbeing log

This exercise lets you take the pulse of your emotional, physical and mental state regularly. It is not about evaluating performance, but about cultivating a practice of inner attention.

Exercise (once a week):

- How was my energy this week? (High / stable / low / none)
- Which emotions were most present?
- Was there a moment that made me feel especially good?
- Was there a moment I found especially hard?
- What helped me keep going this week?
- What do I need for next week?

You can do this in a notebook, in your phone's notes or even by recording voice messages to yourself. The format is up to you; what matters is keeping up the habit of listening inwards.

A review ritual after an intense situation

After a particularly difficult session, a crisis, a tough conversation or an emotionally heavy period, it is essential to close the emotional cycle so that you don't carry the weight into other spaces.

A simple review:

- What did I feel before, during and after that situation?
- What was hardest to hold?
- What did I do well that it comforts me to recognise?
- What would I like to do differently next time?
- What do I need now to "close" this experience?

You can do this alone, out loud, in writing or talking with someone you trust. What matters is not carrying on as if nothing had happened.

Brief moments of reconnecting with the body

The body is often forgotten in emotional self-care. Yet it is the first place where wear and tear shows. Integrating brief bodily practices helps release accumulated tension and recover a sense of presence.

Quick practices:

- Stretching consciously for 3 minutes.
- Shaking out your arms, legs and neck for a full minute.
- Walking for 10 minutes with no destination, breathing deeply and without headphones.
- Placing both hands on your chest, closing your eyes and repeating: "I'm here. I'm with myself."

9. Additional resources and bibliography

No guide is enough on its own. Having a network of varied, accessible, quality resources makes it possible to keep cultivating self-care as a living, flexible and contextualised practice. Here are some sources that may inspire you, accompany you or open new questions. Titles and resources marked (ES) are in Spanish.

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- Brown, Brené. *The Gifts of Imperfection*.
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- Santandreu, Rafael. *El arte de no amargarse la vida*. (ES)
- Riso, Walter. *Los límites del amor*. (ES)
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- Rothschild, Babette. *Help for the Helper: The Psychophysiology of Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma*.

Resources and guides

Guides and templates for self-care plans

- Michigan State University Extension – self-care tools (ES): <https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/herramientas-de-autocuidado-para-enfermedades-cronicas>
- ClickUp self-care plan templates.
- Self-care plan template (ES): https://www.elsolnec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/plan_de_autocuidado.pdf

Wellbeing apps

- Calm.
- Headspace Care.

Guides on mindfulness and self-compassion

- Guide for teachers – Vicky Lahiguera (ES).
- <https://www.eduso.net/autocuidado-emocional-a-traves-del-mindfulness-para-educadores-sociales/> (ES)
- <https://www.consejoeducacionsocial.net/ceesg-formacion-curso-de-autocuidado-emocional-a-traves-del-mindfulness-para-educadoras-es-sociales/> (ES)

General self-care manuals

- <https://www.som360.org/es/monografico/bienestar-adolescente/blog/pautas-autocuidado-docentes> (ES)
- UNICEF El Salvador, self-care manual (ES): <https://www.unicef.org/elsalvador/media/5036/file/Manual%20de%20Autocuidado.pdf>
- INEE guide.

Evidence-based protocols (principles)

- <https://www.minsalud.gov.co/salud/Documents/CalidadAtenci%C3%B3nEnSalud/Observatorio/AUTOCUIDADO.pdf> (ES)
- <https://www.minsalud.gov.co/sites/rid/Lists/BibliotecaDigital/RIDE/DE/CA/Ilustrar-al-paciente-en-autocuidado-seguridad.pdf> (ES)
- https://iris.paho.org/bitstream/handle/10665.2/56571/9789275326275_spa.pdf (ES)

Guides and handbooks for ESC mentors

- MENTOR UP Manual: https://www.mc-celje.si/f/docs/MENTOR_UP/MENTOR-UP_Manual.pdf
- SALTO-YOUTH Mentors' guide: https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3117/03AW_SY%20Mentors%20guide.pdf
- INJUVE – European Solidarity Corps (ES): <https://programaseuropeos.injuve.es/ces>

European Solidarity Corps portals and resources

- European Solidarity Corps – European Youth Portal.
- Reference data providers: https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/organisations/reference-data-providers_en
- European Solidarity Corps Guide.
- EU Academy.
- Youthpass.
- National Agencies and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency.