

# SOCIAL ISOLATION

Strategies to identify, prevent  
and combat the phenomenon

## PROJECT INFORMATION

|                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Project title</b>    | KHIK IT - Strategies to engage socially isolated youngsters                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Project number</b>   | 2019-3-IT03-KA105-017178                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Key Action</b>       | KA105 Mobility of youth workers                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Project website</b>  | <a href="https://khikit.wixsite.com/khikit">https://khikit.wixsite.com/khikit</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Coordinator</b>      | Associazione Akira                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Project Partners</b> | Contextos –Cooperativa para o Desenvolvimento e Coesão Social CRL [PT]<br>Green Elephant Foundation [PL]<br>GUIDE - Global Union for Innovations, Development and Education [BG]<br>Network of Youth Engagement Katerini [GR]<br>Sprijin si Dezvoltare [RO]<br>Team 4 Excellence [RO]<br>Youth BCN [SP]<br>Youth Bridges Budapest [HU] |

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## Introduction

The present work aims at introducing the results of the Erasmus + project **kHIK it - Strategies to engage socially isolated youngsters**, co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union under the Grant Agreement no. 2019-3-IT03-KA105-017178. The project was implemented by nine non-profit organisations from Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain: *Akira, Contextos, Green Elephant Foundation, GUIDE, Network of Youth Engagement Katerini, Sprijin și Dezvoltare, Team 4 Excellence, Youth BCN* and *Youth Bridges Budapest*.

*kHIK IT* was created in response to a form of youth distress, revealed through **voluntary social isolation**. In the era in which the dictates of imaginary idealisation lead to an exasperated search for social recognition, while our communities are witnessing a progressive fragmentation of social structures and rapid changes in the socio-cultural system, the evolutionary process of adolescents and 'young adults' is evolving increasingly more towards individualisation, to 'armour' themselves in the tortuous fight against social pressure. However, in this exhausting research, the young person collides with their legitim limits, with their bodily self, which seems inadequate to face the pressures and challenges that their ambitious project poses and, therefore, will characterise their failure. Hence, the

need to bury their own perceived inadequacy could lead them to avoid direct interaction with the world outside their room, sometimes relating to others only through communication tools that allow them to hide that awkward and unbearable part of themselves. The Japanese define this phenomenon of voluntary social isolation as "Hikikomori", referred to in the project's title, which literally means "social withdrawal". The phenomenon is often accompanied by school phobia and school withdrawal, anthropophobia, persecution delusions, obsessive and compulsive symptoms, regressive behavior, social avoidance, apathy and depressed mood. To date, no specific investigation has been carried out at the European level on the phenomenon in question that can provide statistical evidence or complete information on the connections between this and other socio-cultural factors. However, it is in the activities that the partner organizations have carried out with young people, in the cases encountered and in the difficulties that emerged, that the consortium members assessed the need to equip their trainers and youth workers with suitable lines of intervention to intercept and recover young people in conditions of social isolation and guidelines for structuring information and prevention action plans into schools, addressing students, parents and teachers, in order to identify and prevent cases of distress before it can become deviant.

In the above-mentioned context, the project then pursued the following **objectives**:

- to broaden the knowledge of youth workers on the phenomenon of voluntary social isolation;
- to analyse the characteristics of the phenomenon of social withdrawal in our reference realities;
- to define an operational plan, strategies and intervention techniques to intervene in cases of voluntary social isolation;
- to define guidelines for trainers and youth workers about how to structure information and prevention paths with students, parents and teachers.

The following **activities** were implemented from March 2020 to November 2021:

- focus groups about juvenile discomfort and social isolation that involved youth leaders and representatives of youth organisations from the territory of each partner;

- a four-day seminar, which involved 29 youth workers from 9 organisations, who exchanged experiences, skills, techniques, strategies and good practices, to arrive at the definition of shared methodologies and tools, which converged in this publication.

These activities allowed analysing the characteristics of the phenomenon of social withdrawal in the realities of the partnership network, involving trainers youth workers in the definition of suitable lines of intervention to intercept and recover young people in a condition of social isolation and guidelines to structure information and prevention plans in schools, to be addressed to students, parents and teachers, in order to identify and prevent cases of social disease before it can become deviant.



## Social Isolation: definitions of the phenomenon

Adolescence is a very complex phase in which substantial themes converge for the development of identity, sexuality, decisions concerning lifestyle, self-esteem, emotional and intellectual autonomy, also functional to the construction of framework values. For adolescents, being able to face these issues positively means developing a form of bio-psycho-social well-being, resulting from the interaction between positive assessments on self-esteem, academic successes and interpersonal relationships, even if in reality the experience of well-being in the adolescent phase, inevitably coexists with that of malaise, foreseen within a phase of the path of physiological development, both interconnected to the realization of developmental tasks. However, the fulfilment of these evolutionary tasks has been severely tested by the rigid measures imposed by the various Governments regarding social distancing, aimed at containing the SARS-CoV-2 infection, in particular in the first months of 2020, which have negatively impacted the psychological well-being of adolescents. It has been estimated that between March and May 2020, approximately 1.5 billion children and adolescents, subjected to these restrictions, had to change their social interactions accordingly, exacerbating, even more, the transfer of a mode of interaction from the real world to the virtual one. Literature data estimate that 79% of children aged between 11 and 18, especially in the first months of the Lockdown, spent up to four hours connected

to mobile devices (phones, PCs, tablets), not just connecting to platforms social networks, but also to listen to music or to watch movies until late at night. Think of how this may have contributed in some cases to favouring the process of social isolation, in a period such as that of adolescence which is so complex and articulated, which some scholars have defined, not surprisingly, as a real tsunami. In the phase of adolescence, the brain undergoes a maturation process that predisposes to the formation of four specific mental characteristics: search for novelty, social involvement, greater emotional intensity, creative exploration. For each characteristic considered there are negative and positive aspects that can manifest themselves in terms of behavior: the search for novelty in negative terms can manifest itself with the adoption of behavior that is contemptuous of danger and seeking risk, on the contrary the positive aspects will be concentrated on behaviors oriented to planning; isolation may instead represent the negative component of social involvement, where the adolescent will tend to isolate himself or isolate himself with peers excluding adults, the positive aspects will instead be determined by the development of relationships aimed at a greater source of support or support; the negative aspects of greater emotional intensity may be related to the adoption of impulsive and aggressive behaviors, on the contrary the positive ones may manifest themselves through a greater charge of energy; creative exploration can reveal itself in a negative sense with a possible identity crisis, and the positive aspects can instead be represented by dealing with the daily routine with extraordinariness. Think about how the Lockdown period could also influence the development, already complex in itself, of the mental characteristics of adolescents. A clarification appears necessary: when addressing the issue of social isolation, reference is made to a different form than that provided for by home confinement and social distancing imposed by governments. In fact, in order for the former to be defined as such, it requires the characteristic of the voluntary nature of the subject to be isolated, a parameter obviously not present when referring to the COVID-19 pandemic. The term voluntary social self-isolation is attributable to a phenomenon initially born in Japan around the 80s and known with the term "Hikikomori" which means "step aside" and then gradually spread also in the West, with important repercussions on the psychological well-being of adolescents, even if the phenomenon can affect not only this specific population target but can also involve the adult population.



## Qualitative data analysis: local focus groups

Each partner organisation implemented a focus group at their local level dedicated to the theme of social isolation.

### Objectives

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The Focus Groups aimed to:

- deepen the theme of youth relational distress from the point of view of young people and youth workers, to allow the acquisition of elements related to the way young people live their universe of relationships and the factors that can lead to isolation;
- stimulate the comparison, sharing and exchange of knowledge among professionals active in the Youth field;
- highlight the existing gaps in prevention and intervention in cases of social isolation.

## Implementation Approach

A common questioning route was developed for the implementation of the focus groups. Each partner implemented its focus groups at the local level following the common questions outlined by the project team to reach the goals of the qualitative analysis.

The questions investigated:

- social isolation and voluntary social isolation phenomena;
- factors leading to voluntary social isolation and warning signs;
- prevention strategies;
- intervention strategies.

The following table collects the questions per each researched area.

| Social isolation and voluntary social isolation phenomena       |                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question no. 1                                                  | <i>Based on your personal and professional experience, what does social isolation represent for you?</i>                                      |
| Question no. 2                                                  | <i>In our meeting, we will focus our attention on voluntary social isolation. What characteristics can we attribute to this phenomenon?</i>   |
| Factors leading to voluntary social isolation and warning signs |                                                                                                                                               |
| Question no. 3                                                  | <i>What do you think are the factors leading to voluntary social isolation?</i>                                                               |
| Question no. 4                                                  | <i>What do you think are the warning signs?</i>                                                                                               |
| Prevention strategies                                           |                                                                                                                                               |
| Question no. 5                                                  | <i>Based on the factors and the red flags we identified, what actions could be undertaken to prevent cases of voluntary social isolation?</i> |
| Intervention strategies                                         |                                                                                                                                               |
| Question no. 6                                                  | <i>What could families, schools and nonprofit organizations do to intervene and combat the phenomenon?</i>                                    |

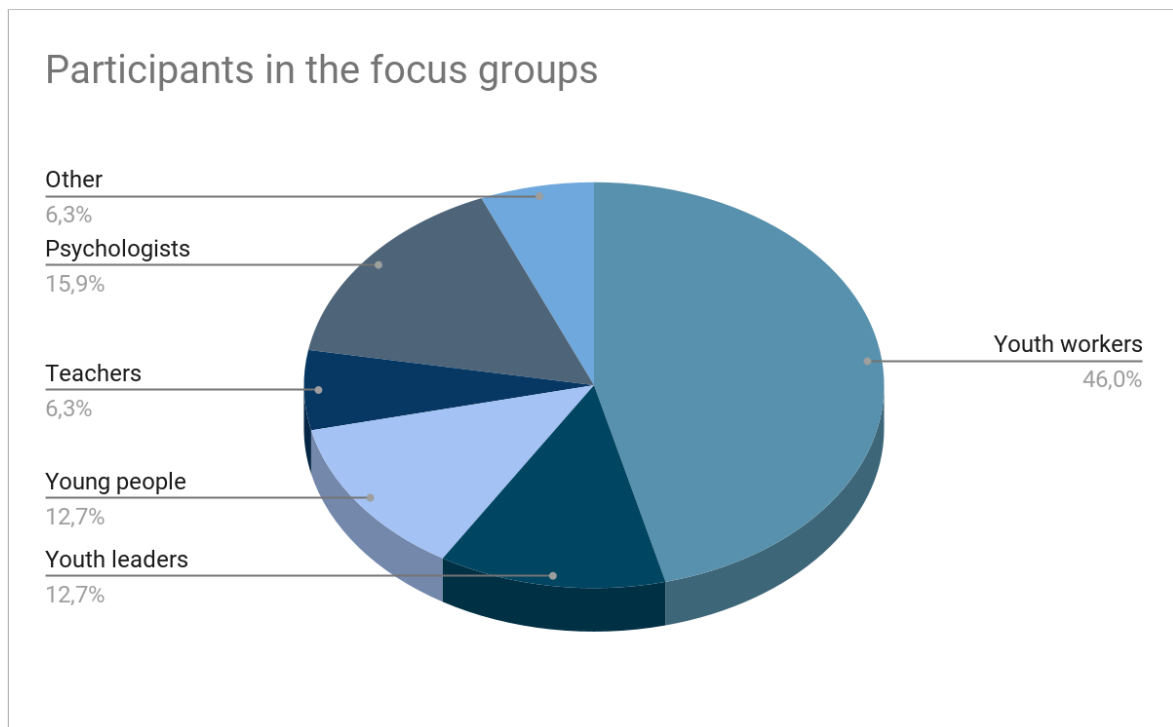
## Participants

133

**One hundred thirty three persons**  
were involved in the local focus groups.

The groups were mainly composed of:

- **Youth workers**
- **Psychologists**
- **Young people**
- **Youth leaders**
- **School teachers**



The following pages detail the composition of each local focus group.



10

Participants



3 Youth Workers  
4 Psychologists  
2 Trainers  
1 Teachers



x8

x2



build it.

Team4Excellence 



21

Participants



14 Youth Workers  
4 Young activists  
2 Youth Leaders  
1 Psychologist



 x15  
 x6





10  
Participants

Youth Workers  
Youth Leaders



khik it

Youth BCN

YOUTH  
BCN



15+  
Participants

Youth Workers  
Young People  
Teachers  
Mental Health



build it.

# Youth Bridges Budapest



8

Participants



Youth Workers  
Young People  
Youth Leaders



## Sprijin Si Dezvoltare



# 15

Participants



5 Youth Workers  
3 Young Volunteers  
3 Youth Leaders  
4 Psychologists



 x8  
 x7



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# GUIDE



# 15

Participants



5 Psychologists  
4 Teachers  
4 Social Workers  
2 Interpreters



 x8  
 x7



©Lolostock

think it.

# Contextos



# 16

Participants



14 Youth Workers  
2 Psychologists



x9

x7



# Green Elephant Foundation



18

Participants



Youth Workers  
Psychologists  
Young Activists  
Youth Leaders



♀ x11  
♂ x7



## Results

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The following sections summarize the results of the nine focus groups:

- the characteristics attributed to the phenomenon of voluntary social isolation;
- the identified driving factors and warning signs;
- the prevention and intervention strategies highlighted during the discussions.

Some limitations need to be acknowledged regarding the findings of the focus groups. The pages onwards collect the prevalent answers provided by the focus groups' attendees, and therefore the results of the direct and indirect experiences and observations of a low-sized sample. Hence, the generalizability of the findings is limited and further research is necessary to determine a wider applicability of the factors listed and establish a certain correlation between the identified elements and the phenomenon.



The purpose of all the information provided in this publication is solely to inform about the results of the activities of the KHIK IT project: although the authors strived to provide accurate general information about the phenomenon of voluntary social isolation, the information presented here is not a substitute for any kind of professional advice, and the readers should not rely solely on this information.

## Characteristics of the phenomenon



Guiding question:

**“What are the characteristics that we can attribute to the phenomenon of voluntary social isolation?”**

| Characteristic               | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Persistent withdrawal</b> | Withdrawal from social participation for a period of more than six months. This can include leaving home while avoiding social interactions.                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Insecurity</b>            | Feeling of inadequacy, low self-esteem and lack of confidence, producing a sentiment of instability, uncertainty and anxiety about personal goals and social relationships.                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Shyness</b>               | Feeling of discomfort in contexts of social interactions.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Social anxiety</b>        | Fear of social situations and anxiety in social contexts, often causing an impairment of functioning in daily life.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Search for comfort</b>    | Creation of more predictable and controllable spaces (e.g., one's own room), considered to be safer and less challenging than the outside world.                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Avoidant behaviour</b>    | Avoidance of interactions with other people, as a form of self-protection from feared social situations, including situations in which the individual could be asked by others about their current state. External relationships with the members of the social communities the person was part of are usually cut off or limited to occasional virtual interactions. |

|                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Day-night reversal</b>                     | Sleeping during the day and staying awake at night, during the conventional bedtime hours.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Unhealthy lifestyle</b>                    | Sedentarity, with low or absent levels of exercise, often accompanied by unhealthy diets: e.g., consumption of fast food, sweets and caffeinated drinks.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Overuse of the Internet</b>                | Spending a considerable amount of time on the Internet, to compensate for the loss of time spent in the real world.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Lack of interest in activities outside</b> | Disengagement and loss of interest in activities to be implemented out of their comfort zone, including going to school or work, and participating in outdoor leisure activities. In some instances, the time spent outside is limited to essential needs, such as going to healthcare locations or shopping for groceries in the neighborhood. However, the disengagement in outdoor activities is often accompanied by the development of new indoor interests and hobbies and the practice of home-based activities. |
| <b>Perceived lack of emotional support</b>    | Sometimes, the young person may perceive there is not someone who try to understand them and with whom they can discuss about their personal problems and thoughts.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |

## Factors leading to voluntary social isolation



Guiding question:

**“What do you think are the factors leading to voluntary social isolation?”**

In all the focus groups, the discussion of the driving factors of voluntary social isolation resulted in the acknowledgment of the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon, and the coexistence and interrelation of multiple individual and contextual factors, including parental, school and societal factors that lead to withdrawal as a coping mechanism.

The most recurring factors highlighted during the discussions are presented in the table below.

| Factor                              | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Struggle with the ideal self</b> | Struggle in achieving the ideal of the self they inherited from childhood and/or developed to keep up with the expectations of others (e.g., parents, friends, society as a whole).                                                                                                     |
| <b>Experiences of defeat</b>        | Difficulties in coping with natural experiences of failure, such as failing exams at school/university or interviews to get that job to legitimize their social status. Social responsibilities and role performances may become a burden turning normal failures into profound defeat. |
| <b>Introverted personality</b>      | Orientation toward their inner world, thoughts and feelings.                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Socio-cultural influences</b>    | Pressures for social realization, fragmentation of social cohesion, change in communication dynamics, internalisation                                                                                                                                                                   |

|                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                    | of societal success standards, culturally inherited resistance to change or uncertainty about the future may be among the numerous socio-cultural factors that can contribute to the phenomenon. |
| <b>Dysfunctional family dynamics and parenting</b> | Poor communication and emotional exchange between the family members. Authoritarian, rejecting or overprotective parenting style, along with an over-dependency from one of the parents.         |
| <b>Adverse childhood experiences</b>               | Parental loss, direct or indirect experiences of abuse, witnessed violence at home.                                                                                                              |
| <b>Bullying and peer rejection</b>                 | Acts of bullying and peer rejections lead young people at risk of social withdrawal to a further cynical attitude towards a generation and a society in which they do not recognize themselves.  |
| <b>Post-traumatic stress</b>                       | Experience of traumatic events, such as harassment, insults or emotional neglect, unexpected loss of a close person, discovery of a life-changing injury or disease.                             |
| <b>Marginalization</b>                             | Social and economic marginalization, and digital exclusion.                                                                                                                                      |

## Warning signs



Guiding question:

**“What do you think are the warning signs of voluntary social isolation?”**

The path toward social withdrawal is gradual. All the warning signs identified by the focus groups’ participants, as listed below, may be revealed and evolve at different stages of the individual’s pathway. Each of the following elements may not be relevant when considered alone; however, their combination may provide a warning for the early detection of social withdrawal.

| Element                                              | Description                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Disengagement from school or work</b>             | Refusal to go to school, university or work, from occasionally to frequently.                                                                           |
| <b>Interpersonal difficulties</b>                    | Challenges to fit into a group and to blend in with other people, including friends and peers.                                                          |
| <b>Decreased social interactions</b>                 | Less in-person social interaction with friends and peers and decreased social participation.                                                            |
| <b>Increased time alone</b>                          | Spending a considerable amount of time alone at home.                                                                                                   |
| <b>Progressive reversal of the sleep-wake rhythm</b> | Staying awake during conventional bedtime hours, engaging in solitary activities, and sleeping during the daytime.                                      |
| <b>Disengagement from outdoor hobbies</b>            | Gradual loss of interest in leisure activities and hobbies the person was previously engaged in, especially if they require contacts with other people. |

|                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Increased time online</b> | Spending more time in virtual environments, e.g., to play videogames, engage in chats or forums. Online interactions with other people may be perceived as more controllable, since they occur in manageable settings, where a feared social situation can be promptly shut down with a click. |
| <b>Family conflicts</b>      | Conflicts with family members arising if the young person perceives to be pushed to talk about their current status, or pressured to go out, re-engage in school, university or work.                                                                                                          |
| <b>Low self-esteem</b>       | Lack of confidence in their ability to cope with societal challenges and perception of being unable to achieve success.                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Low stress tolerance</b>  | Difficulties in coping appropriately with daily stressors, such as interpersonal problems or poor school, academic or work performances.                                                                                                                                                       |

## Prevention and intervention

In recent decades, in the psycho-criminological field, the problem of youth discomfort has increasingly been referred to as the difficulty young people encounter in defining personal and social identity and, therefore, the need for self-knowledge. However, if we want to understand the complexity of the phenomenon of social isolation, we need to start from a global vision that takes into consideration two distinct but interdependent dimensions: on the one hand, the social macro-system, with its stratifications, and, on the other hand, the micro-system concerning the personal dimension linked to the individual history of each one. Since social withdrawal originates from a malfunction in the connection and communication between these systems, prevention and intervention actions should concern both the interested person and all the social contexts in which they are inserted. Therefore, **multi-levelled efforts** are required, involving the key stakeholders in their social environments. Four levels for differentiated action resulted from the analysis of the results of the focus groups' discussion:

- **individual** level;
- **family** level;
- **school** level;
- **non governmental organizations** level.

**Individual level.** Supporting the individual to acknowledge the existence of the problem is essential for any prevention and intervention action to work. However, initially, most young people in social withdrawal are unlikely to seek support: considering their condition as a lifestyle rather than a problem, they won't ask for help or come forward with their complaints, rather it is often a parent or a relative to look for advice and consult support institutions.

**Family level.** Parents and siblings, the affected person's immediate surroundings, are the people who have more impact on the young person's life and should be recognised as a critical factor for prevention and intervention. They are likely to be the only ones allowed to enter their comfort zones without provoking discomfort. On the other hand, in most cases, the lack of knowledge about social withdrawal does not enable family members to respond

promptly and directly. Thus, for early intervention, families need to acquire the appropriate knowledge and techniques for dealing with young people in a condition of social withdrawal. The awareness and the action of these stakeholders are crucial for the success of the journey to prevent the condition or recover.

**School level.** The school environment represents one of the leading development contexts for adolescents, influencing the adaptation and well-being of the individual. School, along with family, should be the main educational source for youth to acquire the social skills that are necessary to establish relationships with others and with the surrounding environments. Moreover, school teachers and mentors could be the first to detect the warning signs of social withdrawal.

**Non-Governmental Organisation level.** Last but not least, a group that should be involved in the prevention of the social isolation phenomenon is composed of the stakeholders in the social field. Youth workers and social workers serve as guiding figures in the social development of many marginalized groups. Informal and non-formal learning activities could provide a flexible environment where learning new skills is participative and inclusion and diversity are encouraged, while learning pathways can be tailored and adapted to the different needs and stages of development of each person.



Guiding questions:

“What actions could be undertaken to prevent voluntary social isolation?”

“What could families, schools and nonprofit organizations do to intervene and combat the phenomenon?”

## Family

### PREVENTION

- Fostering cohesion, adaptability and flexibility within the family.

- 
- Increasing the frequency of conversations between family members, encouraging active listening, dialogue and critical thinking. Finding more time to talk to the children is of utmost importance: asking them questions, being informed about what they think, and how they feel. In this aspect, parents must learn how to build and maintain a relationship of trust with their children, offer moral support and develop their emotional intelligence.
  - Encouraging the development of personal goals and ideals, avoiding the creation of an ideal image based on parents or others' expectations that the young person may not feel like their own and, ultimately, struggle to achieve for lack of real motivation.
  - Relieving pressures on social realization and responsibilities, supporting young people to overcome the fear of failure and the burden of the perceived imperative of being fast, efficient and successful. Help them learn from their failures, emphasizing their effort, and encourage them to use those failures to work towards greater wins.
  - Encouraging children to try new things out of their comfort zone, such as outdoor activities, sports, volunteering or community events.
  - Welcoming conflicts as an opportunity to learn more about each other, connect and get insights about hidden problems.
  - Encouraging children to ask for help, also professional advice if needed to process any emotional pain.

## INTERVENTION

- Acknowledging the problem and understanding the profound distress the person is experiencing. Being open to listening and assisting with any crisis non-judgmentally, empowering them without showing superiority.
  - Seeking professional help: family therapy, including, whether possible, both the young person and his parents; psychotherapy; vocational rehabilitation; home visits for completely recluse youths.
  - Gradually encouraging activities that help them break the day-night-reversed solitary routine.
  - Building and maintaining trust, deciding together upon the actions to undertake, avoiding lies and actions behind their back.
-

- 
- Using their channels to communicate (e.g., messaging apps, social networks) to initiate some ideas to pursue at home, develop new interests or learn new things.
  - Treating them like adults, favouring the development of their decision making autonomy and avoiding overprotective behaviours that may additionally endanger their growth.
  - Avoiding pressures to restore their social life and judgments on their decision to withdraw. Striving to convince socially withdrawn youths to get back to life outside, going back to school or work, hanging out with their peers can be perceived as minimization and disrespect of the discomfort they feel and the reasons they had to withdraw.
  - Avoiding impositions or coercive actions, such as forcing them to wake up earlier or have lunch together, or forbidding the use of the Internet and video games.
  - Avoiding guilt to provoke reactions. An example of this attitude is highlighting how sad one is about the situation, how the whole family's well-being has changed due to the problem. This attitude is unlikely to produce positive reactions: it can only bring more pressure on an already much-pressured person.

## School level

### PREVENTION

- Preventing peer rejection, by enhancing a socially accepting school environment.
  - Promote the value of failure, tackling its stigmatization. Academic pressure and failure to attain high academic achievements have often been associated with young people in voluntary social isolation.
  - Assisting with academic difficulties, through individualized attention, tutoring or mentoring, to support students who are struggling in their studies and falling behind their class to build confidence in their abilities and, ultimately, catch up to the rest of their peers.
  - Identifying the warning signs of bullying, e.g., name-calling, back turning, exclusion from class/school groups, unexplained bruises and scratches.
  - Providing orientation, advice and support for the transition from high school to university.
  - Promotion and management of counseling service points where students can discuss with counselors.
-

- 
- Promotion of information and raising-awareness actions targeting youth, school staff and families about dangers to youth psychosocial wellbeing.
  - Promotion of outdoor learning experiences and exchange spaces outside the school environment.

## INTERVENTION

- Avoiding pressures to come back to school, favouring students' gradual reintegration.
- Encouraging alternative teaching opportunities that favor the personalization of the learning process, with inclusive intervention strategies. Providing youth with opportunities for online learning during the withdrawal period could help them gain the skills they need to not fall further behind and, at the same, operate in a space they feel they can control.

## NGOs level

### PREVENTION

- Promoting learning opportunities for families and school staff about how to identify, understand, and respond to warning signs of social withdrawal.
- Promoting social skills training to let young people develop skills such as emotion management and interpersonal skills and ultimately let them build a sense of relatedness with others.
- Promoting parenting courses and emotional intelligence training for young people and their families.
- Providing job-seeking assistance as well as orientation for learning opportunities in the vocational education and training field.
- Promoting volunteering, traineeships and internships in the social field to foster cooperation and independence, support youth to acknowledge their abilities and self-worth.

### INTERVENTION

- Providing opportunities for parents of socially withdrawn youths to understand the problem and how to deal with it, share experiences and concerns, through support groups.
  - Providing opportunities for socially withdrawn young people to socialize with others. Such activities should avoid authoritative roles in the groups, be flexible,
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loosely scheduled, and carried out with informal or non-formal education methods.

- Offering virtual mentoring activities, through chats, emails, social networks, using the Internet-based tools socially withdrawn youths may use the most.
  - Offering opportunities to engage in online social activities to encourage their sense of belonging to the community and improve their social skills.
  - Development of hotlines addressed to socially withdrawn youth, but also families, friends and school staff.
-



## Case Studies

This chapter presents the case studies shared and discussed by the participants of the project's international seminar, held in Naples in October 2021. All the names used are solely pseudonyms.

### Case Study #1

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Pseudonym                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Maya |
| Age                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | 37   |
| Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |      |
| <p>Maya is a woman born and raised in a small town in Bulgaria.</p> <p>In her early childhood, she did not show any abnormalities in her social behaviour. However, she preferred the company of younger children, and she was not living up to her age. The first signs of her discomfort have been observed in her early high-school years: she began having some difficulties with subjects like Chemistry and Math, had issues overcoming them and began having difficulties with peers at school.</p> |      |

Maya experienced some problems in her social life as well: her friend circle was very limited and mainly consisted of younger than her students and friends of her younger sister. Her mother noticed the problem and acted on it by asking some of her classmates to tutor her and help her in her studies, yet this did not have any positive results. As a result, she had antisocial behaviours at the end of her school years. Her mother kept asking some of the peers she used to play with to go out with her, but she did not achieve the desired result.

Maya continued her studies and finished university, achieving both bachelor and masters degrees in another city. After the end of university, Maya returned to her hometown, where she has lived until now. Once home, when she managed to find a job, Maya had trouble communicating with her colleagues and struggled with even the simplest of tasks that required collaboration. She didn't manage to find a new job.

Today, she is unemployed and does not have a partner. According to her neighbours, she does not go out and despises small talk. Her only social interactions are with her sister. On the other hand, her social media presence is firm: she regularly posts pictures of herself online, combined with motivational quotes and inspirational messages.

### Considerations

- Maya's social and communication skills got worse when she was struggling to overcome her issues with academic achievements in high school. During that period, she preferred going out with her sister and the friends of her younger sister, avoiding peers. In reaction to that, her mother intervened, trying to find support for Maya's learning and socialization.
- Absence of the father and protective behaviour of the mother: her mother used to ask some of Maya's schoolmates to come to home and help her with the studies, as well as asking some of the people Maya used to play with to go out together with her.
- About the years Maya spent in higher education in another city, there is a lack of specific information. She graduated, and holds an MA degree, and therefore it seems she had enough motivation to continue her studies after the BA degree. Her capability to set and achieve goals can be assumed. However, when she returned to her hometown, she experienced challenges in the transition from education to work: difficulties finding a stable or

long-term job, and, when she found one, she had problems completing tasks and collaborating with her colleagues. Her social skills were poor and she couldn't manage to adapt to the social environment.

- Maya is 37, and she has been unemployed for most of the time since her graduation. The situation has stagnated in the last approximately 12 years. Maya has not engaged in any stable and long-lasting relationship. She has struggled in the field of her professional and private life and her response to a situation she fears she cannot manage has been social withdrawal.
- She goes out only to walk her dog, but has struggles engaging also in small talks, frustrated by the questions of others, in a defensive, self-protective state, to avoid questions about her family status or career achievements.
- Maya strives to fill the gap of real relationships with her online presence, where she looks like an optimistic and confident person. She posts motivational quotes and selfies on her Facebook profile almost every day.
- Maya's parents blamed the employers for not hiring their daughter, despite her MA degree. It can be assumed that they do not acknowledge her condition, the reasons that keep her isolated and the need to work on her social skills. Hence, they do not try to empower her, rather they created an environment in which there are only other people to blame for her actions.

## What could be done to intervene?

Engaging her sister in the reintegration process could facilitate the pathway: since their childhood, Maya felt more comfortable with her and she could be the gateway for small steps to be taken. Such small steps should include actions both for Maya and her family:

- seeking professional help, such as, progressively, home visits, family therapy and psychotherapy;
- participating in support groups for families and individuals in a similar condition;
- engaging in online mentoring sessions;
- engaging in volunteering activities that could boost her self-esteem and support her in developing her social skills.

## What could have prevented Maya's withdrawal?

Years in the kindergarten/primary school:

- **Extra-curricular activities.** Offering her more extra-curricular activities with the aim of strengthening her self-esteem, self-sufficiency and training her to interact in diverse situations with other kids, trying different roles, developing her soft skills such as cooperation, teamwork, flexibility and adaptation. We would suggest team-sports like: football, basketball etc. Arts and craft club where children work on different projects or projects related to STEM education in small groups with the supervision of a teacher. Drama class / theatre group would be a great place to join.
- **Informing parents.** Seminars on learning and behavioral difficulties led by practicing psychologists and/or educational professionals for the parents.
- **Training teachers.** For the teachers, further training on innovative methodologies to develop soft-skills in school, and having structured circles for sharing and taking advice.

Years in the high-school:

- **Training and workshops** for Maya to further develop her skill set and to discover her strengths and values in situations outside of school.
- **Volunteering.** Involvement in tutoring or volunteering activities.
- **Career advising** and **mentoring** to make more suitable career choices.

After high-school / university

- **Network-building.** Attend different social clubs and learning groups, to help her integrate, create a network for her future career and social network in her new environment.
- Attend **career days**.
- Have a **mentor**.
- **Volunteering.** Engage in volunteering and teamwork activities.
- **Exchange** programs. Take part in exchange programs, to broaden her horizon and network.
- **Internships.** Pursue internship opportunities during her studies.

## Case Study #2

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Pseudonym                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Mike |
| Age                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | 12   |
| Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |      |
| <p>Mike is a 12-year-old middle school student from Greece. He is shy, quiet, introverted and speaks only to answer questions. He is an only child with no friends. Mike does not seem to have problems with going to school. In the beginning, he did not talk to the educator at all. Then gradually started to respond to his questions. No other information on interests and hobbies is provided. His father shared with his English teacher the concern that his son might have a problem as he seems to be too quiet. As an introverted child, Mike has difficulties integrating with his classmates.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |      |
| What could be done to prevent the child's social isolation?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |      |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The educator could engage Mike in a school project that involves writing postcards and letters in English to another child from the same grade in another country. It may help him to develop his <b>communication skills</b> and express his feelings in written form.</li> <li>Advicing the father in engaging his son into different <b>activities together</b>, like outdoor experiences, walking, sport or star watching. These activities should allow them to spend quality time together and build up trust. Art therapy techniques could be useful to engage Mike's imagination and help him express himself indirectly.</li> <li>Engaging Mike in <b>social skills training</b> to let him develop skills such as emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills and let him build a sense of relatedness with others.</li> </ul> |      |

## Case Study #3

|           |         |
|-----------|---------|
| Pseudonym | Roberto |
| Age       | 18      |

## Description

Roberto is an 18-year-old, single, who lives with his parents and his twin brother in Portugal. He isolated himself for almost 2 years after failing a school year and left his brother's class. He only left his room once to visit his grandmother. During the night he watched tv and played on the computer. By day he slept. He didn't show any particular interests in any activities.

### Family

- Absent father, especially during long periods because of his work.
- His Mother showed some difficulties in imposing herself and in setting limits.
- His twin brother didn't show any symptoms and didn't have any problems at the school.

### School

- He was a bullying victim during his teenage time and he was very shy.

### Clinical history

- Nothing about alcohol or drugs, neither psychiatry historial.
- His mum looked for professional help because his son never left home and gained a lot of weight.
- He didn't want to leave his house to go to the hospital, so the specialized medical care went to his house. In that visit, the boy demonstrated some tension and didn't make any eye contact.
- He was hospitalized for one month. Doctors gave him different treatments until he felt better and started showing improvement: At discharge, he was more interactive and collaborative, and accepted the transition to admission to the day hospital.

## Considerations

- The absence of the father as a male-role model, not being able to establish a connection with a reinforcing figure that recognizes the achievements of Roberto in school and in his personal life.
- The mother was the only parental figure reference for Roberto. In such cases, the mother is usually forced to play two roles, in this case, the inability to set

boundaries and limits by her, might have made Roberto feel insecure. This could lead to a false sense of reality or freedom, not allowing Roberto to engage and practice routines and habits for a healthy relationship with himself and his environment.

### How could youth workers support Roberto's social reintegration?

After the improvement shown with the medical treatment, in order to help Roberto re-engage with society, youth workers, under the supervision of a medical professional for mental and physical health, could support him through a step-by-step program focused on improving his self-esteem and social skills.

Activities that could be implemented:

- Favoring the creation of a habit of spending **family time**. Exploring and finding activities that Roberto is interested in to be done together during the weekend. These types of activities should help bond together as a family.
- Exploring and finding activities that Roberto is interested in to be done with friends. Physical activities are especially important, putting emphasis on team sports. These activities will help him reestablish good relationships and healthy habits.
- Keeping a "**Diary of Thoughts, Emotions & Behaviors**", at the of every day he should write about the feelings he experienced while interacting with his environment (family, friends, school). He should keep this diary for at least one year, and if possible, keep it as a good practice.
- **Mentoring** activities to reintegrate him into the education system. In this way, he will be able to get an education that will prepare him for starting his adult life. The participation in both formal and non-formal learning programs is vital to developing his social skills and competences required for the labor market.
- **Volunteering**. Engage in volunteering and teamwork activities.
- **Exchange** programs. Take part in exchange programs, to broaden his horizon and network.
- **Internships**. Pursue internship opportunities during his studies.

## What could have prevented Roberto's withdrawal?

- His engagement in **outdoor leisure activities** of his interest, either in youth center institutions, sports clubs, or any other informal education groups.
- A healthier **relationship** inside his **family**, spending quality time that would foster the support and security that the young person should have.
- The role of the school when a bullying event appears is crucial to help in the early stages, helping identifying it and making it visible its relevant actos. Oftentimes the early intervention, together with the support of a network made by the family, youth workers, mental health professionals and teachers could lead to a very successful rate of prevention of lesive conducts of a young person. The **psychological support** after the traumatic events he experienced may have prevented the isolation.

## Case Study #4

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Pseudonym                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Costadine |
| Age                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | 12        |
| Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |           |
| <p>Costadine is a 12 years old girl from Greece. Currently she attends an after school tutor center where she does her homework for the next school day with the help of a teacher. In the classroom she talks a lot about her family but, when it comes to friends, she never mentions them. When she was asked about her best friend, she thought about it for a while and then she said that it was her two years younger brother. Moreover, she wanted a lot to go to the tutor center although her family is not worried about her academic progress.</p> |           |
| Considerations                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |           |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Costadine doesn't have a friend she can talk to.</li> <li>• She built her self esteem based on her academic excellence because people usually praise her for her intellectual skills.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |           |

- Although she tries to build relationships with other kids they seem to ignore or reject her.

#### What could be done to prevent Costadine's isolation?

At school, her teachers should facilitate interactions with other children. Also, they should praise her not only for her academic achievements, but for the deeper, specific details that form the strengths of her personality (e.g., "You help others and this is a good trait. Good job!"). Teachers should also enhance a conversation with the parents in order to share their concerns and learn more about her everyday habits. Regular seminars and discussions for families with educators and psychologists at school could be beneficial: in this way, the experts could provide parents with social and communication skills to improve their relationship with their children. Also, youth workers should play an important role in local communities by creating activities and connecting different generations. Finally, it would be also important for schools to organize workshops and programs about bullying, social exclusion, and emotional intelligence.



## Conclusions

Based on the results of the focus groups and the work on the case studies presented in the previous chapter, this chapter will provide the key takeaways from the project experience. The propositions presented in the following lines are meant to be guidelines for families, educators and the close environment of the socially isolated person. The goal and hope is to provide the information and strategies necessary to minimize the problem and shed a light on the path of reintegration through small steps.

### 1 Awareness-raising initiatives for parents

Holding seminars about learning and behavioral difficulties led by practicing psychologists and/or educational professionals for the parents could help families to understand how to better support members at risk or in conditions of voluntary social isolation. Family is the key to the reintegration of *hikikomoris*: members of the family are highly likely to be the only ones allowed into the young person's safe space. The role of parents and siblings is considered to be crucial, and therefore their awareness and preparation on how to deal with the condition is essential.

## 2 Awareness raising initiatives with young people

**Creating workshops and programs** with more specific topics such as bullying, racism, gender and sexuality stereotypes.

## 3 Engaging young people in writing youth projects

Involving youngsters in writing projects and creating opportunities for intercultural interactions, to help them develop their language skills.

## 4 Increasing the provision and diversification of extra-curricular activities

**Offering extra-curricular activities** that the youngsters enjoy, based on group work, such as sports , art (music - chamber music groups, dance, painting,drama ), etc. This will help them reestablish good relationships and healthy habits, train their soft skills such as cooperation, teamwork, flexibility, adaptation, and also prepare them to interact in diverse situations with other kids and try different roles.

## 5 Training educators

We would suggest further training on methodologies to develop soft-skills in school, and having structured circles for sharing and taking advice.

## 6 Soft skills development

**Offer training and workshops for young people between 18-30** to further develop their skill set and to discover their strengths and values in real-life situations.

## 7 Promoting volunteering

**Involvement in volunteering.** Volunteering activities can support leadership skills, teamwork, and taking responsibility at any age.

## 8 Career advising and mentoring

**Career advising and mentoring** during the years of education might help more suitable career choices.

## 9 Social clubs and learning groups

**Create opportunities for youth to take part in different social clubs and learning groups.** To help the integration of young people in new communities, to create a bedrock for their future career and build a network in their new environment.

## 10 Career days

**Organize and promote career days** to broaden the horizon of students who are about to enter the labor market.

## 11 Exchange programs and Non-Formal Education activities

**Creating and promoting exchange programs and NFE activities.** Low entry activities and experiences abroad can support the soft skill development and independence of young people. These programs should aim to involve youth with fewer opportunities and support their participation.

## 12 Quality internship opportunities

**Implement quality Internships opportunities.** A well organized internship program can contribute to the participants' employability, networking and increase their job-satisfaction.

### 13 Awareness-raising initiatives for the community

**Inform** - raise awareness of the public of the phenomenon of self - isolation, its symptoms and possible consequences.

### 14 Meaningful unemployment programs

**Have a meaningful, educational unemployment program that** focuses on skill-development, a variety of training opportunities and recognition through volunteer work.

### 15 Mental health care exercises

Familiarising young people with **mental health care exercises**. For example, "Diary of Thoughts, Emotions & Behaviors", where youngsters write about the feelings they experienced while interacting with their environment (family, friends, school).

### 16 Co-design processes within youth centers

**Redefine** what **youth centers** are in the mind of youngsters by involving them in the process of selecting the activities offered there by asking them directly and keeping updated with their preferences. The aim is to make youth centers more appealing to the current generation by having useful as well as fun activities for example, help with homework and video game tournaments.



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