

# **NATIONAL TRAINING PLAN - PFN 2026**

## **MODULE 1 COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE WORKSHOPS FOR THE PNES**

**PNES THEMATIC WEBINARS: FOCUS ON MENTAL HEALTH**

**JA PRISM: THE CIRCLE OF FRIENDS BEST PRACTICE**

**29 May 2026**

**10.00-12.00**



**1 An overview of the 20-year history of the Circle of Friends intervention in Finland**

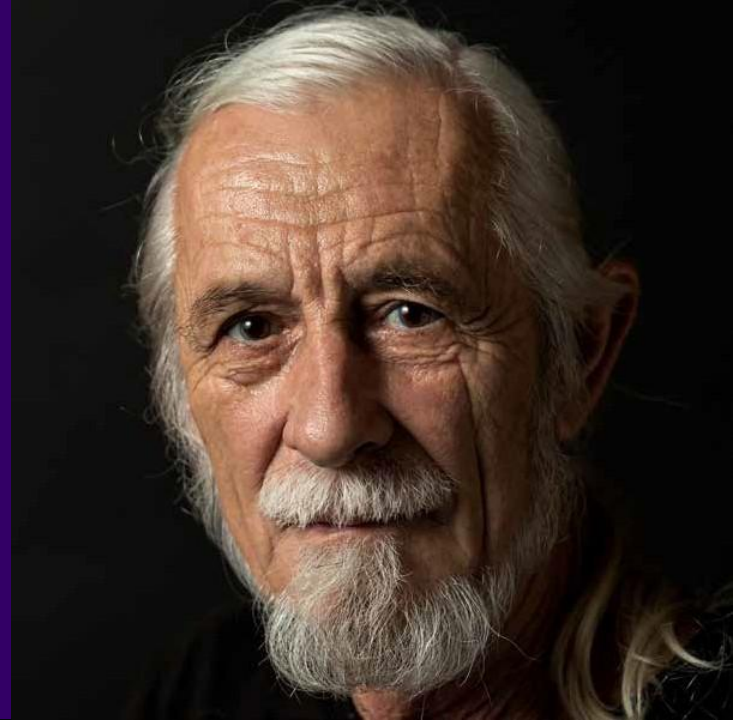
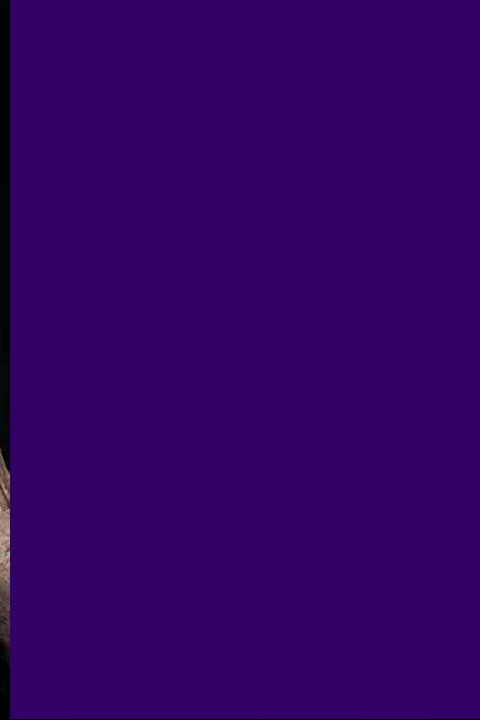


**2 Sharing our experiences and good results from Finland**

*Laura Rautiainen*, MSc, Doctoral researcher (University of Helsinki)  
Head of regional coordination, Empowering self-management group intervention  
The Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older Adults

## The Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older Adults

**The Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older Adults is a strong and well-known social opinion leader that is helping to make Finland the model country for ageing.**



**Older adults and aging people must be seen as a resource in society.**



**We make the voice of aging people heard.**



**We encourage people to prepare for old age.**



**The Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older Adults is the largest national organisation for the benefit of older people in Finland, and it reaches more than two million people through its membership. We offer functional solutions for the daily life of aging people, both through our own services and the services of our member communities.**

# Dignified old age is a basic human right.

STRATEGY 2022-2025



## 1 An overview of the 20-year history of the Circle of Friends intervention in Finland

### **Loneliness is**

- An individual, almost always negative experience.
- Expectations regarding social relationships or the social environment are not met.
- A complex and multidimensional phenomena.

### **Known background factors of loneliness:**

- Age, gender
- Living alone
- Lack of close relationships
- Losses, widowhood
- Declining health and functional ability
- Relocation
- Changes in social networks

### **Loneliness is related to:**

- Cognitive decline
- Decline in physical functioning
- Lowered mood
- Increased use of healthcare services
- Unhealthy health behaviors
- Increased mortality

## 1 An overview of the 20-year history of the Circle of Friends intervention in Finland

---

### Why loneliness matters?

- Loneliness is common and a widespread phenomenon.
- Approximately 20–40% of home-dwelling older adults in Finland experience loneliness at least sometimes.
- Around 10% experiences loneliness often or always.
- In assisted living facilities around 35–55% experience loneliness.

(Jansson 2020; Kolster et al. 2025; Rautiainen et al. 2026)

## 1 An overview of the 20-year history of the Circle of Friends intervention in Finland

### **Circle of Friends is addressing loneliness of older adults**

- It does not address social isolation, or target people who are just living alone, but not experiencing loneliness.
- The group is focused on loneliness, participants' distressing feelings and on the gap between desired or expected and actual levels of social interaction (Perlman and Peplau 1982)
- A participant in the group may feel lonely, even if this person is socially active (Victor et al. 2009)
- People who are suffering from existential loneliness, do not necessarily benefit from expanding their social network (Jansson et al. 2021)

## 1 An overview of the 20-year history of the Circle of Friends intervention in Finland

# Effectiveness of the Circle of Friends

## In the original RCT, Circle of Friends

- Improved lonely older adults' health and cognition (Pitkälä et al. 2009; Routasalo et al. 2009; Pitkälä et al. 2011).
- Decreased the use of healthcare services and reduced mortality among the participants (Pitkälä et al. 2009).

## According to the ten-year follow-up

- 9/10 of the participants felt that their loneliness had been alleviated in the group (Jansson et al. 2018).
- Of the groups, 60 % continue meetings on their own.
- Groups may continue independently without facilitator for years after the facilitated group process has ended -> empowerment of the participants.

## 1 An overview of the 20-year history of the Circle of Friends intervention in Finland

# Effectiveness of the Circle of Friends

Adaptation of the Circle of Friends, "Friends in Nature" (EU Horizon funded RECETAS-project 2021-2026) for frail older adults living permanently in assisted living facilities in Helsinki metropolitan area

### **Loneliness:**

- The intervention reduced loneliness in the intervention group compared to the control group (at the 3-month measurement point).
- The effect weakened during the follow-up period.

### **Health-related quality of life (15D):**

- The intervention did not improve health-related quality of life, but the sleep dimension improved in the intervention group compared to the control group.
- The number of group sessions attended and the amount of time spent outdoors influenced both the 15D outcomes and loneliness.

Pitkala et al. 2026. JAMDA [https://www.jamda.com/article/S1525-8610\(26\)00093-9/fulltext](https://www.jamda.com/article/S1525-8610(26)00093-9/fulltext)

## 2 Sharing our results

---

### Celebrating 20 years of Circle of Friends in Finland

- The Circle of Friends has been implemented in Finland since 2006.
- Over 13,000 older adults have participated in Circle of Friends groups in 130 localities in Finland
- Nearly 1,300 people have completed the facilitator training.
- **This has required time, planning, consistency, funding, rigorous training of group facilitators, strong support from VTKL and dedicated full time staff.**

## 2 Sharing our results

### **What do we know about the dissemination of the Circle of Friends?**

- Circle of Friends is well organised by the VTKL.
- Professional staff: 4 full-time coordinators, also part-time Circle of Friends – trainers

### **Circle of Friends participants in Finland are:**

- Home-dwelling older adults
- Residents in the long-term facilities (nursing homes, assisted living facilities)
- Older adults with cognitive decline (MMSE at least 15)
- Deaf people using sign language
- Older LTGBQIA+ adults

### **Circle of Friends facilitators in Finland are:**

- 65 % are professionals in the social – and health care
- 35 % are volunteers.

## 2 Sharing our results

---

### What we have learned from implementation

- Building the ground requires good coordination.
- Networking is essential.
- Careful planning, monitoring, evaluating and reporting.
- **Attitude is the key** – older adults are the heart of what we do.
- Nowadays we have four full time regional coordinators, who organise facilitator trainings and increase awareness about loneliness and its alleviation in their own region.
- Sustainable, continuous funding for organising the Circle of Friends.

## 2 Sharing our results

### Regional coordinators in Finland

- Regional coordinators are the ones who put Circle of Friends model into practice.
- They embed Circle of Friends in different localities by communicating within the region, organizing Circle of Friends group facilitator training sessions, and also acting as trainers in facilitator trainings.
- Together with local Circle of Friends facilitator trainers, regional coordinators ensure that the core elements of the group model are preserved through training and that the model is correctly adopted by facilitators.
- Regional coordinators and facilitator trainers collaboratively develop the Circle of Friends training programs, for example, based on feedback received from participants.

(Jansson et al. 2024)

## 2 Sharing our results

### Circle of Friends facilitators

Circle of Friends facilitators and their background organizations play an important role in putting the group model into practice by implementing Circle of Friends groups locally.

Local networks and actors are essential, as they can help identify older adults experiencing loneliness and guide them to join in groups.

Local actors can also be involved, for example, as expert guests in continuing education sessions.

An annual survey is sent to key partners, and its results are used for developing, evaluating, and reporting the activities.

(Jansson et al. 2024)

## 2 Sharing our results

---

### **Case example, Circle of Friends groups in Helsinki**

- City of Helsinki has been offering Circle of Friends groups for lonely older residents since 2006 in service centres around the city.
- Various NGOs are also actively facilitating CoF groups in Helsinki and around Helsinki metropolitan area.
- Circle of Friends groups are facilitated by social- and health care professionals and volunteers. Professionals usually facilitate groups as a part of their job.

## 2 Sharing our results

---

### **Case example, Circle of Friends groups in Riihimäki**

- In Riihimäki, Kotokartanosäätiö foundation actively organises Circle of Friends as a part of their regular activities.
- Participants are found through networks, advertising in local newspapers and regular activities in Kotokartanosäätiö.
- They have been facilitating Circle of Friends groups in different ways: professional – professional, professional – volunteer.
- Supporting the volunteers is important. It is important that the background organisation enables the frames for the group and also trusts volunteers – for example, forming the group and other steps in group process.

### 3 Take home - message

---

## Take home - message

- Rigorous facilitator training and mentoring played a key role in the successful embedding and dissemination of the Circle of Friends group model.
- Careful training Circle of Friends group facilitators has ensured that the effective elements of the original model have been preserved in practice.
- Careful training of facilitators has also been shown to be a crucial component of the effectiveness of Circle of Friends group activities. (Jansson et al., 2018.)

**This all has taken time –  
it is important to carefully conduct first groups.**

**Quality over quantity.**

### 3 Take home - message

---

# Thank you!

Laura Rautiainen

[laura.rautiainen@vthl.fi](mailto:laura.rautiainen@vthl.fi)

+358 50 317 2562

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0709-3843>

### 3 References

- Jansson, A. H., Savikko, N. M. & Pitkälä, K. H. (2018). Training professionals to implement a group model for alleviating loneliness among older people—10-year follow-up study. *Educational Gerontology* 44(2–3), 119–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601277.2017.1420005>
- Jansson, A. (2020). *Loneliness of older people in long-term care facilities*. [Väitöskirja. Helsingin yliopisto, lääketieteellinen tiedekunta, väestön terveyden tohtoriohjelma.] HELDA Helsingin yliopiston digitaalinen arkisto. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-51-6342-4>
- Jansson, A., Karisto, A., Pitkälä, K. (2021). Time- and place-dependent experiences of loneliness in assisted living facilities. *Ageing & Society*.
- Jansson, A., Lehtonen, R., Partanen, M., Pääkkö, M., & Ylimaa, T. (2024). Ystäväpiiri-toimintamalli. <https://www.julkari.fi/handle/10024/149853>
- Kolster, A., Rautiainen, L. J., Aalto, U. L., Jansson, A., Partonen, T., Sachs, A. L., Litt, J. S., Masó-Aguado, M., & Pitkälä, K. H. (2025). The importance of nature and wishes for nature-based experiences among older adults in assisted living facilities. *Geriatric Nursing*, 63, 300-306. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gerinurse.2025.03.061>
- Peplau LA, Perlman D. Perspectives on loneliness. In: Peplau LA, Perlman D. *Loneliness: a sourcebook of current theory, research and therapy*. John Wiley & Sons, New York. 1982
- Pitkälä, K. H., Routasalo, P., Tilvis, R. S., Kautiainen, H., Sundell, P., & Höijers, H. (2009). Effects of psychosocial group rehabilitation on social functioning, loneliness and well-being of lonely, older people: randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 65(2), 297–305.
- Pitkälä KH, Routasalo P, Kautiainen H, Sintonen H, Tilvis RS. (2011). Effects of socially stimulating group intervention on lonely, older people's cognition: a randomized, controlled trial. *Am J Geriatr Psychiatry*, Volume: 19, Issue: 7, Date: 2011 Jul, Pages: 654-63.
- Pitkala KH, Aalto UL, Rautiainen LJ, Kautiainen H, Kolster A, Laakkonen ML, Partonen T, Roitto HM, Puntsher S, Rochau U, Siebert U, Bartova A, Holmerova I, Coll-Planas L, Litt JS, Strandberg TE, Jansson AH; RECETAS consortium. Effects of Nature-based Group Intervention on Cognition and Nature Connectedness Among Lonely Older Adults Living in Assisted Living Facilities-Secondary Analyses of an RCT. *J Am Med Dir Assoc*. 2026 Apr 24;27(6):106203. doi: 10.1016/j.jamda.2026.106203. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 41966701.
- Rautiainen, L. J., Jansson, A. H., Aalto, U. L., Kautiainen, H., Laakkonen, M.-L., Roitto, H.-M., Strandberg, T. E., Carbó Cardeña, A., Coll-Planas, L., Litt, J. S., Kolster, A., & Pitkälä, K. H. (2026). Loneliness, social inactivity and social isolation of older adults in assisted living facilities. *Experimental Gerontology*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0531556526000987>
- Routasalo, P. E., Pitkälä, K. H., Kautiainen, H., Tilvis, R. S., & Pitkälä, K. H. (2009). Effects of psychosocial group rehabilitation on social functioning, loneliness and well-being of lonely, older people: randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 65(2), 297–305.
- Savikko, N. (2008). *Loneliness of older people and elements of an intervention for its alleviation*. Turun yliopisto.
- Tiikkainen, P. (2006). *Vanhuusiän yksinäisyys*. Jyväskylä University Printing House.