

NATIONAL TRAINING PLAN - PFN 2026

MODULE 1 COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE WORKSHOPS FOR THE PNES

PNES THEMATIC WEBINARS: FOCUS ON MENTAL HEALTH

JA PRIMS: THE CIRCLE OF FRIENDS BEST PRACTICE”

29 May 2026

10.00-12.00



1 **The Circle of Friends group intervention model:** An in-depth analysis of how "Circle of Friends" operates, explaining how the group structure helps to combat loneliness among the adults.



2 **Training the Circle of Friends facilitators:** Details on how professionals and volunteers are trained to facilitate these groups in an effective and sustainable way.

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The Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older Adults (VTKL)



1 The CoF model



The Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older Adults

Circle of Friends – group model

Group intervention for lonely older adults - alleviating loneliness and training facilitators



We talk about loneliness.

We have opportunities to become friends.

We get peer support and are empowered.

The content and activities come from our wishes.



Circle of Friends training enhances my knowledge and skills to facilitate a group.

As a facilitator I give space for the group participants.

The effectiveness of the intervention is based on systematic research and development.

Core elements of the Circle of Friends - group model

The aim is to alleviate loneliness.	The group is for older adults who experience loneliness
The group is made up of six to eight people.	Eight participants is an ideal group size in Circle of Friends
The group is closed.	Once the group process has begun no more people are added to the group
The group meets for a specified period.	Each meeting is usually two hours long. The group meets every week at the same time for a total of 12 times, i.e., for 12 weeks.
The group has a facilitator pair.	Both facilitators have Circle of Friends training. They take part in all the group meetings.

Circle of Friends is funded in Finland by STEA, Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations. STEA's funding can be granted to incorporated non-profit corporations and foundations for their work that promotes health and social welfare. The funding is applied yearly.

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In Circle of Friends - groups the role of the older adult is central

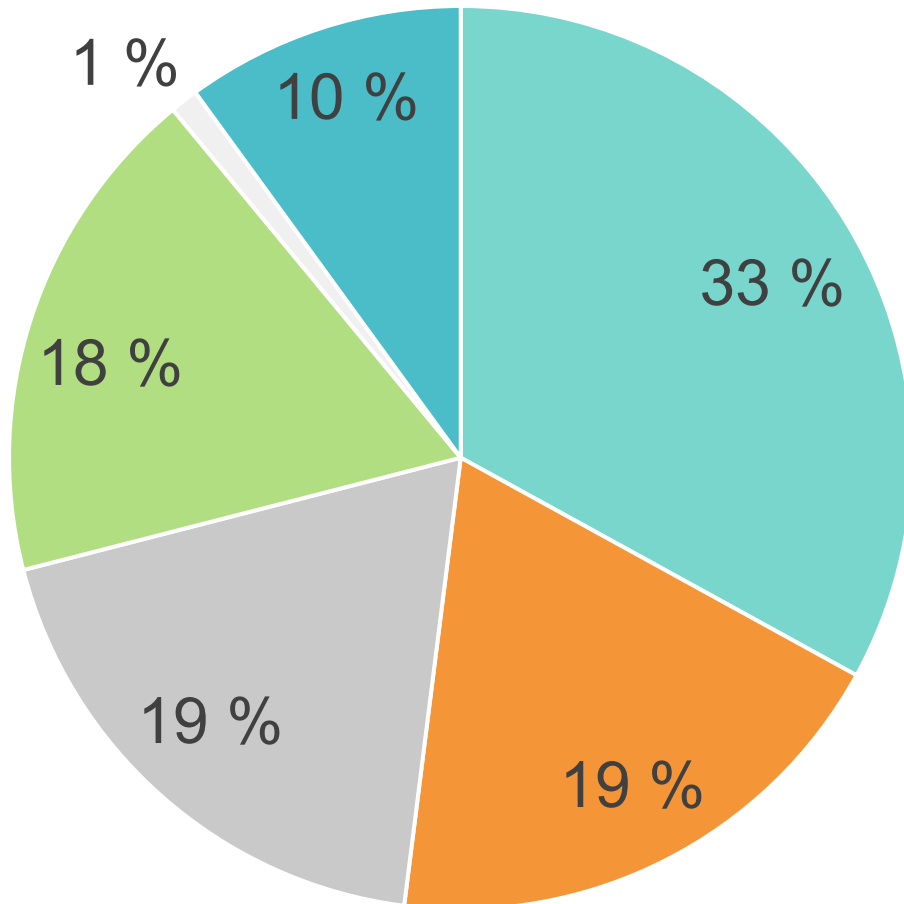
The views of older adults form the starting point for development and evaluation; for example, group participants hold a position of authority within the group.

We continuously evaluate and collect feedback from the group participants.

An expert by experience (an older adult) shares their personal experiences and views on loneliness and empowerment, for example in Circle of Friends training workshops and other events.

1 The CoF model

Reasons why lonely older adults have joined the Circle of Friends in Finland



Hope to alleviate loneliness 33%

To find some meaning and content in life 19%

Encouraged by someone 19%

Hope of making friends 18%

Melancholy, sorrow 1%

Other reasons 10%

1 The CoF model

What made you join the Circle of Friends?

”

The threat of loneliness. The desire to meet different but nice people.

My husband died a while ago. It was such a difficult time and the group's support was really important.

I had moved to a new place to live

I needed people's company to be able to carry on.

Loneliness, especially in the evenings.

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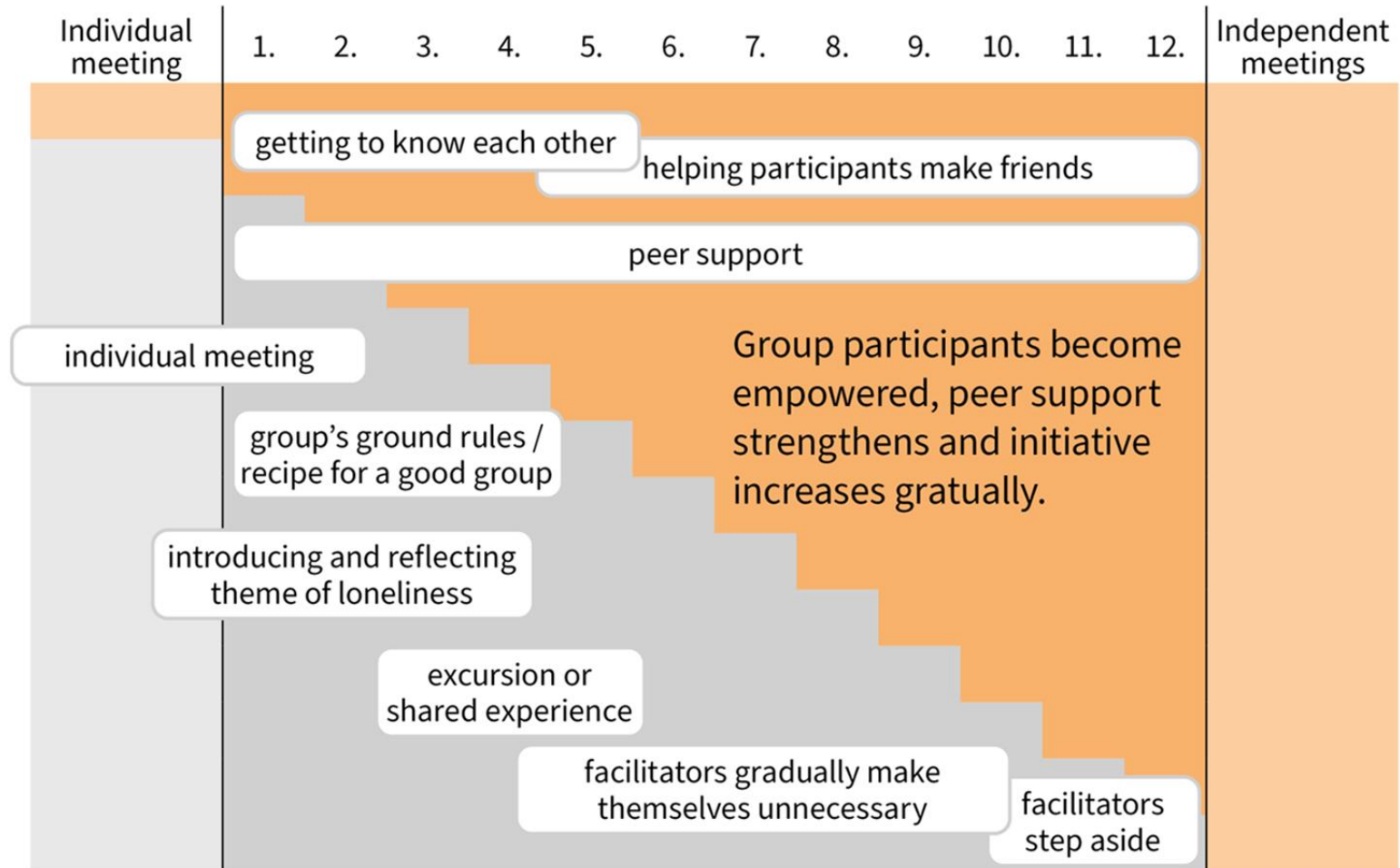
Forming the Circle of Friends - group

- The group consists of 6–8 people with 8 people being the ideal group size.
- New participants will not be introduced once the group has started.
- The experience of loneliness and motivation for group meetings are important criteria for participation.
- The aim is to make the group homogeneous, i.e. unified, → this makes it easier to make friends and work together.
- It is important to note that being in a group may not be suitable for everyone.
- The facilitator pair meets each participant individually before the Circle of Friends - group begins. It is important that the facilitator pair talks with their future group participants before the group begins.

Why meet the group participants before the group starts?

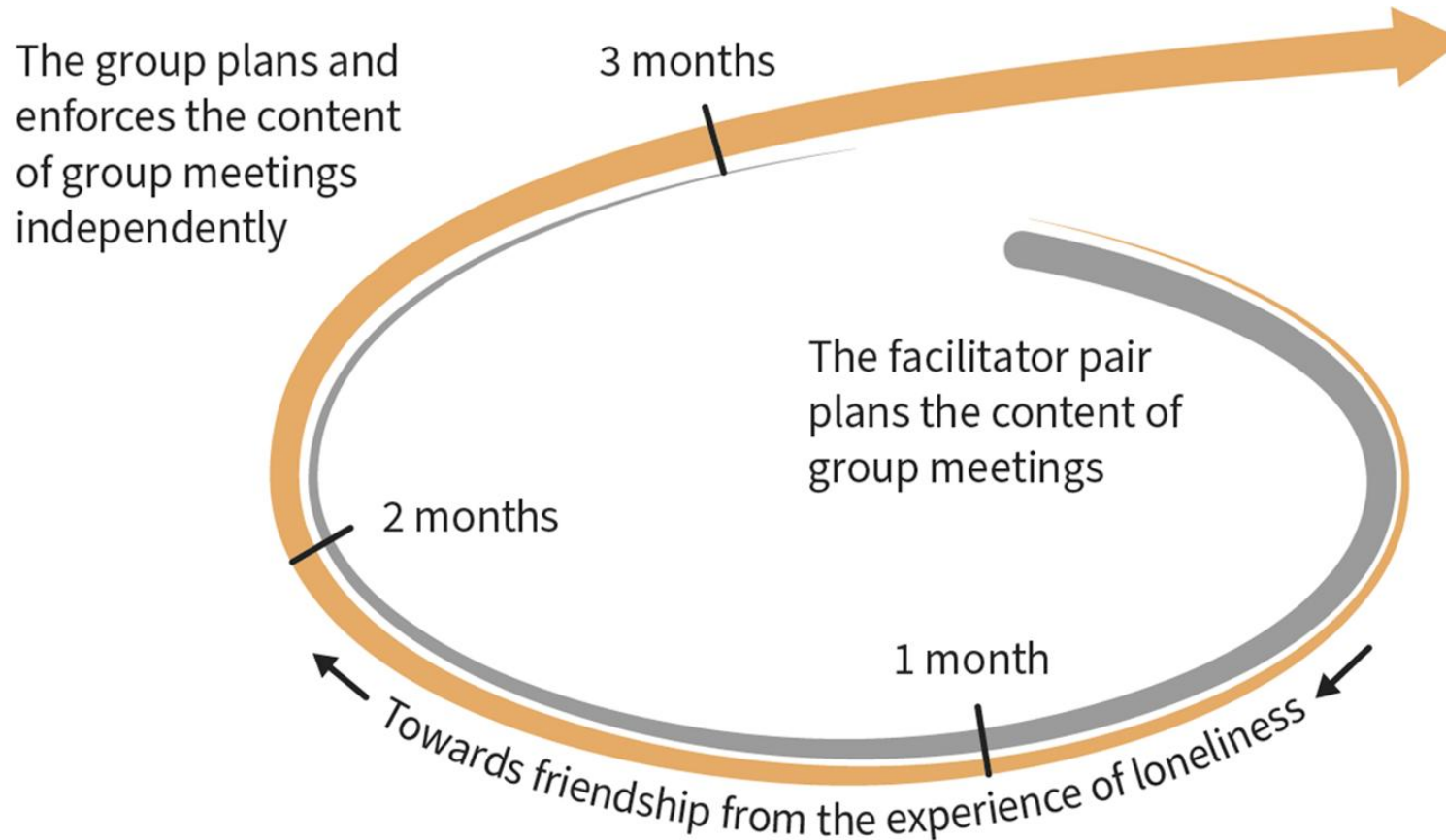
- The individual meeting initiates the group process. It plays a central role in orienting participants to the group, lowering the threshold for participation, and creating a sense of safety.
- The individual meeting supports commitment to the group and reduces the risk of dropouts.
- During the meeting, participants' interests, needs, and wishes are identified, which then serve as the basis for planning the group meetings.
- The individual meeting is also an opportunity to decline participation in the group.

Circle of Friends group process (12 facilitated group meetings)



Adapted from Jansson et al. 2025

Progression of the CoF group process (3 months)



Orange: peer support, strengths and responsibility of the group
Grey: reinforcement from the facilitator pair

A clear group structure supports and strengthens the group process

1. Settling in

Helps participants become present and sets the tone. This can be repeated in the same way at every group meeting (as an opening routine)

2. Activity

Is based on participants' wishes and needs, and always works towards an objective. Discussion is also a form of activity.

3. Reflection and sharing experiences

Strengthens group bonding. Discussion about the thoughts and reflections the group meeting has sparked in the participants

4. Closing

An opportunity to ask questions and talk about upcoming group meetings (participants' wishes and expectations for these). This may also include a closing routine.

1 The CoF model

” Experiences from Circle of Friends participants

Everyone was in a similar life situation, so it felt as though we were able to support one another.

After getting to know one another, we even started to long for this connection and time together. It felt completely natural that, as friends, we would continue meeting in the future.

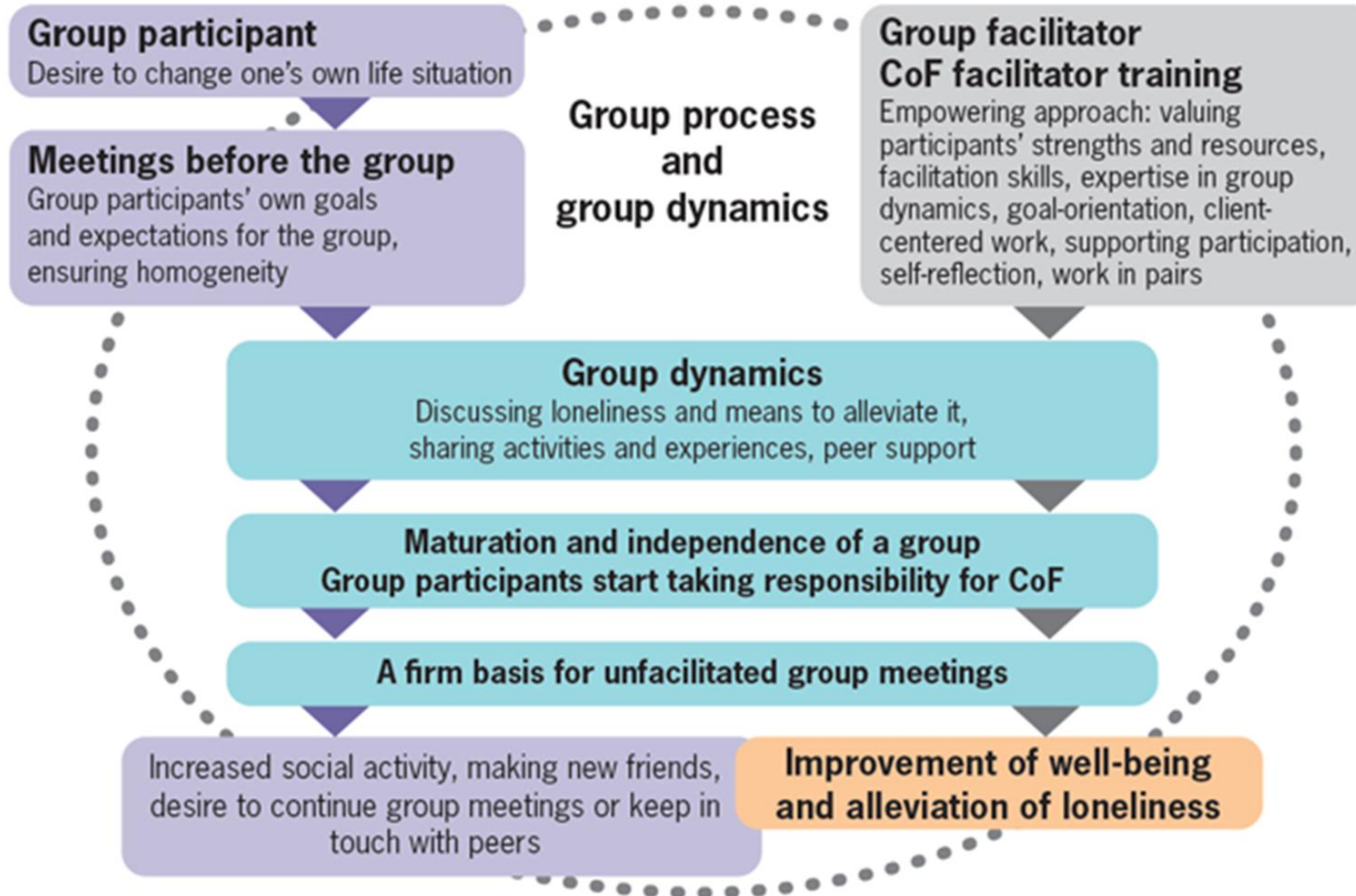
It was truly an ideal situation! In a small and safe group, you could get to know people and share everything

There are many people who experience loneliness. In the group, moments of light begin to appear in the life of someone who feels lonely.

I had a need to have people around me — and I did! At first through the group, and then two of the group participants have become a significant part of my life.

”

2 CoF facilitator training



Adapted from Jansson et al. 2025

Circle of Friends – facilitator training

10 online workshops
duration 5–6 months

Outreach work and individual meetings with the group participants. 6–8 participants/group

Facilitating the group. 12 group meetings (3 months).

A learning diary of each group meeting and two mentoring meetings with the mentor.

Interview of the facilitator pair: motivation, resources (time to plan and organize the group) and goals.

Workshops 1–2: Loneliness of older adults and understanding the key elements of the Circle of Friends group.

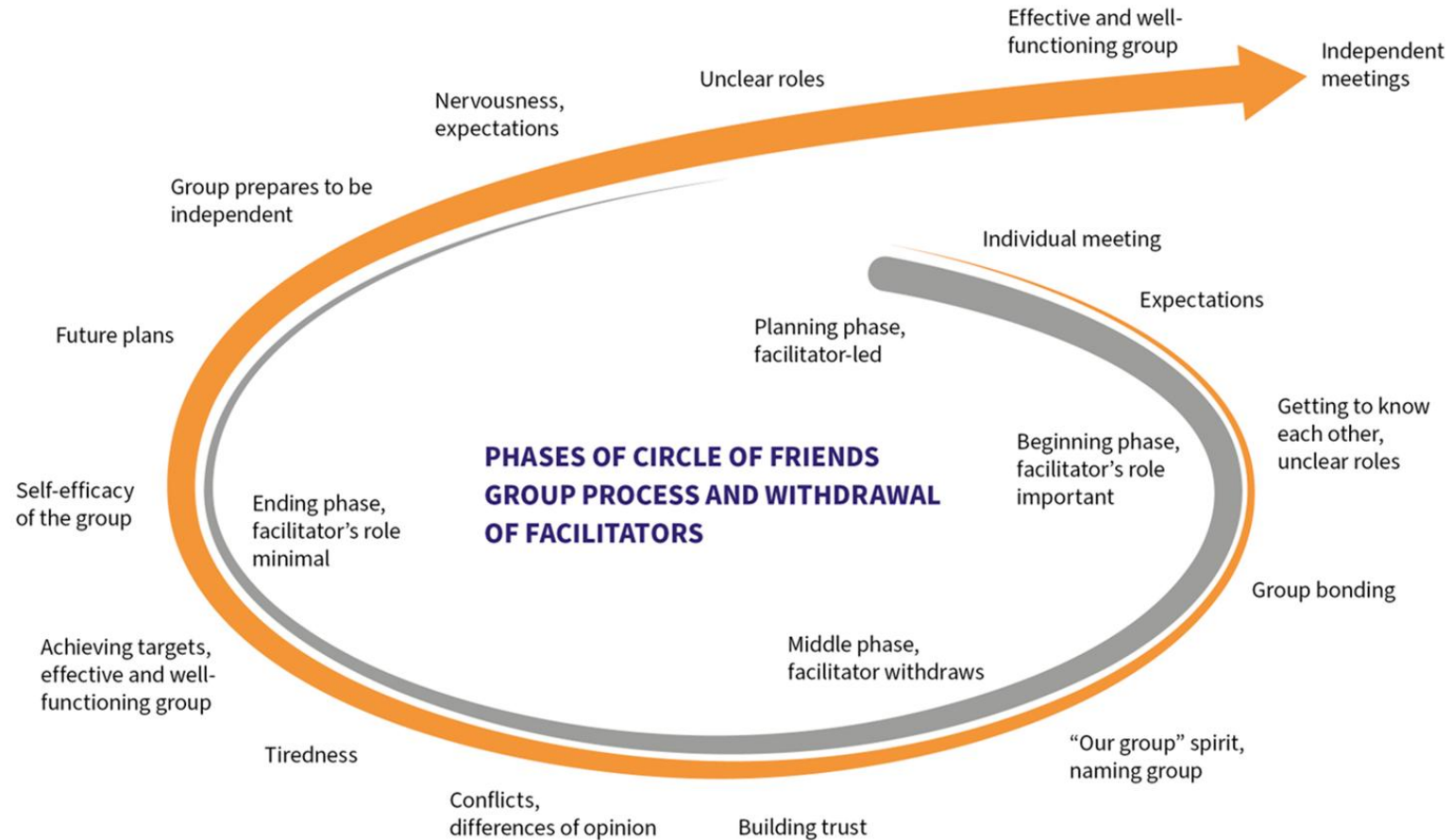
Workshops 3–4: Facilitating a closed and goal-oriented group process.

Workshops 5–6: Group facilitation in practice: How to plan and initiate a Circle of Friends group.

Workshops 7–8: Strengthening group facilitation skills and understanding the facilitator’s role throughout the group process.

Workshops 9–10: Evaluation of the group process and strengthening facilitation skills. Facilitator’s professional growth narratives.

2 CoF facilitator training



Adapted from Jansson et al. 2025

Circle of Friends facilitators are faced with many expectations

- The group expect the facilitators to take on a leadership or expert role.
- Facilitators may unintentionally respond too strongly to participants' expectations, which can result in interaction remaining primarily between the facilitators and the participants.
- Facilitators may also be tested; this can support the group's development and maturity.

Circle of Friends facilitator

- encourages and supports
- asks the right questions, does not give ready-made answers
- repeats important points aloud and clarifies things
- opens up the meanings of discussions, does not (over-)interpret
- creates opportunities for sharing experiences
- initiates discussion about the group's primary purpose at the first meeting and returns to it regularly as the group progresses
- supports shared ground rules that create safety
- sets an example of good co-facilitation through their own actions
- trusts the participants

Group facilitators promote participants' commitment if they...

- focus on the group's shared objectives and primary purpose
- support participants' individual objectives
- highlight participants' interests and wishes and work to realise them together with the group
- trust their own facilitation while also recognising areas for development
- encourage the group and provide positive feedback
- work collaboratively with their facilitator pair and gradually transfer responsibility to the group

” Quotes from Circle of Friends - group facilitators

I thought it would help me get even closer to people, so I took the training — and I absolutely loved it.

I learn new things all the time from the older adults

The training has taught me that every group participant should be treated as an individual and given their own space to speak

Working in pairs feels safer, and you have peer support right there beside you. I personally feel much more secure when there are two of us.

I've learned new ways of reducing loneliness — helping older adults feel empowered and build new friendships.

The training has been really important and versatile. It has opened up new perspectives and given me the tools to develop myself as a group facilitator.”

Take home message: Participation bulletin board for CoF

- Participants are seen, heard and accepted.
- Participants are offered opportunities to make choices.
- Participants are respected and valued.
- Trust between participants is built.
- Partnership within the group is strengthened.
- Power lies with the group and the participants (empowerment).

Thank you for your attention!

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<https://vtkl.fi/toiminta/ystavapiiri/circle-of-friends>

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